

**"LIVING RIGHT AND BEING FREE"
COUNTRY MUSIC AND MODERN AMERICAN CONSERVATISM**

by

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Abstract

The rising popularity of country music in the United States since WWII is a cultural phenomenon intimately related to the ascendance of conservative values, leaders, and movements over the same period. By routinely celebrating themes like heterosexual love, the patriarchal nuclear family, hard work, individualism, freedom, patriotism, religion, and small-town life, country music provided the soundtrack for the insurgent conservatism of politicians like George Wallace, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan. In the sixties and seventies, while other forms of popular music (rock, folk, soul) articulated the values of liberals, socialists, hippies, war protestors, feminists, and civil rights activists, country music alone stood for the "traditional" values cherished by the so-called "silent majority" that powered the rise of the Right. The spread of both country music and conservatism is also a reflection of the "southernization" of America - the diffusion across the nation of cultural and political traits long associated with the South.

Résumé

La popularité croissante de la musique country aux États-Unis depuis la Deuxième Guerre mondiale est un phénomène culturel étroitement relié à la montée des valeurs, des leaders et des mouvements conservateurs pendant la même période. Des thèmes tels l'amour hétérosexuel, la famille nucléaire patriarcale, le labeur, l'individualisme, la liberté, le patriotisme, la religion et la vie des petites villes y sont habituellement à l'honneur. C'est sur son fond sonore que s'est affirmé le conservatisme insurgent d'hommes politiques comme George Wallace, Richard Nixon, et Ronald Reagan. Pendant les années 1960 et 1970, alors que les libéraux, les socialistes, les hippies, les protestataires contre la guerre du Vietnam, les féministes et les militants des droits civils exprimaient leurs valeurs par d'autres formes de musique populaire (rock, folk, soul), la musique country incarnait seule les valeurs "traditionnelles" chères à la majorité dite "silencieuse" sur laquelle s'appuya la montée de la droite. La diffusion de la musique country, comme celle du conservatisme, reflète en outre la "sudisation" de l'Amérique, c'est-à-dire la généralisation dans tout le pays de caractéristiques culturelles et politiques associées depuis longtemps au Sud des États-Unis.

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CONTENTS

Abstract/Résumé	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Contents	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One:	
Southern Roots, Conservative Roots	9
"The Story of My Life"	
"Lord Protect My Soul"	
"500 Miles Away From Home"	
"Love of the Common People"	
"Song of the South"	
Chapter Two:	
Country Music and the Emergence of the Silent Majority	30
"The Ballad of the Silent Majority"	
"Tell Them What We're Fighting For"	
"Love It or Leave It"	
"Stand By Your Man"	
"My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys"	
"The Great White Soul Sound"	
Chapter Three:	
Going South and Going Country in the Seventies	53
"Success"	
"A Little Good News"	
"When You're Hot You're Hot"	
"American Cosmic Music"	
"I Take A Lot of Pride in What I Am"	
"The South's Gonna Rise Again"	
Chapter Four:	
Urban Cowboys and the Country Craze	71
"Country State of Mind"	
"When Two Worlds Collide"	
"Get Down On Your Knees and Pray"	
"God Bless America Again"	
"Don't Let Me Cross Over"	
Chapter Five:	
New Country and the Sound of America	93
"Time Changes Everything"	
"Put a Little Drive In Your Country"	
"Independence Day"	
"Rose Garden"	
Conclusion	114
Bibliography	118

INTRODUCTION

Since the triumph of the "Reagan Revolution" in the 1980's, American historians have devoted an increasing amount of study to modern conservatism. The new focus is welcome, and long overdue. As one advocate of a more comprehensive understanding of the Right has written, American historians have "finally realiz[ed] that after more than thirty years of expanding support for social, cultural, and political conservatism in American life, they must begin to see the Right as something more than a pathological fringe element in society."¹ And yet, as historians have awoken to the significance of studying the Right, the focus of most of the recent scholarship has been on leaders, parties, ideology, and social movements - in short, the political world. Certainly these are worthy areas of inquest, and the research in these fields has been enlightening. In the rush to understand the Right however, it seems the cultural context of the conservative ascendance has yet to be given adequate attention. Studies focused on the political arena are essential, but they do not tell the entire story.

In a nation increasingly dominated by mass media and images, where politics and popular culture have become ever-more intertwined, it is difficult to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon such as the conservative ascendance without placing it within its cultural context. And as historian Ronald Edsforth has argued, a truly meaningful understanding of "the relationship between popular culture and politics" requires "more careful study of discrete popular cultural developments and productions."² In other words, historians need to isolate and study in depth the most influential popular culture realms in order to understand their relationship to the broader social and political trends of the last fifty years. The recent history of popular music, and more specifically country music, is one of the most fertile fields for such study.

Sociologist Christopher Ballantine argues that "the assumption that music and society are wholly separate domains is demonstrably false."³ Indeed, as other sociologists have argued: "we understand something social about a group of society by the way that music is lived, by the way it supports and influences lives within that

¹ Moore, "Good Old-Fashioned New Social History and the Twentieth-Century American Right," p. 555.

² Edsforth, "Popular Culture and Politics in Modern America: An Introduction," p.11.

³ Ballantine, *Music and Its Social Meanings*, p.5.

society.”⁴ In an era when music “has itself entered into partnership with ideology,”⁵ we can find in an examination of country music a cultural reflection of the spread of conservative values and political beliefs.

Over the past half century, roughly the same period as the conservative ascendance, country music has risen from being the ridiculed, backwoods, twangy, sound of the “backward” South, to being the respected, uptown, polished sound of all America. Though the considerable stylistic changes in the music (namely the incorporation of elements from pop and rock music) have helped bring country closer to the mainstream,⁶ there has also been an equal movement from the mainstream toward the music. That is because country speaks to the psychic needs of a vast segment of America besieged by disorienting cultural and social change, and left behind by other developments in popular music. Country music hearkens back to an earlier, more traditional age, less complex and alienating than the one in which we now live. It is, in the words of country music scholar John Grissim, “an unspoken reaffirmation of the values which seemed to work so nicely in simpler, less dangerous times.”⁷

The values to which Grissim alludes are undoubtedly conservative, at least as such is defined within the context of America’s current political climate. Throughout its history, the lyrical themes of country music have routinely celebrated traditional notions of heterosexual love, the patriarchal nuclear family, hard work, individualism, freedom, patriotism, religion and the honest simplicity of rural, small-town life. In the dialectic of conservatism, such values and the type of society they idealize have been contrasted with the purportedly perverse values of an overly permissive urban liberalism, which has: corrupted the nation’s youth, disrupted the “order” of traditional gender roles, undermined the integrity of the traditional family unit, weakened the American work ethic, encouraged antisocial behavior (such as crime, drug use, and homosexuality), used government as a tool for “undemocratic” social welfare schemes, exalted bureaucrats, intellectuals, and other elites over the common people, and on the whole,

⁴ DaSilva, Blasi, and Dees, *The Sociology of Music*, p.vii.

⁵ Ballantine, *Music and Its Social Meanings*, p.9.

⁶ For example: Don McLeese, “Country,” *Rolling Stone* 645/46 (December 10-24, 1992), p. 75.; Malcolm Jones Jr., “Tough Times For Honky-Tonk,” *Newsweek* 124 (July 25, 1994), p. 54.; Tony Scherman, “Country,” *American Heritage* 45 (November 1994), pp. 38-57.

⁷ Grissim, *Country Music: White Man’s Blues*, p. 9.

contributed significantly to the erosion of American international prestige.

The link between the conservative ascendance and country music is most explicitly demonstrable in the association of country with the election campaigns of such conservative apostles as Richard Nixon, George Wallace, and Ronald Reagan. But the connections have also been reflected by other cultural trends. The increasing popularity of "country living" lifestyles, the spread of "country and western" fashion trends, the proliferation of television programs and Hollywood movies with country music as subject matter or soundtrack, and the growth of other culture industries centered on country music culture are only a few of the country-related social patterns that have reflected the conservative ascendance.

The concurrent rise of country and conservatism is also highly symbolic of another, related phenomenon which some scholars have termed a "southernization" of America; that is, the diffusion across America of cultural and political traits long associated with the region of the former Confederacy.⁸ Historically, country had always reflected the cultural sensibilities of the South's white working-class. Despite its great debt to black musical influences, country music never meaningfully transcended the ironclad dictates of Jim Crow, and for years "remained very much the music of the southern redneck...elicit[ing] images of pickups with shotguns stacked in the back of the cabs, shotguns waiting to be used to terrorize or kill civil rights marchers or those who sympathized with them."⁹ Given such an image, country music's conquest of America was no small feat, and indicated a major transformation in the South's relation to the rest of America.

It was America's working class that fuelled country's newfound popularity in the late-sixties and early-seventies. Experiencing pressures not unlike those felt by southern working people, the northern and western construction workers, truck drivers, policemen, barbers, beauticians, cab drivers, auto workers, and factory hands who formed the backbone of Nixon's "silent majority" found in the music of the southern white working-class an expression of their own pride, prejudices, and values. They

⁸ Some of those who have discussed the "Southernization" phenomenon include: Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, p. 189.; Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, Chapter 11.; Cobb, "From Muskogee to Lukenbach: Country Music and the 'Southernization of America,'" pp. 81-91.; Applebome, *Dixie Rising*.

⁹ Cobb, "From Muskogee to Lukenbach: Country Music and the 'Southernization of America,'" p. 83.

expressed their distaste for racial change, feminism, the counterculture, antiwar demonstrators, and liberal intellectuals not only by listening to the conservative music of the South, but by voting for George Wallace, and in time defecting from the Democratic to the Republican party. Little wonder then, that by the seventies, academics and journalists would begin to identify the "great white soul sound" of country music as the "ballad of the silent majority."¹⁰

Though prior to the 1960s country music had rarely been overtly political, it is important to note, as John Buckley writes, that "country music has long defended the values of its audience, and its defence has been most aggressive when those values were most seriously challenged."¹¹ Given the chaotic circumstances of American life in the tumultuous sixties, the music could not help becoming politicized. In part, this was a response to the politicization of other forms of popular music. While folk, rock, and soul came to symbolize the anti-establishment politics of the New Left, the counterculture, and American blacks respectively, country music produced artists who defended traditional American values and articulated the "silent majority's" disgust at what was happening to their nation. Country artists reaped huge commercial benefits in middle America with songs that trashed hippies, protestors, draft-dodgers, feminists, and liberals. The lack of loud volume, subversive lyrics, and strange sounds in country music also offered a musical refuge from the grating, adolescent sounds of psychedelic- and hard-rock. And of course, the sheer lack of black performers in country music made it a logical alternative for those fearful or suspicious of busing, open housing, and other efforts at racial integration. But above all, country music seemed patriotic at a time when patriotism and America itself seemed under attack from traitors within.

With the completion of the civil rights movement in the South, the election of Jimmy Carter to the Presidency, and the rise of the sunbelt economy (of which the country music industry centered in Nashville was a major component), country music's identification with southern values no longer conjured up negative visions of night-riding Klansmen and necktie parties. Instead, the "redneck" image symbolized commitment to true "Americanism," and came to be worn as a badge of pride by

¹⁰ Wren, "Country Music: The Great White Soul Sound," *Look* 35 (July 13, 1971), pp. 10-13.; Dimaggio, Peterson, and Esco Jr., "Country Music: Ballad of the Silent Majority," pp. 38-55.

