

Renfro Valley Barn Dance, Preserving Kentucky's Country Music

“This is the Renfro Valley Barn Dance coming to you directly from a big barn in Renfro Valley, Kentucky, the first and only barn dance on the air presented by actual residents of an actual community,” is how John Lair once introduced the show. In its beginning, the rural location of the Renfro Valley Barn Dance set it apart from the other dances across the country.

As program director of WLS Chicago, Lair saw the crowd attracted to the “National Barn Dance” and envisioned that country music in an authentic setting would also attract audiences. Additionally, he wanted to preserve its traditional sound from the western influence. While working at WLW Cincinnati, Lair developed a country music entertainment complex with partners Whitey Ford, Red Foley and Cotton Foley. On Oct. 9, 1939, the first “Renfro Valley Barn Dance” was broadcast over WLW radio from Cincinnati Music Hall.

Renfro Valley distinguished itself by focusing on true entertainers and entertainment rather than commercial music and using original talent on its stage. Because of his devotion to traditional country music, Lair refused to produce his shows on television, calling the production methods fakes. Therefore, the Renfro Valley Barn Dance played to smaller, regional audiences. Nor did Lair allow flashy cowboy clothes or modern cowboy songs because these styles did not conjure the image of Kentucky mountain music.

Oral history interviews about Renfro Valley Barn Dance can be found at <http://passtheword.ky.gov>.

