By STEPHEN POWELL

First there was the legendary Hank Williams, followed by Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson and, of course, the Watsons — Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline, Emmy Lou Harris. And then some upstarts like Krammaphone, Randy Travis, Steve Earle.

But country, once relegated to backwoods AM stations, could no longer remain immune from shifts in the music industry.

Seemingly wild eclectics such as Lyle Lovett and R.D. Lang were hitting the mainstream.

And finally, The Cowboy Junkies, who will be playing at Patsy Sulet at 8 p.m. Saturday, combine a Velvet Underground sensibility with a pro-GW sound.

Based out of Toronto, the Canadian band is the collaborative effort of the Timms siblings (Marg on lead vocals, Michael on guitar, Peter on drums) with Alan Anton holding down the bass.

Characterizing their music is a deliberate sprawl filled in with Mario's ethereal voice.

In essence, the Junkies take a country song, draw it in to more minimalist dimensions, and replace it with a Lou Reed-like urgency.

Privacy supporter Michael expounds the band's motivations.

"What you hear on the radio is pretty syrup. It's a pop with a Southern country accent. The sounds coming up today are so distant, so up-to-date about everything, that they force an emotion on you. Instead of Loretta Lynn, Peter, we want our music to be evocative, to pull at emotions."

The Junkies have taken advantage of their emotional and geographical distance to approach the music for its mythical quality.

Playing off the constant American

often stunning music that finds at the emotional heart of the genre with the hope of finding renewed interest.

"I think The Cowboy Junkies have a distinctly more introspective approach to country than others," Michael said, referring to their RCA release.

"One can only find a kernel, however, a yearning vulnerability in the band's interpretation, which Mario confirms.

"In each of Michael's songs, no matter how disparate the illusion of love and loss, I keep hearing his ability to express the emotion," says Linda."

The Junkies' breakthrough came with The Trinity Session B, 1989, a six-hour live recording of a church underlining the approach and style of their music.

Today, the $770,000 deal with RCA and fans that have put them around the globe the last two years.

In a scene where most releases are sparked by a complex use of studio gimmickry, the Junkies chose a completely opposite less-is-more approach.

"The album represented a kind of simplicity and confidence," Mario said.

"How the Junkies were able to arrive at such an audience actually came about through reverse-censorship."

Playing in a six-hour-harried British rock band for four years.

Michael and Patsy returned to Toronto to reclaim some tranquility.

Cowing Mario into singing and brother Peter into filling in on the drums, another garage band was born.

"We'd get the approval out of our system. Now we could think about our music — and have some space in it," Michael said.

"That's where a lot of egos of The Cowboy Junkies come from. It's from not wanting to disturb the neighbors."

The Junkies will be preceded by special guest Towers For Rent.