¹¹ Buckley, "Country Music and American Values," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.204.

working people across the nation. By the mid-seventies, musical odes to redneck culture had become common fare in country music.

Ironically, by the Reagan years country music and conservatism would gain new followers from the ranks of those it had once vilified. By that time, the children of the baby boom, the former hippies and street radicals of the sixties, had begun reaching middle-age. As they struggled to cope with children, careers, mortgages, and aging tastes, many (though certainly not all) of the children of the Woodstock generation found their values and political beliefs becoming increasingly conservative. At the same time, their aging ears were no longer drawn to the abrasive, politically-charged sounds they had grown up with. Weaned on the acid- and hard-rock of the sixties, the baby boomers found less to identify with in the numerous genres that evolved out of the music of their youth: glam-rock, art-rock, disco, punk, funk, heavy metal, and eventually rap, grunge and alternative. Such music, celebrating teenage rebellion, drug experimentation, violence, alienation, and alternative lifestyles, no longer resonated with them as they edged further away from the values and tastes of their youth and eased into mid-life circumstances.

Nevertheless, despite their growing conservatism and their dislike for mainstream rock, the baby boomers carried forward into the 80's many of the tastes and beliefs they picked up as teenagers. Though they may not have identified with Ozzy Osborne, the Sex Pistols, and Iron Maiden, they still clung to their affection for the Beatles, the Byrds, and the Rolling Stones. And even though they no longer partook in raucous street protests against racism, sexism, militarism, colonialism, and a host of other isms, they were not about to call for the return of Jim Crow, June Cleaver, and an ideological war in Southeast Asia. Thus, as the baby boomers began to gravitate toward the more conservative sounds and values of country music, country music took similar steps toward accommodating the baby boomers' 60s-born aesthetic sensibilities and social conscience. Country superstars in the 80's and 90's not only incorporated in their music stylistic elements of classic rock, but they began singing out against racism, sexism, poverty, domestic abuse, and other social causes resonant with the sixties generation.

As a result of this attraction between country music and baby boomers, by the

early 90's country music had become the sound not just of truck drivers, factory workers, rednecks, and good old boys, but of all America. For as one analyst of the country craze wrote in 1992: "by their sheer demographic weight, the nation's 76 million baby boomers continue to determine America's musical preferences."¹² The music itself may have changed considerably, but despite its hillbilly twang being diluted by the insurgence of rock and pop sounds, and despite its accommodation of humanitarian values, country music remained true to its folksy, conservative, southern roots. The music still flaunted a buoyant, even jingoistic patriotism, it still coveted religion and "family values," it still celebrated rural, or perhaps now, suburban life, and it still exuded the same homespun charm and wholesomeness long associated with its image. It remained representative of good old fashioned American values and its ever-growing popularity poignantly symbolized how far America had come from the rancorous liberal heyday of the sixties.

* * *

The treatment of country music as a topic worthy of scholarly attention is a relatively recent phenomenon. While blues, jazz, and even rock have long been treated as valid subjects for academic attention, "virtually no other genre of American music has been as shabbily treated as country in terms of its maintenance as living history."¹³ Cecelia Tichi argues that the academic neglect of country music has resulted from "its association with a social sector that the intelligentsia has been reluctant, even loathe, to engage, namely, lower-class Southern whites....Academics have shunned a music linked to white poverty ("white trash") and racial prejudice, as if scholars might be demeaned or found guilty by association."¹⁴ Thus the story of American society gradually coming to love country music is itself the very same story of academics gradually realizing that country music "bears historical weight and ought to be accorded legitimacy and serious attention by educators."¹⁵

The first stirrings of mainstream scholarly interest in country music came in the early sixties when the emergence of the "urban folk revival" applied an intellectual

¹² Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p. 62.

¹³ Sanjek, "Blue Moon of Kentucky Rising Over the Mystery Train: The Complex Construction of Country Music," p. 45.

¹⁴ Tichi, "Editor's Note," p.3.

¹⁵ Tichi, "Editor's Note," p.3.

legitimacy to the study of folk and traditional music. Though the left-leaning leaders of the folk revival may have had little use for modern country music (which they saw as impure, narrow-minded, and shamelessly commercial) they nonetheless paved the way for further scholarly study of the music of the South. By the mid-sixties, scholarship devoted specifically to country music began to appear. In 1964, the John Edwards Memorial Foundation (JEMF) launched a quarterly academic journal devoted specifically to folk, country, bluegrass, and other types of "hillbilly" music. The *JEMF Quarterly* quickly became the leading journal in publishing and encouraging country music scholarship. The following year, the *Journal of American Folklore* (JAF) recognized the emerging interest in country music study by publishing a special "Hillbilly Issue,"¹⁶ symbolizing a concession by the more traditionally minded folk revivalists for whom this journal was a sort of secular bible.

Country music scholarship had arrived by 1968 when Bill C. Malone published his seminal *Country Music USA*. Begun as a graduate dissertation in 1960 and later expanded to its eventual broad scope, Malone's fifty-year history was quickly recognized as the most impressive and authoritative scholarly study of modern country music. To the present, it remains the first and most indispensable book in the field, especially since the publication of an updated edition in 1985.

In the 1970's, country music scholarship moved from the pages of more obscure journals into those of some of the leading academic journals. Articles focused on country music appeared in many of the most widely read academic periodicals, including the *Journal of Popular Culture*, *Social Forces*, and *Yale Review*, as well as in many other more specialized journals ranging from the *Journal of Geography* to the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. In addition, the *Journal of Country Music* began publication in 1971, joining the *JEMF Quarterly* as a leading forum for the academic study of the music. Clearly, country music scholarship was in the mainstream by the mid-eighties when *Southern Quarterly* devoted an entire issue to country music,¹⁷ and by the end of that decade when many new, innovative monographic studies of country began to appear.

¹⁶ *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1965).

¹⁷ *Southern Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1984).

In the 1990s, country music scholarship has continued to flourish, at the same time that the music enjoys its most widespread popularity yet. Inventive scholars continue to delve deeper into country music to gain insight into the American experience, of which, it is now acknowledged, country music is an integral and revealing component. The present study is produced in that same spirit. The history of country music since WWII shall be examined within the context of broader historical trends, revealing a great deal about the cultural and political transformations of the last few decades. Analyzing the lyrics of some of the most popular (as well as obscure) country songs of this era opens a window on the American psyche during this tumultuous time. Correlating the lyrical expression of conservative sentiments in country music with the simultaneous rise in popularity of both country music and conservatism not only provides a yardstick by which to measure the chronological growth of each, but provides insight into the nature of the conservative ascendance. Examining mainstream journalistic coverage of country music over the last three decades (prior to the 1970's, mainstream journalists all but ignored country music) reveals a great deal about contemporary attitudes toward the music and its social meaning, and in many cases also reveals the biases of those who chronicled the rise of both country music and conservatism. Statistical data shall also help illuminate the outlines of the following history. Music industry indicators, such as record sales, concert ticket sales, the *Billboard* magazine popularity charts, and statistics relating to radioplay of county music will be employed to measure the growing popularity of country music. In addition, statistics relating to demographic and population trends important in facilitating the rise of country music will also be employed. Finally, the work of many scholars on subjects related to country music, conservatism, and post-war American history and politics shall guide and inform the discussion to follow, in which the increasing popularity of country music shall be cast as a cultural byproduct of the socioeconomic and political changes of the past four decades.

CHAPTER ONE

SOUTHERN ROOTS. CONSERVATIVE ROOTS

At what is regarded by many as the first country music recording session, in July 1922 in New York, the artists, old-time fiddlers Eck Robertson and Henry Gilliland, performed clad entirely in Confederate regalia - they had just come from performing at a Civil War veterans reunion in Virginia.¹ How fitting it was that at this inauspicious "birth" of modern country music the performers would wear attire so symbolic of the conservative worldview of the South. "Country Music is a product of the American South," observes Jens Lund, "which has long been the area of the United States most supportive of political reaction."² Indeed, country's history and image is unalterably linked to its conservative southern heritage, and as Paul Hemphill writes, if one would preserve the music, "he must also preserve the culture that gave rise to them, a society characterized by cultural isolation, racism, poverty, ignorance, and religious fundamentalism."³

"The Story of My Life"

Among the sources of modern commercial country music are many associations with conservative and racist traditions. One of the primary roots of modern country music was the nineteenth-century minstrel show, which idealized antebellum plantation life and transmitted negative racial stereotypes of blacks to its audiences.⁴ Old-time fiddling, another of modern country's ancestors, was a featured activity in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries on the Southern campaign trail for such notorious bigots as "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman and James Vardaman. In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan sponsored numerous old-time fiddler conventions, and "Fiddlin" John Carson, who historians recognize as the first modern country music recording "star," was a frequent performer at Klan picnics, rallies, and other events.⁵

Even after the advent of modern commercial country music in the 1920s, the

¹ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p. 123.

² Lund, "Fundamentalism, Racism, and Political Reaction in Country Music," p.79.

³ Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound*, p.12.

⁴ Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, p.241.

⁵ Lund, "Fundamentalism, Racism, and Political Reaction in Country Music," p.83.

music continued to reflect its conservative, southern worldview. During the lively debate of the 20's over fundamentalism and evolutionism, country singers predictably weighed in on the side of biblical literalism, with songs like "Bryan's Last Fight," "You Can't Make a Monkey Out of Me," and "The John T. Scopes Trial," which argued that "Mr. Scopes' house was built on sand," and ended with the refrain: "the old religion's better after all." In the 1930s, country musicians campaigned for Louisiana's populist "Kingfish," Huey Long, while the Carter Family (who along with Jimmie Rodgers are seen as founders of the modern country style) hoped to attract patrons to their performances by declaring in bold type on their advertisements: "THE PROGRAM IS MORALLY GOOD."⁶ During WWII, country music rallied to the cause with patriotic anthems like "There's a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere"(1942), "Cowards Over Pearl Harbor"(1942), and the unabashedly racist "We're Gonna Have To Slap That Dirty Little Jap (And Uncle Sam's The Guy Who Can Do It)." During the same era, a few country artists turned in their guitars for politics, running for office at various levels of government; the most successful of these was Jimmie Davis, known as well for his authorship of "You Are My Sunshine"(1930), as for his two terms as Louisiana's ultraconservative, segregationist governor.

As the Cold War dawned, Hank Williams denounced Soviet expansionism in "No, No, Joe," while Jimmie Dickens lamented: "They Locked God Outside the Iron Curtain." Roy Acuff also gave musical expression to Cold War ideology - in "Advice to Joe" he foresaw the day "when Moscow lies in ashes," and in "MacArthur" he praised the dismissed General and denounced those who would "let the Communists take over all of creation." Finally, Gene Autry articulated two of the main tenets of southern patriotism in "The Bible on the Table and the Flag Upon the Wall."⁷

Up to the fifties, country music's conservative, southern image had inhibited its broader popularization. As James Cobb writes: "For most of its existence, the music had encountered all the hostility and condescension traditionally reserved for things southern."⁸ In the mid-fifties however, the United States was shaken by two

⁶ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p. 54.

