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Country roads lead to Lillehammer

Nashville strikes chord in Norway

By Katy Kelly
USA TODAY

LILLEHAMMER — Sitting in his dressing room just before a concert Monday night, Arne Benoni speaks his native tongue with a light, singsong tone.

But when the 6-foot-4 Norwegian takes the stage, he opens his mouth and out comes a deep, drawling *Yonder Comes a Sucker* (and he's got my gal).

Suddenly, there's nothing light about his voice. Next to Benoni, Johnny Cash sounds like a squeaky little thing.

"I used to be a sea captain (until) a reporter friend of mine went to do an article on a new recording studio and I went along with him. He asked if they had any country acts yet," Benoni, 38, says.

When they said they were looking for one, the reporter pointed at Benoni: "The man is standing right here."

That was 11 years ago, in a coastal area north of the Arctic Circle. And that was the beginning of Benoni, who if there were a Nashville in Norway, could be really big.

He certainly dresses the part, black fringe-and-rhinestone jacket and T-shirt. His belt buckle, made of soldered



By Mark Zaleski, The San Bernardino County Sun

BRIDGING CULTURAL GAP: Arne Benoni practices before a concert in Lillehammer Monday night. Benoni, one of 'eight or 10' country singers in Norway, performed for the Olympic Cultural Program.

U.S. nickels, glitters under the lights. He says he's one of "eight or 10" country singers in Norway. But he knows how to get an audience to tap their Gore-Tex swathed toes.

Benoni — along with Ameri-

can legends Connie Smith, Skeeter Davis, Jimmy C. Newman and Johnny Russell — was performing Monday night in the Grand Ole Opry Spectacular, part of the Olympic Cultural Program.

Davis — best known for her 1963 hit *The End of the World* — is particularly big in Norway. Country music generally is not, possibly because it doesn't always translate well.

Davis couldn't understand

why her song *Dear John* continued to be popular in Norway long after it had fallen off the charts at home.

"The (Norwegian) girls just loved this song," she says. "I finally said, 'What are you getting out of it?' They said, 'It's a Dear John letter. We send it with our men when they go to sea.' (In Norway) it's a love 'em, not a leave 'em, song."

But Benoni, who almost always sings in English and has done the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, is working hard at bridging the cultural gap. Shortly after Monday's concert, he heads for Little Rock to make a music video for Scandinavian release.

He plays about 100 dates a year in Norway and more overseas (next: Carlisle, Pa.). He appears often on *Country Loftet*, Norwegian TV's answer to *Hee-Haw*. And he's recorded 10 albums; the latest will be released this spring.

His records routinely sell between 10,000 and 20,000, impressive for this small country.

Striding across the stage in his Norwegian cowboy boots, he runs through a sound check, and his full, rich voice envelops the hall. His hand strums the guitar and his knuckle-knocking gold and diamond ring flashes at those watching.

It is his engagement ring, given to him by his girlfriend "nine or 10 years ago."

They are still together but have yet to set the date.

Sounds like the stuff country music lyrics are made of.