⁷ Lund, "Fundamentalism, Racism, and Political Reaction in Country Music," pp. 80-88.

⁸ Cobb, "From Muskogee to Lukenbach: Country Music and the 'Southernization of America,'" p. 81.

developments that would dramatically impact the nation's future course, developments which would alter the South's relationship to the rest of America and ultimately clear the way for the nationwide popularization of country music.

The first was the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which outlawed racial segregation and signalled the beginning of the end for the Jim Crow system. Ten years later, Congress would pass the Civil Rights Act (1964) followed soon by the Voting Rights Act (1965), each of which put an effective end to legally sanctioned discrimination in the South and elsewhere. These developments, driven by their social engine, the civil rights movement, shook America at its foundations, not only in the South but eventually across the entire nation. The radical upheavals in race relations were only the beginning, for the civil rights cause would inspire numerous other movements which challenged the very assumptions underlying America and turned the decades after *Brown* into one of the most traumatic periods in American history since the Civil War.

On the cultural front, another revolutionary development occurred in the mid-fifties, one which shook America with equal intensity. This was the emergence of an exciting and controversial new form of popular music: rock n' roll. The new sound represented the most important stylistic innovation in American music since the emergence of jazz in the 1920's. And like the music of the "Roaring Twenties," rock swept through the nation like wildfire, earning as many enemies as fans. Some feared that the tribal beat was part of a communist plot to brainwash American youth and convert them into godless zombies. Others regarded the music as incitement for amoral behavior, including drug and alcohol use, and of course, sex. As educator Max Rafferty put it, in near-comedic hyperbole, rock n' roll transformed fine young men into "booted, sideburned, ducktailed, unwashed, leather-jacketed slobs, whose favorite sport is ravishing little girls and stomping polio victims to death."⁹ Others in government also expressed concern that the new music was a nefarious influence on American youth. California Republican congressman James Tustin railed against rock musicians' use of "Pavlovian techniques to provoke neurosis in their listeners."¹⁰

⁹ Dr. Max Rafferty, "What's Happened to Patriotism?," *Reader's Digest* 79 (October 1961), p. 109.

¹⁰ Quoted in: Ralph J. Gleason, "A Cultural Revolution," in: Denisoff (ed.), *The Sounds of Social Change*, p. 137.

Sociologist Vance Packard was more blunt, declaring in 1958 before a U.S. Senate Subcommittee that the aim of rock music was to “stir the animal instinct in modern teenagers.”¹¹ Others, perhaps more concerned by the imminent revolution in race relations, were quick to tag rock as “Negroid-jungle music,”¹² thus calling attention to the dangers of “race-mixing” symbolized by this newest derivative of black music.

But rock was not simply black man’s music performed by whites. Rock was an organic *fusion* of various styles, principally black rhythm and blues and white country music. The early innovators of rock in fact, as Patrick Mullen and many others have pointed out, were “all southern white boys,” reared on the country styles so popular throughout Dixie.¹³ Bill Haley had fronted numerous country bands before his landmark hit “Rock Around the Clock”(1954) ushered in the rock era. Elvis Presley had first gained wide exposure as a performer on the Louisiana Hayride country radio show (where Hank Williams had popularized the honky-tonk sound), and the B-side of the “King” of rock n’ roll’s first single was a gassed-up version of Bill Monroe’s hillbilly waltz, “Blue Moon of Kentucky.” Along with Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, and others, it was these *country* singers who helped define rock n’ roll.¹⁴ In fact, these pioneers in the rock field were originally tagged as “Rockabillys,” due to “their successful fusion of ‘rocking’ black music and ‘hillbilly’ music.”¹⁵ As country music historian Bill Malone deliberately stresses, rock music “first vaulted onto the national scene with a southern accent and was performed by ‘good old boys’.”¹⁶ Ironically, the region of America most renowned for its reactionary political tendencies had created a force which would encourage the type of youthful rebellion and hedonism against which country music and conservatism would later react.

While this new music was eagerly received by middle-class youth across the nation and by the young “hillbilly hipsters” of the South, “‘traditional’ country music

¹¹ Quoted in: Malone, *Country Music USA*, p. 247.

¹² “Our Children,” *American Mercury* 95 (October 1962), p.27.

¹³ Mullen, “Hillbilly Hipsters of the 1950s: The Romance of Rockabilly,” p. 80.

¹⁴ Malone, *Country Music USA*, pp.247-252.

¹⁵ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.250.

¹⁶ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.250.

suffered as a result of the rock and roll revolution."¹⁷ Record companies cut country performers from their rosters while radio stations changed formats and played less and less pure country records. Television also jumped on the rock bandwagon at the expense of country performers, who lost spots on prime time showcase programs featuring more and more rock artists. Country had already been dealt a great blow by the untimely death of Hank Williams in 1953, but what popularity it still enjoyed was curtailed even further by the advent of rock.

"Lord Protect My Soul"

Country music and its fans responded to the rock onslaught in two divergent ways. Many fans sought out the "pure" country sound of bluegrass, which, though a relatively new form (having crystallized only in the years after WWII), was representative of the most traditional strain in contemporary country. Bluegrass musicians made a conscious effort to attract these fans with more down-home tastes. As bluegrass historian Neil Rosenberg writes:

Bluegrass acts could derive some commercial benefit from billing their shows in such a way as to assure the fans who didn't like rock and roll that they would be playing only country music....[and] most bluegrass bands incorporated Elvis spoofs into their in-concert comedy routines, further testimony to their fans that they were on the right side of the rock and roll controversy.¹⁸

And yet, despite its ability to buck the rock n' roll trend through parody and explicit "rock-bashing," bluegrass' appeal was somewhat narrow. As an entirely acoustic music overtly based in the "old-time" sound, it represented the extreme opposite of rock, and failed to appeal to those who were turned off by rock, yet looking for a "modern" sound in country music. Worse however was the music's association with a left-leaning audience. In the late-fifties the urban folk revival emerged from the colleges and coffee-houses of the Northeast and West, gripping the imaginations of thousands of white, middle-class suburban and city kids. The folk revival, animated in equal parts by socialist/communist ideology and the existential, moca-sipping, goatee-wearing hipness of the Beats, found in the mountain music of the South a romantic link to a pre-capitalist, pre-technological, rural society. For the urban folkies, bluegrass was

¹⁷ Mullen, "Hillbilly Hipsters of the 1950s: The Romance of Rockabilly," p. 79.; Malone, "Elvis, Country Music, and the South," in: Lewis, *All That Glimers*, p. 55.

¹⁸ Rosenberg, "Bluegrass, Rock and Roll, and 'Blue Moon of Kentucky'," p.69.

the crowning statement of this purportedly anti-bourgeois music culture, despite the music's recent genesis and its complete integration into the capitalist economy. Folklorist Alan Lomax officially initiated the music into the hallowed halls of urban folksterism with an article written for *Esquire* magazine in October 1959, in which he dubbed bluegrass "folk music in overdrive."¹⁹ With academics, folk-singers, middle-class teenagers, socialists, and communists touting the virtues of bluegrass, many southerners of a decidedly less left-wing bent viewed the music and its attendant culture with an air of suspicion. Though the lyrical thrust of bluegrass songs was pious, conservative, and archetypically southern, its questionable allegiances and its traditional, rural sound failed to emerge as a viable alternative to rock for conservative southerners. Bluegrass managed to survive the rock onslaught as a highly specialized musical subculture, but it did not become a mainstream force in popular music.

Meanwhile, the more mainstream country styles developed a survival strategy of their own in order to avoid being swept up in the rock and roll whirlwind. Guided by the need to "modernize" the music yet retain its cultural identity, sophisticated Nashville producers like Chet Atkins, Eddy Arnold, and Owen Bradley fashioned a "compromise," in which country music was "sanitized" in order to be more competitive with rock. As Bill Malone explains:

The country music industry reacted to the rock and roll threat by creating a form of music that would be inoffensive to listeners who had not grown up in a southern rural environment or who wanted to forget they had. The result was a so-called 'compromise' that would preserve the flavour and ambience of country music while projecting a more urbane image....Fiddle almost disappeared from country recordings, and the mainstay of the honky-tonk genre, the steel guitar became even more rare. The 'rural' sound was discouraged, and everywhere there was a tremendous emphasis on youth, vitality, and modernity.²⁰

This "compromise," soon to be known as the "Nashville Sound," helped salvage a place for modern country in the mainstream of popular music, despite turning the form into what one reviewer later called "a neatly packaged, thoroughly contrived consumer product."²¹ Under the direction of Atkins, Arnold, and Bradley, artists like Jim Reeves, Marty Robbins, Skeeter Davis, and Patsy Cline helped boost country music's sagging popularity in the 50s and early 60s by embracing this "countrypolitan" sound,

¹⁹ Lomax, "Bluegrass Background: Folk Music With Overdrive," *Esquire* 52 (October 1959), p. 108.

²⁰ Malone, "Elvis, Country Music, and the South," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, pp. 55-56.

²¹ Danker, "Country," p. 396.

characterized by slick production, lush string arrangements, muted guitars, and even such alien instruments as vibes.

Yet while the music itself changed, the honest, down-home (though no longer hayseed) image of country music survived. More importantly, the lyrical thrust of the music remained the same. Country singers still meditated on the ups and downs of life, loves lost and found, the dignity and difficulty of hard labour, the merits of unconditional patriotism and the old-time religion, and missing home, mother, and the farm. This was the "modern" sound with a traditional philosophy sought by those trapped between the extremes of bluegrass and rock. Country music had redefined itself as a viable, modern-yet-traditional alternative for older and more conservative listeners repulsed by rock music and its emerging politics of rebellion.

The country music industry also assisted its own resurgence through the creation, in 1958, of the Country Music Association (CMA), "a device by which country music could attain respectability and achieve a wider popularity." As Bill Malone has demonstrated, the CMA was another "facet of the music's counterattack against the threats posed by rock and roll."²² Basically a trade organization, the CMA developed three major strategies for marketing country music: the sponsorship of all-country format radio stations, the creation of a Country Music Hall of Fame, and the consolidation of Nashville as the center of the country music industry.²³ The CMA was an important adjunct to the "Nashville Sound;" in fact, these were the principal components in country music's general thrust to appeal to a broader audience and tap into those turned off by rock music.

"500 Miles Away From Home"

Together, the CMA and the proponents of the "Nashville Sound" helped insure the survival of country music after the coming of the rock revolution. By themselves, however, these efforts were insufficient to guarantee an expansion of the music's audience beyond its base of southern, white working people. Countryopolitan or not, it was still tagged as hillbilly music, and faced major obstacles in appealing to those from

²² Malone, *Country Music USA*, pp.264-265.

²³ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.265.

non-rural, non-southern backgrounds. The spread of country music's popularity in subsequent years was a result not merely of stylistic changes in the music and aesthetic changes in its image. The effect of WWII and the demographic and economic upheavals of the pre- and post-war decades had as much to do with expanding the music's audience as did Chet Atkins and the entrepreneurs of the expanding Nashville music business.

World War Two played a major role in spreading country music beyond its heartland. Country artists' tuneful patriotism and vigorous support of the war effort earned them many new fans. As *Billboard* observed in 1942: "popularity of fighting country tunes in the music boxes calls attention to the fact that [country music], far more than the pop field, has come through with war tunes of the type asked for by government officials....The output has continued...doing a fine morale job."²⁴ Moreover, service in the armed forces exposed many non-southerners to country music for the first time.²⁵ As D.K. Wilgus has written:

Country music was almost forced on the serviceman, whether he liked it or not. He could not always silence a company radio tuned to the armed forces network; nor could he always silence the guitar of the boy on the bunk next to him. The training camps of the South and Southwest exposed the recruit to a heavy dose of country music, on the radio and in the honky tonks.²⁶

More importantly however, as the wartime economy pulled America from a decade of depression, America's job-rich northern and western urban centers lured poor rural folk from the South. This movement, of course, had begun early in the century, arriving at its peak between 1930 and 1960. The economic disaster of the Depression, combined with the ongoing effects of agricultural modernization, pests, and drought, displaced millions of rural southerners in the thirties, sending them north or west in search of industrial employment.²⁷ The wartime economy and the post-war economic boom only accelerated the trend. By the seventies, nearly fifteen million southerners (a third of whom were black) had dispersed across the country, bringing with them "their music, their values, their evangelical religion...and a whole panopoly of southern-fried

²⁴ *Billboard*, October 3, 1942, p.69.

²⁵ Chinn, "There's a Star-Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere": Country-Western Songs of World War II," p.74.

²⁶ Wilgus, "Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly," p. 149.

²⁷ Gregory, *American Exodus*, pp.6-7.

virtues and sins."²⁸ The migration of black southerners to other parts of America (from 1940 to 1970, the percentage of American blacks living outside the South increased from 24% to 50%²⁹) would be instrumental in transforming American race relations and conservatizing national politics. And the migration of white southerners from Dixie would lay the groundwork for the diffusion of southern cultural traits to the rest of the nation, including country music and conservatism.³⁰

The two groups of southern migrants who would play the largest role in both the migration and the diffusion of country music to non-southerners were the "hillbillies" of the upper, Appalachian South, and the "Okies" of the Old Southwest. The industrial Midwest was the destination to which most Appalachian southerners headed. Cities like Chicago and Detroit were practically overwhelmed by the influx of these migrants. In just one ten-year span, from 1950 to 1960, Appalachia (Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia) lost one fifth of its population to the urban Midwest.³¹ The 1960 census revealed 1.7 million people of southern birth living in the industrial states of the Midwest, 71% (1.2 million) of whom reported Kentucky or Tennessee as their state of birth.³² The magnitude of this migration and the prejudiced attitude of many midwesterners toward the migrants is best understood through a popular joke that circulated in the postwar period: "There are now only 45 states in the U.S. - Tennessee and Kentucky moved to Michigan and Michigan went to hell!"³³

The hostility reserved for southern migrants by midwesterners was very much like that directed at other immigrant ethnic groups in America's cities. And like those other ethnic groups, the Appalachian migrants formed their own "urban hillbilly" enclaves in the city. As journalist James Maxwell observed in 1956: "in most Midwestern cities, these neighbourhoods of Southern Mountaineers are as easily recognizable as those made up of Italians, Jews, or Negroes."³⁴ One of the most

²⁸ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.10.

²⁹ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.100.

³⁰ Gregory, *American Exodus*, p.xvii.; Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.10.

³¹ Killian, *White Southerners*, p.92.

³² Killian, *White Southerners*, p.163.

³³ Killian, *White Southerners*, p.98.

³⁴ Killian, *White Southerners*, p.100.

distinctive features of the southern migrant "ghettos" were the hillbilly taverns that served their recreational and community needs. These establishments, Lewis M. Killian writes, "served as a gathering place where white Southerners could enjoy informal, intimate associations with companions who shared similar backgrounds and common experiences as migrants."³⁵ In these taverns, "the migrants found escape from the impersonality of urban living,"³⁶ and were able to recapture a sense of home, surrounded by fellow migrants and the familiar sounds of country music, either live or on the jukebox.

In fact, many of the popular country songs of this era chronicled the travails of the migration experience. In tunes like Charlie Moore's "I'm Leaving Detroit," Bill Anderson's "City Lights," and Bobby Bare's "500 Miles Away From Home"(1963), "country music expressed the rootlessness and loneliness that most [migrants] felt and made it into a recognized group sentiment."³⁷ Danny Dill's "Detroit City," recorded by Bobby Bare in 1957, typified these odes to urban alienation and homesickness:

Home folks think I'm big in Detroit City.
From the letters that I write they think I'm fine.
But by day I make the cars, by night I make the bars.
If only they could read between the lines.
...I want to go home.

The hillbilly bar was an important institution in the eventual diffusion of country music to non-southern audiences. Bringing their music and culture with them to the Midwest, migrants established an urban base from which they could act as what sociologists call "culture-bearers" in exposing country music to non-southerners of non-rural backgrounds. As Richard Peterson and Paul DiMaggio write, where there were "sufficient concentrations of migrants, enterprising commercial interests from tavern owners to radio station managers [found] it profitable to disseminate country music. In this way, many non-migrants [we]re exposed through the media" to the music.³⁸ Thus, the migration of southerners to the Midwest in the pre- and post-war years was an important precondition for the rise in popularity of country music among non-

³⁵ Killian, *White Southerners*, p.111.

³⁶ Killian, *White Southerners*, p.110.

³⁷ Gregory, *American Exodus*, p.235.

³⁸ Peterson and DiMaggio, "From Region to Class - The Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis," pp. 501-502.; William K. Stevens, "Appalachia's Hillbillies Trek North For Jobs," *New York Times*, March 29, 1973, pp. 49, 94.

southerners in subsequent decades.

The experience of southwestern migrants was similar in many respects to that of their upper South brethren, and its effects in terms of the future of country music were even greater. Fleeing the dust bowl and the economic calamity of the Depression, the "Okies" (a term denoting migrants not only from Oklahoma, but also Arkansas, southern Missouri, Louisiana, and Texas) chose California as their primary destination. Heading west in a spectacular exodus (immortalized by John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*) western South migrants endured terrible hardship in their resettlement; many could not even make it to California, and were forced instead to settle in New Mexico or Arizona. But despite those who stopped short of the golden state, by 1950 there were more than 1.2 million western South natives living in California, representing 11% of the state's population.³⁹ Many migrants went to metropolitan areas like Los Angeles and San Francisco, where their homesickness and alienation found expression in Stuart Hamblen's hit song "Texas Plains," whose chorus went "city lights and city ways are driving me insane/I want to be alone, I want to be back home/Back to my Texas Plains." Nevertheless, the majority of Okies went to more rural areas, particularly the state's lush inland valleys. The most favoured destination was the San Jauquin Valley, where by mid-century, western South natives composed 22% of the population.⁴⁰

Like Appalachia's "hillbillies," California's "Okies" brought with them the values and institutions of their homeland and developed a thriving subculture that served to ease the pain of dislocation and provide cultural continuity. The two most important institutions they brought were their evangelical protestant religious background, and country music. Both eventually caught on with non-southern Californians.

In 1942, the first Southern Baptist church outside of the South was established in California. Others followed, initially serving the religious needs of migrants. By the sixties however, the migrants' evangelical religious traditions had begun to attract followers among non-southerners. Between 1952 and 1971, the number of worshippers belonging to evangelical churches (Southern Baptist, Pentecostal, Holiness) in California tripled, from 200,000 to over 600,000, and by 1980, would

³⁹ Gregory, *American Exodus*, p.251.

⁴⁰ Gregory, *American Exodus*, p.251.

increase to 800,000, encompassing 40% of the state's Protestants.⁴¹ The diffusion of southerners' evangelical religion to non-southerners, was, in California as well as in other parts of the country, one of the processes simultaneously driving and symbolizing the southernization and conservatization of America in the decades after the sixties. The other was the increasing popularity of country music.

Prior to the influx of Southwesterners, "California was not prime country music territory."⁴² But just as the migrants' religion would attract followers among native Californians, so too would their music, and at a faster rate than their religion. The increased presence of southerners in California resulted almost immediately in more and more radio stations playing country music, especially in the San Jauquin and San Bernardino/Imperial Valleys.⁴³ More importantly, as the Okie presence in southern California grew, Hollywood film producers began to take interest in the music. Marrying the music of the South with the mythology of the West, Hollywood turned Okie migrants like Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, Roy Rogers, and Spade Cooley into big-screen stars as "singing cowboys," thus inventing "the stereotype of the heroic cowboy who was equally adept with a gun and guitar."⁴⁴ It was this effort that first brought "western" into the label "country and western," which by the mid-forties had replaced the somewhat derogatory label "hillbilly" (which had previously been applied monolithically to all country and folk music) as the heading for the genre of country music. By deemphasizing the southern aspect of the music and injecting the less sectarian trappings of western frontier imagery, Hollywood helped make country music into a more nationally-marketable commodity. Indeed, as James Gregory, Bill Malone and many other scholars have argued, the singing cowboy films did more than any other force prior to the sixties to expose country music to a truly national audience.⁴⁵ The role of Hollywood in developing the singing cowboy and constructing the union of "country and western" underscores the importance of migration in popularizing country

⁴¹ Gregory, *American Exodus*, pp.217-218.

⁴² Gregory, *American Exodus*, p.225.

⁴³ Gregory, *American Exodus*, p.228.

⁴⁴ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.143.

⁴⁵ Malone, *Country Music USA*, pp.143-145.; Gregory, *American Exodus*, p.228.; Austin, "Hollywood Barn Dance: A Brief Survey of Country Music in Films," pp.111-115.; Winchell, "Introduction: We Were Country....," p.4.

music with a national audience. Had there been no Okie presence in the golden state, Hollywood would not have come in contact with the southern singing stars who brought the singing cowboy to life.

The presence of large numbers of southerners in California led also to the development of an important satellite center of country music production. With the working-class, inland valley town of Bakersfield as its mecca, by the fifties and sixties California had developed its own indigenous country music industry. Supported by the vast numbers of southern migrants and their first- and second-generation descendants, Bakersfield emerged as Nashville west, turning out its own stars and cultivating its own distinct sound. Initially, Tommy Collins was Bakersfield's biggest country star, but by the late fifties he was supplanted by one of his own sidemen, Buck Owens. Owens would emerge as one of the towering figures in sixties and seventies country music, his national stardom rising to its apex with his two decade stint as the co-host of the syndicated country music television show *HeeHaw*. Following on Owens' heels was another artist who would become one of the biggest stars in country music history, Merle Haggard. Like Owens, Haggard came from a transplanted southern family, born and raised in near-poverty by Okie parents in a converted boxcar in the San Jauquin Valley. The immense stardom of Owens and Haggard powered the rise of the western country music industry, which signalled its arrival (and its independence from Nashville) with the creation of the Academy of Country Music (ACM) in 1965, a California equivalent to the CMA. Country music had now established a bi-coastal presence, spanning from Nashville to Bakersfield across the southern and western Sun Belt region that would soon power the rise of conservatism.

"Love of the Common People"

The spread of southern migrants to northern and western cities proved to be an important precondition for the spread of country music's popularity outside the South. But this did not of itself account for the rising popularity of country music in the sixties, a fact to which Richard Peterson and Paul DiMaggio have attested. Writing in 1975, these scholars did not dismiss "the historical importance of migration in spreading country music," but argued that "migration alone is neither a necessary nor a sufficient

explanation" for the spread in country's popularity. These authors instead hypothesized that "country music will diffuse to persons most like the culture-bearers - the white, post-adolescent, upwardly mobile working class."⁴⁶ Thus, Peterson and DiMaggio provide the analytical context for understanding the incredible boom in country music's popularity beyond its traditional fan base in the sixties and seventies. Emphasizing the socioeconomic characteristics of southern country music listeners and potential converts from outside the South, these authors provide a class-based theory of country music diffusion. As we shall see, it was the class-orientation of country music, along with its accompanying value structure, that facilitated the expansion of country music's appeal to working-class non-southerners in the 1960s. In the midst of the political and social turmoil of this era, country music's growing popularity indicated the increasing unity of belief on matters of contemporary significance among working people, northern and southern, a unity which found expression in the increasingly politicized strains of country music.

By the mid-sixties, working people north of the Mason-Dixon line and west of the Mississippi had become increasingly sympathetic to the plight of their southern brethren with regard to the revolution in race relations. By then, the civil rights movement had turned its focus toward the more complex racial problems outside of the South, including unemployment, poverty, poor schools, ghetto housing, and the more subtle forms of discrimination in the North. These issues directly impacted the lives of northern blue-collar Democrats, for as the Democratic Party turned its attention to these problems, the plight of the working man (which had been the Democrats' *raison d'être* for decades) became less of a priority. As Lyndon Johnson later observed in reflecting on his presidency, by the mid-sixties blue-collar industrial workers had begun to feel that "the Democratic Party had traded [their] welfare for the welfare of the black man."⁴⁷

As this northern backlash against civil rights emerged, astute conservative politicians recognized the opportunity to take advantage of "growing white resentment

⁴⁶ Peterson and DiMaggio, "From Region to Class - The Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis," p. 501.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, p.549.

against the pace and tone of Negro demands.”⁴⁸ The 1964 Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater was one of the first politicians to perceive that the nation’s accelerating racial tensions could dramatically alter American politics. Though Goldwater was buried by one of the largest electoral landslides in American history, his attacks on the federal government, the Supreme Court, and the Civil Rights Act had succeeded at prying conservative Deep South states out of their long-standing Democratic allegiance, foreshadowing the eventual transformation of the South into a Republican stronghold.

It was Governor George Wallace of Alabama however who proved to be the shrewdest exploiter of white working class resentment of civil rights. A hardline segregationist and skillful political strategist, Wallace had predicted in 1962 that he was “gonna make race the basis of politics in this country,”⁴⁹ Setting out to establish himself “as the heroic defender of the rights of oppressed whites,”⁵⁰ Wallace ran for president four times between 1964 and 1976. In his first foray into national politics, Wallace mounted a surprisingly strong challenge to President Johnson in three 1964 Democratic primaries. The man who the *New York Times* had dismissed as an “anachronistic Southern demagogue” managed to capture 34% of the votes in Wisconsin, 30% in Indiana, and a nearly victorious 43% in Maryland.⁵¹ Running nationwide on an independent ticket in 1968, he garnered 13% of the popular vote, and with 45 electoral votes, nearly threw the election into the House of Representatives. More significantly, he had acted, according to journalist Marshall Frady, as “more or less the ghost writer for many of the issues of 1968,”⁵² forcing opponent Richard Nixon to draft a conservative running mate (Spiro Agnew), and craft his infamous “southern strategy” in order to co-opt Wallace. In 1972, Wallace again mounted an insurgent campaign to capture the Democratic nomination, and with impressive primary victories in Michigan and Maryland, seemed on his way to at least a Vice-Presidential nomination. On the eve of these primaries however, an assassin’s bullet paralyzed him,

⁴⁸ White, *The Making of the President, 1964*, p. 233.

⁴⁹ Crass, *The Wallace Factor*, p.314.

⁵⁰ Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, p.113.

⁵¹ *New York Times*, April 9, 1964, p.1.; Carlson, *George C. Wallace and the Politics of Powerlessness*, p.30.

⁵² Frady, *Wallace*, p.viii.

effectively ending the prospect that he might ever be president. Nevertheless, the "Wallace Factor" left an enormous imprint on American politics, then and long after. As journalist Peter Applebome has recently written: "to understand what has happened in American politics over the past thirty years it suffices to understand the constituency Wallace mobilized and defined and then to understand how that constituency moved from the Democratic Party to the Republican."⁵³

The key to Wallace's success was his intuition that there was "a lot of southern sympathy in all the states."⁵⁴ Indeed, the surprising amount of support Wallace found outside of the South confounded many, leading liberal publications like *New Republic* to dismiss Wallace supporters as "extremists of every stripe."⁵⁵ But in fact, his support had come mostly from working class whites and blue-collar ethnic voters, the very people that "consensus" liberals had idealized as progressive-minded supporters of pluralism and New Dealism.⁵⁶ The majority of his campaign contributions came in sums less than \$50 each from "the average man on the street, the steel worker, the auto worker, the textile worker, the fireman, the policeman, the barber, and the beautician."⁵⁷ In 1968, Wallace managed to convince 70,000 working-class Democrats in California alone to change their official party registration to his American Independent Party.⁵⁸

In retrospect, Wallace's appeal to working-class voters was unsurprising. Blue-collar elements had formed the backbone of his support in Alabama, which was "the most unionized state in the Deep South."⁵⁹ Unlike Goldwater and other conservatives of the same era, Wallace's political philosophy was undergirded by a populist impulse. One historian has described the program of Wallace's first term as governor as a "down-home version of the Great Society."⁶⁰ While Goldwater stood for a stripped

⁵³ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.94.

⁵⁴ Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, pp.193-194.

⁵⁵ William Bradford Huie, "A Southerner Goes North," *New Republic* 150 (April 25, 1964), p. 8.

⁵⁶ Makay, "The Speaking of Governor George C. Wallace in the 1964 Presidential Primary," pp. 152-157.; Carlson, *George C. Wallace and the Politics of Powerlessness*, pp. 30-38.

⁵⁷ Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, p. 337.; *George Wallace Tells It Like It Is*, p.92.

⁵⁸ Leshner, *George Wallace: American Populist*, p.400.

⁵⁹ Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, p. 70.

⁶⁰ Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, p. 265.

down, noninterventionist federal government, Wallace was concerned not so much with cutting taxes and ending government welfare spending as with insuring that government benefits would accrue to the white working man rather than blacks and the civil rights cause.⁶¹

Wallace's populist economic policies were intimately linked to his implicit appeal to white ethnic working people's latent racism, despite his ridiculously disingenuous assertion: "I've never made a racist speech in my life."⁶² Wallace told his blue-collar audiences that the civil rights bill would "destroy the union seniority system and impose racial quotas," in addition to making it "impossible for a home owner to sell his home to whomever he chooses."⁶³ Promising to halt the implementation of open housing laws and measures aimed at desegregating schools through busing, Wallace cast himself as a defender of these voters' largely homogeneous and segregated ethnic neighbourhoods and schools.

Wallace's staunch anticommunism provided further justification for white, blue-collar ethnic voters to support him. These voters were "intensely patriotic, but still bound by ties of emotion and blood to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia."⁶⁴ Wallace's anticommunism complimented these voters' patriotism and dismay at communist control over the Eastern European nations from which they hailed (and where many still had family).

And as the sixties wore on, Wallace's scathing attacks on antiwar protesters, civil rights marchers, and other dissidents struck an increasingly resonant chord with the "hardhat" element. Working-class Americans, as demonstrated by sociologist Edward Ransford, were "uniquely antagonistic to the goals and methods of student and black demonstrators."⁶⁵ Wallace aroused them by vowing to "take a billy club and drive it two inches into [war protesters'] skulls," and by declaring: "there is no need to talk about civil rights; those are guaranteed in the Constitution."⁶⁶

⁶¹ Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics*, p.230.

⁶² George Wallace *Tells It Like It Is*, p.96.; Wallace, *Stand Up For America*, p. 107.

⁶³ Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, p. 207.

⁶⁴ Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, p. 206.

⁶⁵ Ransford, "Blue Collar Anger: Reactions to Student and black Protest," p.333.

⁶⁶ Lawrence Learner, "Out West With Candidate Wallace," *New Republic* 157 (December 16, 1967), p.13.; George Wallace *Tells It Like It Is*, p.21.

In exporting his brand of southern working class populism, Wallace tapped major fissures in the Democratic Party. His success in northern working class areas like Milwaukee, Boston, and Gary, Indiana resulted from his appeal as a states' rights idealist, a populist defender of the working man against Washington bureaucrats, intellectuals, and judges, who were purportedly trying to dictate peoples' everyday lives through unconstitutional civil rights laws and insane judicial decisions. Wallace informed his audiences that a vote for him would "let the people in Washington know that we want them to leave our homes, schools, jobs, businesses, and farms alone."⁶⁷

"Song of the South"

Wallace's success in national politics made it "clear that the racial fears of southern whites were no longer much different from those of whites outside the South."⁶⁸ In a broader sense, it indicated that a "southernization" effect was beginning to occur in parts of the urban north and west as a component of the backlash against civil rights. An incident related by Wallace in his autobiography is illustrative. At one of his 1964 campaign rallies in Milwaukee's Serb Hall, recounts Wallace, "the band struck up 'Dixie' and three thousand or more voices sang 'Dixie' in Polish." Wallace was further amazed when after his speech in Serb Hall "one fine-looking man grabbed me and said, 'Governor, I have never been south of South Milwaukee, but I am a Southerner.'" "Of course he was," wrote Wallace, "the South is no longer geography - it's an attitude and a philosophy toward government."⁶⁹

Wallace's identification of a "southern" attitude in the North seemed to hit the mark. And as the working people of the North came to identify with their cohorts in the South, country music served a role similar to that of Wallace. As Peter Applebome writes: "just as George Wallace slammed his way into the gut of the white working class, country formed a visceral bond with lower- and lower-middle-class whites."⁷⁰ Indeed, while Wallace acted as a messenger of southern political views, country music emerged as an emissary of the southern cultural perspective (uncoincidentally, country

⁶⁷ Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, p. 207.

⁶⁸ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.100.

⁶⁹ Wallace, *Stand Up For America*, p. 89.

⁷⁰ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.244.

music bands played a major role in Wallace's campaign road show, and the Governor had also once declared a "Hank Williams Week" in Alabama). In turning to country music, the northern working class edged even further toward the southern worldview with which they increasingly identified by the mid-sixties.

The populist character of the Wallace phenomenon was perhaps the most important characteristic in allowing southern-style political reaction to be accompanied by the spread of country music's popularity. Jack Makay has argued that the worldview underlying country music is strikingly similar to that underlying populist movements. Makay argues that "country music fans are, so to speak, the underbelly of populism":

In their own terms, populist movements are composed of the common people whose control of societal forces has been usurped by a metropolitan elite....They feel, for good reason, that their backs are against the wall and that life is an uphill struggle....[this] could lead to extremisms of a political or social nature. Both these tendencies are expressed in the music.⁷¹

Proceeding from Makay's observations, it is easy to see the similarities between Wallace's working-class southern populism and the appeal of country music. Wallace's populism identified intellectuals, judges, and bureaucrats in Washington as the enemy - in short, the "metropolitan elite" to which Makay refers. The feeling of having their backs against the wall, which Makay sees as another element of the populist perspective, was also evident in the Wallace phenomenon and the spread of southernization. Just as the South had traditionally played the role of oppressed and embattled martyr in relation to the rest of America, Wallace's blue-collar northern populists had developed their own siege mentality toward the agents of social and political change: the civil rights movement, the student/antiwar movement, the federal government and the Supreme Court.

Makay identifies another similarity between the Wallace phenomenon and country music in stating that "country crosses geographic and ethnic lines with relative ease."⁷² Just as Wallace was able to cross the geographic and ethnic lines separating white southerners from northern ethnic voters, so too did country music begin crossing these barriers in the mid-sixties. The class perspective of both Wallace and country

⁷¹ Makay, "Populist Ideology and Country Music," in: Lewis (ed.) *All That Glitters*, pp. 287, 290, 295.

⁷² Makay, "Populist Ideology and Country Music," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p. 285.

music allowed for the popularization of each outside of their traditional southern realms.

Wallace's appeal helped crystallize a sense of working class solidarity among northern blue-collar voters, an identity gratified by country music. Since its earliest days, country music had always celebrated the everyday experiences of working people, from drinking at the honky tonk to the grind of wage labor. In such songs, working-class people saw reflections of their own lives and sufferings. Merle Travis' "Sixteen Tons"(1947), with its lament of "I owe my soul to the company store," was a classic statement of the kind of class perspective embodied in country music. Joe Maphis' "Dim Lights, Thick Smoke, and Loud Music"(1954) and Webb Pierce's "There Stands the Glass"(1953) captured the ambience of the working-class saloon, the latter becoming "virtually the national anthem of beer drinkers."⁷³ The virtues of lower-class life as compared to the hollow lives of the rich were celebrated in songs like Hank Williams' "Mansion on the Hill"(1951), Loretta Lynn's "Success"(1962), and the oft-covered Porter Wagoner song "Satisfied Mind"(1955), which concludes with the lyric: "It's hard to find one rich man in ten with a satisfied mind." In all these examples, it was evident that country music was deeply rooted in a laudatory working-class perspective.

As the sixties dawned however, country music began to inch beyond the simple "slice of life" depiction of working class life. Conservative political causes began associating with country, and gradually political commentary crept into the music, making it even more attractive to the nation's embattled working class. In addition to Wallace, other southern segregationists like Lestor Maddox and Orval Faubus used country bands in their political campaigns. The song "Don't Let Them Take the Bibles From Our Schools"(1962) became the theme song of the John Birch Society's effort to impeach Chief Justice Earl Warren.⁷⁴ Elton Britt tunelessly articulated Cold War ideology with "The Red We Want is the Red We've Got (In That Old Red, White, and Blue)." Wayne Raney connected secularization with the alarming rise in teen delinquency and crime when he sang "We Need a Whole Lot More of Jesus (and a Lot Less Rock n' Roll)." And an obscure song from the mid-sixties titled "Bus Them Here,

⁷³ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p. 234.

⁷⁴ Lund, "Political Reaction in Country Music," p.82.

Bus Them There" harangued against the "evil" liberal scheme of bussing.

* * *

By the mid- sixties, country music had become increasingly politicized as blue-collar Americans everywhere began to identify with the conservative southern worldview. However, the politicization of country music would not reach its ultimate expression until the late-sixties. By then American society threatened to come apart at the seams as a result of the emergence of more and more contentious political movements, and as a result of America's involvement in the Vietnam War.

CHAPTER TWO

COUNTRY MUSIC AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE SILENT MAJORITY

The late-sixties and seventies were a time of great chaos and polarization in American society. With the rise of the militant Black Power phase of the civil rights movement, the nation's cities became flashpoints of violent conflict, frequently erupting in devastating race riots. And with the emergence of the counterculture, and the student, antiwar, and women's movements, the nation's streets became forums for protests which questioned mainstream "American" values and challenged every facet of American life. Added to this volatile mix were political assassinations, a rapidly rising crime rate, and a bloody stalemate in Vietnam. As this mass chaos played out nightly on the evening news, Americans watched their society crumble around them. And as a result of this trauma, a reactionary conservatism spread among ordinary Americans, eventually resulting in the triumph of conservative political forces across the nation.

The forces of disorder helped generate a tremendous growth in country music's popularity. While other forms of popular music came to articulate liberal and anti-establishment views, country reflected the impulses of the "silent majority" tired of riots, crime, protests, and seemingly perverse social behavior. The sentiments expressed by country music in this era were distinctly anti-urban, anti-feminist, anti-hippie, anti-intellectual, and implicitly, anti-black. But above all, country music expressed patriotism, working-class pride, and unwavering belief in traditional "American" values.

"The Ballad of the Silent Majority"

In 1969, *Time* magazine awarded its annual Man of the Year honours to the "Middle Americans." At the same time, other American news magazines also published special reports exploring the concerns of the "silent majority."¹ With the electoral triumph of Richard Nixon the previous November and the strong third-party showing of George Wallace in the same election, the nation's journalists had awoken to the fact that a broad conservative force was emerging in reaction to the liberal and radical forces

¹ "Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans," *Time* 95 (January 5, 1970), pp. 10-17.; "The Troubled American: A Special Report on the White Majority," *Newsweek* 71 (October 6, 1969), pp.28-73.; Joseph C. Goulden, "Voices From the Silent Majority," *Harper's* 240 (January 1970), pp.67-78.

which had dominated American politics in the previous years.

Though the "Silent Majority" had emerged as an identifiable political force, defining its constituents proved to be an imprecise science. *Time's* speculation that "middle America" was at least 100 million strong (roughly half the nation's population) revealed how broadly one could define this force; the magazine came closest to the mark in arguing that this massive group was "defined as much by what they are not as by what they are." Other commentators agreed that middle America's identity was formed in opposition to other groups. Political scientists Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg sketched this segment as "unyoung, unpoor, unblack...middle-aged, middle-class, and middle-minded."²

Time's exploration of middle American psychology revealed a great deal about the incipient changes in American politics. "For too long," wrote the editors in their tribute, "no one has seemed to care about the Middle Americans' concerns. They have felt ignored while angry minorities dominated the headlines and the government's domestic action."³ Responding to this discomfort among the ignored masses tired of seeing their "system of values...assaulted and mocked everywhere,"⁴ Nixon and Wallace capitalized on middle America's discontent and initiated a major reversal in America's political orientation. In 1964, the Democrats had swept to victory with an astounding 60% of the presidential vote; just four years later, 57% of the electorate repudiated them by voting for either Wallace or Nixon.

In the 1968 election, country music stars flocked to the conservative cause. They "lined up to a man for Nixon and Wallace"⁵ in the election, furnishing campaign songs and headlining conservative fund raisers. Nashville crooner Marty Robbins gave the Wallace campaign a theme song entitled "Ain't I Right?"(1968), which, with references to "outside agitators" causing "suffering" for the common man, amounted to a musical version of a Wallace speech. Another Robbins song, "My Native Land"(1968), critiqued the federal government's foreign aid initiatives, another of

² Scammon and Wattenberg, *The Real Majority*, p.21.

³ "Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans" *Time* 95 (January 5, 1970), p. 10.

⁴ "Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans" *Time* 95 (January 5, 1970), p. 10.

⁵ Lund, "Political Reaction in Country Music," p. 89.

Wallace's favorite targets. The Wallace campaign was also active on the southern bluegrass festival circuit, where bumper stickers declaring "Bluegrass is White Folks Music" were distributed by mobile "Wallace For President" teams. Nixon too did not miss the chance to identify himself with the good-old fashioned, southern virtues of country music, persuading stars like Tex Ritter and Roy Acuff to endorse his candidacy and campaign for him. After the election, Nixon and the GOP continued the association by having Tennessee represented in the Inaugural parade by a fiddle-shaped float honouring the Grand Ole Opry, and by inviting country stars like Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash to perform at the White House.⁶ In 1970, Nixon designated October as national country music month.⁷

Country music's support of conservative candidates in the 1968 campaign indicated how politicized the music had become in the previous years. Responding to the contentious national climate, country music launched a musical counteroffensive against the forces of disruption, and against the radical protest music of rock, folk, and soul. Offering increasingly polemical opinions on Vietnam, dissent, feminism, and the counterculture, country music emerged as a foot soldier in the conservative backlash, and as the perfect musical manifestation of middle America's concerns.

"Tell Them What We're Fighting For"

No event politicized country music as intensely as the Vietnam War. Country music already had a well-established reputation for defending American military action and rallying support on the home front. During WWII especially, country singers produced numerous songs in support of the war effort. But, as Jens Lund observes, the patriotic songs of the WWII era "were not particularly reactionary. They merely reflected the determined mood of a mobilized nation."⁸ During the Vietnam era however, war-related country music would not be nearly so benign. Country music, observes scholar Melton McLaurin, "view[ed] the cold war as it had more traditional conflicts - in terms of black and white rather than shades of gray."⁹ As a result of the

⁶ "'Opry' To Float High at D.C. Inaugural," *Billboard*, January 18, 1969, p.36.; Greenfryd, "The Sad Twang of Mountain Voices: Thomas Hart Benton's *Sources of Country Music*," pp. 310-313.

⁷ "The Golden Sound of Nashville," *The Economist* 249 (October 20, 1973), p. 68.

⁸ Lund, "Political Reaction in Country Music," p.87.

⁹ McLaurin, "Proud to Be an American: Patriotism in Country Music," p.25.

domestic controversy surrounding American involvement in Vietnam, country assumed a more militant posture in which songs about the war focused on "attacking dissenters, defending traditional American values and generally ignoring the propriety of American involvement."¹⁰

At the outset of the war, there were a few songs which did not take a polemical stance. Ernest Tubb's "It's For God, Country, and You Mom (and the Girl I Left Behind)"(1965) and Marty Robbins' "Private Wilson White"(1966) chronicled stories about brave young soldiers dying on the battlefield in the name of freedom. Though each of these songs uttered familiar cliches and voiced an undying patriotic commitment to American military efforts, neither was particularly antagonistic toward the "unpatriotic" dissenters.

Not so of the majority of Vietnam-country songs to follow. Dave Dudley kicked off the trend toward militantly pro-war/anti-dissent country anthems with his recordings of Tom T. Hall's "Tell Them What We're Fighting For"(1965) and Kris Kristofferson's "Vietnam Blues"(1966). Spending a combined 28 weeks on the *Billboard* country charts, these songs set the lyrical tone for many of the anti-protestor tunes to follow:

"Tell Them What We're Fighting For"

You tell me there are people marching in our streets
The signs they carry say that we don't fight for peace
There's not a soldier in this land who likes this cruel war
Oh, mama, tell them what we're fighting for
Tell them that we're fighting for the old Red, White and Blue
Did they forget Pearl Harbour, and Korea too?
Another flag must never fly above our nation's door
Oh, mama, tell them what we're fighting for

"Vietnam Blues"

I saw a crowd of people on the White lawn
All a-carrying signs about Vietnam...
They was a strange looking bunch
But then I never could understand some people.
One held a sign that said "We Won't Fight!"
And I said "Well that ain't right."

Dudley explained further the necessity of the war in his minor hit "Hello Vietnam"(1966):

A ship is waiting for us at the dock; America has trouble to be stopped
We must save freedom in that foreign land, or freedom will start slipping through our hand...
I hope and pray some day the world will learn, that fires we don't put out will bigger burn.
We must save freedom now at any cost, or someday our own freedom will be lost

Following Dudley's lead, others joined in the musical defense of the war and the attack on dissenters. Johnny Seay contributed "Day For Decision"(1966), a patriotic, right-wing response to Barry Maguire's left-wing, anti-nuclear war folk anthem "Eve of

¹⁰ Buckley, "Country Music and American Values," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.204.

Destruction”(1965). Stonewall Jackson, whose stage name left little doubt about his views toward war and politics, offered “The Minute Men Are Turning in Their Graves”(1966), a scathing attack on those who would “rather go to prison than heed their country’s call.” Few however approached the heights of vitriol achieved by Pat Boone in “Wish You Were Here Buddy”(1966), which took the form of a threatening letter written from the battlefield to a war-protesting college friend back home:

Well hi there buddy, thought I’d drop you a line, haven’t seen you for a hundred years.
When you get the time will you let me know if it’s true what a fellow hears?
Heard you been leading those campus demonstrations, you’ve been busy as can be,
With the sit-downs, walk-outs, and other aggravations, that you hardly ever think of me.
Well, I’m on a little vacation in South Vietnam, an expense-paid trip for one.
I’ve got my own little rifle and a great uniform, and a job that must be done.
We’re sleeping in the jungle and dodging real bullets, and man it’s a lot of fun
Wish you were here.

Heard you let your hair grow till it’s hanging on your shoulders, and you hardly have time to shave.
I bet the girls all flipped ‘cause you looked so fine, like something that crawled out of a cave.
I heard Uncle Sam nearly scared you to death, but you fooled him just in time.
Just stuck a little match to your old draft card, and burned up a future like mine.
Oh I know you’re not scared, you’re a real brave guy, you’re a regular Cassius Clay.
And I know you’d a fought when the country was young, but the world’s just different today.
Well, you just stay home and leave the fighting to us, and when the whole damn mess is through,
I’ll put away my rifle and my uniform, And I’ll come a-lookin’ for you

Oddly enough, two of the biggest country hits of the early Vietnam years were barely even country songs, indicating the degree to which country music fans sought to identify with pro-war/anti-dissent feelings. In “Open Letter To My Teenage Son”(1967), Victor Lundberg vowed in a solemn spoken word delivery to disown his son if he were to burn his draft card. Though the song was only minimally country-styled it received great exposure on country radio. An even bigger hit was Sgt. Barry Sadler’s “Ballad of the Green Berets”(1966). This patriotic anthem, set to a martial beat, touted the virtues of fearless, manly American soldiers willing to die for the cause. Despite being more of a “pop” song, the record received massive airplay on country radio, spent eleven weeks on the country charts (peaking at number two), and eventually sold seven million copies. Sadler’s surprise success in the country market led to a follow up LP featuring a number of songs with similar themes but a more authentic country sound.

Country songs expressing support for the war continued to appear throughout the late sixties and early seventies. Autry Inman’s “Ballad of Two Brothers”(1968) told

the story of a dissenting college student who, after the death of his brother in the war, sees the light and enlists in the cause, despite the advice of his left-wing professor. Bobby Bare offered the superpatriotic "God Bless America Again"(1969) for "those sick of the cussers and the doubters."¹¹ Merle Haggard's number one hit "The Fighting Side of Me"(1970), which was said by Ernest Tubb to express "the way all of us really feel," criticized those who hypocritically protested the war yet would not fight to defend the freedom which they exercised in their street politics.¹² Haggard, who once told an interviewer that he sang "for the kind of people who fought World War II,"¹³ used this song to cast the behavior of dissenters as an insult to both those who had fought in the past and those presently fighting to keep America free.

The most controversial Vietnam-country song was undoubtedly Terry Nelson's "The Battle Hymn of Lt. Calley"(1971), a tribute to the "heroics" of the soldier found guilty of wartime atrocities for his role in the My Lai massacre. The song, which also "castigated those Americans who, safe at home, criticized Calley's actions," was banned by the Armed Forces Network and had to be removed from jukeboxes around the country after it reportedly caused numerous fistfights.¹⁴ It nevertheless set sales records and country star Tex Ritter, a staunch conservative, asked to record it, only to be overruled by record executives who deemed it too controversial.¹⁵

Country music's politicization over Vietnam was understandable given that other forms of popular music also took to political commentary on the war. Folk, rock, and soul music in fact were rather explicit in *denouncing* the war. While folkie Bob Dylan scathed the "Masters of War"(1965), and rocker Jim Morrison mourned the pointless death of the "Unknown Soldier"(1969), country music alone rallied to the cause.

But country's support of the war, like that of middle America, was based more on the belief that dissent was unpatriotic, not necessarily on the explicit belief that the Vietnam intervention was just. Edward Looney, a Brooklyn bus driver who lost a son

¹¹ Dickson, "Singing to Silent America," *Nation* 210 (February 23, 1970), p.212.

¹² Lund, "Political Reaction in Country Music," p.89.

¹³ Wren, "Merle Haggard: He Sings For the Folks Who Fought World War II," *Look* 35 (July 13, 1971), p.41.

¹⁴ McLaurin, "Proud to Be an American: Patriotism in Country Music," p.25.; "U.S. Command in Vietnam Bars 'Battle Hymn of Calley' From Radio Network, Citing Pending Appeal," *New York Times*, May 1, 1971, p.4.; Earl Paige, "Jukebox Programmers Putting 'Calley' on Request-Only Basis," *Billboard*, April 31, 1971, pp.1,36,38.

¹⁵ "Cap Nixes Disk; Seeks Not To Glorify Calley," *Billboard*, April 24, 1971, p.3.

in the war, captured the essence of this position in comments published in *Time* magazine's feature on middle America: "We may find out some day that what we're doing in Vietnam is wrong, but until then, it's my country right or wrong."¹⁶ The subtle misgivings detectable in Looney's opinion were evidenced in some country songs. "Ruby Don't Take Your Love To Town," a popular ballad recorded by nine different artists between 1967 and 1971, depicted the destructive effect the war could have on families and individuals, but despite the protagonist's bitterness at being crippled during his tour of duty, he does not condemn the war itself: "It wasn't me that started that crazy Asian war / But I was proud to go and do my patriotic chore." A similar song by Loretta Lynn, called "Dear Uncle Sam"(1966), told the story of an anguished widow shattered by the death of her husband in combat. Though it depressingly mourns the woman's misfortune, "the song contains no hint of protest; the loss, though painful is accepted as necessary."¹⁷

Country music's undying support of Vietnam was really a means of expressing disapproval at domestic dissent. Expressing antiwar sentiments in country music would have been blasphemy for a genre defined by its patriotism. As country star John D. Loudermilk attested in 1971: "if a strong anti-war [country] song came out now and hit the charts it would be taken off the air. They [country music fans] think an anti-war song is Communist, written by a man who's afraid or doesn't want to fight."¹⁸ On the whole, this was accurate, though there were some exceptions later in the war (Johnny Cash's "What is Truth?"(1971) and Arlene Harden's sarcastic "Congratulations, You Sure Made a Man Out of Him"(1971) were two of the only antiwar country songs to break onto the charts). For the most part, the liner notes of a sixties compilation album called *Country Music Goes To War* remained true: "Country Music artists have never been identified with the so-called 'protest songs' or 'peace marches...right or wrong, Country Music stands with our Country. When America goes to war - Country Music also Goes To War."¹⁹

¹⁶ "Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans" *Time* 95 (January 5, 1970), p. 15.

¹⁷ McLaurin, "Proud to Be an American: Patriotism in Country Music," p.27.

¹⁸ Wren, "Country Music: The Great White Soul Sound," *Look* 35 (July 13, 1971), p.12.; Silber, "A Study in Illusion and Reality," *Sing Out!* 17 (August/September 1967), p.20.

¹⁹ Lund, "Political Reaction in Country Music," p.88.

"Love It or Leave It"

During the Nixon years, the pro-Vietnam/anti-protestor country song began to merge into a wider musical critique of *all* the unpatriotic, "traitorous" elements in America. Bill Anderson asked the musical question on all of middle America's mind with "Where Have All Our Heroes Gone?"(1970), while Harlan Howard's "Mister Professor"(1970) articulated the widespread disdain for liberal intellectuals, blaming them for everything from atheism and draft-dodging to protest marching and arson. Ernest Tubb offered a musical ultimatum to hippies and peaceniks in "Love It or Leave It"(1969), and bluegrass legend Lester Flatt expressed a common sentiment when he humorously indicted hippies in "I Can't Tell the Boys From the Girls"(1971) (incidentally, Flatt had split with his longtime partner, banjo wizard Earl Scruggs in part due to Scruggs' opposition to Vietnam - Flatt also suspected Scruggs of smoking pot).

The undisputed leader however in voicing middle America's concerns through country music was Merle Haggard. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported: "when Merle Haggard sings, the silent majority isn't silent."²⁰ An ex-convict, Haggard had developed his musical skills while in prison, and by the mid-sixties had emerged as a top figure in country music with songs celebrating working-class pride and hardship. In 1969 Haggard released "Okie From Muskogee," a polemical song which quickly became a number one hit. In the song, Haggard sketched a typical small American town insulated from the revolutionary currents of the day, and in so doing, captured many of the schisms dividing America in the late sixties and early seventies:

We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee
And we don't take our trips on LSD
And we don't burn our draft cards down on Main street
But we like living right and being free
We don't make a party out of loving
But we like holding hands and pitching woo
We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy
Like the hippies out in San Francisco do
Leather boots are still in style if a man needs footwear
Beads and Roman sandals won't be seen
Football's still the roughest thing on campus
And the kids here still respect the college dean
I'm proud to be an Okie From Muskogee
A Place where even squares can have a ball
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse
And white lightning's still the biggest thrill of all

²⁰ Gottschalk, "Love It or Leave It: New Patriotic Music Wins Fans, Enemies," *Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 1970, p.1.

Using humour and effective imagery, Haggard's vision of Muskogee served as "a comforting musical antidote to student protest, black militancy and serious debate on the war."²¹ The song articulated with great effect the conflict in values between the traditionally-minded silent majority of ordinary, working-class Americans and the free-thinking, free-loving, drug-ingesting, war-opposing, spoiled middle-class kids on college campuses across the nation. In a 1971 interview, Haggard provided more insight into the message of "Okie":

The ones who bitch are usually the rich kids who get tired of having everything. The people who work don't have time to riot or protest. Too busy working....Ain't no 16-year-old kid gonna solve the world's problems. A man out working gotta right to bitch. Not someone who hasn't paid his dues."²²

Such sentiment was widespread among working-class Americans in the sixties and seventies.²³ Haggard's ability to articulate it helped earn him the sobriquet "poet of the working class." His other songs also helped identify him as a working-class, conservative hero. "Workin' Man Blues"(1969), in which he sings proudly "I ain't never been on welfare / That's one place I'll never be," was particularly enjoyed by President Nixon, who after inviting Haggard to the White House, told the singer: "just keep on singin' songs like that 'Workin Man's Blues' Merle, and maybe we can get some of these people off their asses."²⁴

Another of Nixon's favorites was Guy Drake's "Welfare Cadillac"(1969), a caustic tale about a welfare recipient who buys a luxury car with government "handouts." This conservative attack on welfare was, in the estimation of Bill Malone, "clearly inspired by the Great Society's support of minority groups," and it too went to number one on the country charts. Nixon so loved the song that he asked Johnny Cash to perform it at the White House - Cash refused, not out of political reasons but simply because it was not his song and he did not know how to play it.²⁵

²¹ Dickson, "Singing to Silent America," *Nation* 210 (February 23, 1970), p. 218.

²² Wren, "Merle Haggard: He Sings For the Folks Who Fought World War II," *Look* 35 (July 13, 1971), pp.40-41.

²³ "Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans" *Time* 95 (January 5, 1970), pp. 12, 14-15.

²⁴ James Cobb, "From Rocky Top to Detroit City: Country Music and the Economic Transformation of the South," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p. 68.

²⁵ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p. 319.

"Stand By Your Man"

Amidst the contentious gender politics of the sixties and early seventies, it was no surprise that country music weighed in against the women's movement. Most distasteful to the country community were the tactics used by feminists to publicize their cause and highlight sexual inequality. Man-hating and bra-burning were unlikely to attract a following among the working-class women with strong family values who made up the core of the female country audience. As some scholars have argued "female artists' working class identification discourage[d] them from identifying with a women's liberation movement they s[aw] as having a middle-class image."²⁶

It was entirely logical that a genre identified with the traditional, patriarchal values of southern life would express distaste for the ideology and politics of feminism. As many scholars have demonstrated, country music has traditionally depicted women's roles as "limited to lover, wife, and mother," rarely allowing them to be seen as co-workers or professional career persons.²⁷ This changed little in the sixties, when the country music female continued to be portrayed as "a dependent, submissive, masochistic, and stoic woman."²⁸ This image complimented the views of middle America, who, as *Time* magazine wrote, often attributed youthful disrespect, drug use, and "the weakening of the family structure to the fact that so many mothers have gone to work."²⁹

In the late-sixties and early seventies, female-sung country music was dominated by Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn, and Dolly Parton. Undoubtedly, the leader in depicting the traditional country woman in song was Wynette, who emerged as a superstar by singing what *Newsweek* called "songs of non-liberation."³⁰ The song which did the most to establish Wynette as a proponent of traditional women's roles was her number one hit "Stand By Your Man"(1968). The song provoked great controversy with what feminists saw as its sexist message, but it quickly became an

²⁶ Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness in Country Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson(eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.56.

²⁷ Lundy, "Women and Country Music," p.218.; Oermann, "Mother, Sister, Sweetheart. Pal: Women in Old-time Country Music," pp. 125-134.

²⁸ Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness in Country Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson(eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.55.

²⁹ "Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans" *Time* 95 (January 5, 1970), p. 15.

³⁰ "Songs of Non-Liberation," *Newsweek* 78 (August 2, 1971), pp.81-83.

anthem for the anti-feminist cause. The single spent 17 weeks on the country charts, and successfully "crossed over" onto the pop charts, eventually becoming the biggest-selling record by a woman in the history of country music.³¹ Billy Sherill, Wynette's producer, later reminisced that he had written the tune because he was "sick of hearing of women's lib,"³² and his highly provocative lyrics (at least in the climate of the sixties) clearly reflected this:

Sometimes it's hard to be a woman
Giving all your love to just one man
You'll have bad times
And he'll have good times,
Doin' things you don't understand
But if you love him
You'll forgive him
Be proud of him
'Cause after all he's just a man

Stand by your man
Give him two arms to cling to
And something warm to come to
On nights he's cold and lonely
Stand By your man
And tell the world you love him
Keep giving all the love you can

Encouraging women to remain loyal and faithful even while their men were out having "good times" (presumably with other women or with "the boys"), the song countered the feminist admonition for women to rebel against oppressive, philandering, unsupportive husbands. As if to reemphasize this message, Wynette followed up "Stand By Your Man" with other songs about weak, passive females who stick with their men despite maltreatment. In "When He Loves Me (He Loves Me All the Way)" (1970), Wynette sang:

Sometimes when he comes home I'm cookin' breakfast.
I haven't slept a wink all night long.
I've been layin' in bed, thinkin' like a woman,
Wonderin' if my man's been doing me wrong
...I guess he needs some time away from me.
But when he loves me, he really loves me.
There's nothing more for me to say.
...I'd rather wonder a little and have his lovin',
'Cause when he loves me, he loves me all the way.

In "My Man (Understands)" (1974), Wynette further underscored her ideal of dependent,

³¹ Morris, "Sometimes It's Hard To Be a Woman: Reinterpreting a Country Music Classic," p.1.

³² Banes, "Dixie's Daughters: The Country Music Female," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.98.

submissive womanhood, declaring: "My man, understands / That he holds me in the palm of his hand / And I like it." Wynette's attitude toward feminism was nowhere more clear than in the title of her 1969 hit "Love Me, Don't Liberate Me," described by one scholar as an "appeal to the 'barefoot-in-the-kitchen' school of thought concerning the female's role in society."³³

The songs of Loretta Lynn embodied more complex messages than those of Wynette, for while Lynn did not identify with mainstream feminists, she did express an assertiveness previously absent from female country music. Songs like "Happy Birthday"(1964), "Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' (With Lovin' On Your Mind)"(1966) and "Your Squaw's On the Warpath"(1968), which spent a combined 57 weeks on the country charts, were sung in the persona of an aggressive woman unwilling to be mistreated by men. In her most controversial song, Lynn extolled the virtues of "The Pill"(1972), which by giving women control over procreation gave them "the power to explore extramarital sex just as men had previously done in the traditional scenario of domestic turmoil."³⁴

But the message expressed in these songs was not as simple as it appeared. The power Lynn sang about in "The Pill" was, as Curtis Ellison demonstrates, cast less as a means for "liberated" women to gratify their own sexual impulses, and more as a way to keep errant men at home with their families, forcing them to be attentive, faithful husbands/fathers.³⁵ The seemingly radical messages of "The Pill," "Don't Come Home A-Drinkin,'" and "Your Squaw's on the Warpath," were actually deceptively conservative, for they were firmly fixed on the ideal of domesticity, only with the added caveat that men must be more responsible and respectful.

In fact, many other Lynn songs were critical of feminism and idealized the traditional domestic male-female relationship. In "One's On the Way"(1971), Lynn contrasted the virtuous lives of overworked housewives with the spiritually-devoid, free and easy lifestyles of "the girls in New York City," who "all march for women's lib." In "To Make a Man (Feel Like a Man)"(1969), Lynn cast the value of women as based

³³ Cobb, "From Muskogee to Lukenbach: Country Music and the Southernization of America," p.88.

³⁴ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.175.

³⁵ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.175.

on their ability to satisfy a dominant male's masculinity. Other hits of hers, like "You Ain't Woman Enough (To Take My Man)"(1966) and "Fist City"(1968) were decidedly pre-feminist expressions of female competitiveness, which put blame for extramarital activity on the "other woman," rather than the philandering man. By fixing the female protagonist's worth on the basis of her ability to attract and keep a man, these songs embodied a characteristic which scholar Karen Saucier Lundy sees as a primary means by which country music perpetuates anti-feminist principles.³⁶

On the whole, Curtis Ellison's description of Lynn as "a noncompliant female who is sexually assertive while simultaneously defending traditional values" seems most accurate.³⁷ As James Cobb writes, Lynn's music appealed to "an eager audience of women tired of second class citizenship...but uncertain they wanted total 'liberation'."³⁸ While subtly expressing more moderate feminist beliefs, Lynn maintained a distinct reverence for home, family, motherhood, and monogamy.

Dolly Parton's music reflected tensions similar to those seen in Lynn's songs, leading scholar Patrick Carr to describe her and her music as "feminine-but-not-feminist."³⁹ While songs like "Dumb Blonde"(1967) and "Just Because I'm a Woman"(1968) seemed to argue against sexism, others like "My Tennessee Mountain Home"(1972) and "Jolene"(1973) seemed devoted to old-fashioned domesticity and preoccupied with the same kind of catty, female rivalry seen in Loretta Lynn's music. Though many of her songs earned her the respect of women's liberation activists, Parton continually "disassociat[ed] herself from the rhetoric of mainstream feminism."⁴⁰ In a 1978 interview, Parton was asked if she supported the Equal Rights Amendment. She evasively replied: "I can't keep up with it." Further pressed as to if she read any books about the women's movement, she responded: "Never have. I know so little about it they'd probably be ashamed that I was a woman."⁴¹ Indeed, Parton often earned the ire of feminists by flaunting her well-endowed body with tight

³⁶ Lundy, "Women and Country Music," p.214.

³⁷ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.175.

³⁸ Cobb, "From Muskogee to Lukenbach: Country Music and the Southernization of America," p.88.

³⁹ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.393.

⁴⁰ Steinem, "Dolly Parton," *Ms.* 15 (January 1987), pp.66, 94.; Wilson, "Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton," p.128.

⁴¹ Wilson, "Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton," p.128.

clothing and exaggerated makeup and hairstyling, thus encouraging her own sexual objectification. After appearing on the cover of *TV Guide* in a gaudy, revealing dress, prominently displaying her ample bosom, an enraged female reader wrote the magazine's editors:

I have never been so thoroughly sickened by a magazine cover that has come into the house as I was with your Dolly Parton issue....What kind of woman is Dolly Parton to actually *agree* to be photographed in such a manner....I just hope that this incident does not help send the women's movement hurtling so far backward into the Stone Age that a recovery would be highly improbable - if not useless. And while I realize that things are improving, our struggles are far from over - something the picture on your cover makes perfectly clear.⁴²

Country music listeners' preference for songs by and about "traditional" rather than "liberated" women was evident in radioplay, record sales, and chart statistics from the late-sixties and seventies. Using a sophisticated statistical method to determine the characteristics of hit country songs, country music scholar Charle Jaret has demonstrated that songs by female country stars from this era that focused on more traditional themes (heartbreak, crying, motherhood, homemaking, feminine purity, unwavering devotion to a male partner) were more successful than those with more risqué or "subversive" themes (such as honky-tonkin', cheating, drinking, flirting).⁴³ Clearly, country music listeners in this era were drawn to songs with a more traditional view of gender roles, and put off by those which challenged such views. By singing "songs of non-liberation," country music females found an eager audience among middle Americans unconvinced, and in many cases disgusted by feminist rhetoric.

Female singers were not alone in expressing anti-feminist sentiment in Nixon-era country music. Some songs, like the previously mentioned "Ruby Don't Take Your Love To Town" seemed to encourage violence against women with lyrics like "If I could move I'd get my gun and put her in the ground." Worse however were the bluegrass "murder ballads," long a staple in that genre's repertoire and as popular as ever in the seventies. In bluegrass "standards" like "Poor Ellen Smith," "Pretty Polly," and "Banks of the Ohio," the male protagonist brutally murders his love, either out of "jealousy and a desire to possess the woman," or often without any explanation

⁴² Hancock, "Letters," *TV Guide*, December 18-24, 1993, pp. 45, 84.

⁴³ Jaret, "Characteristics of Successful and Unsuccessful Country Music Songs," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.182.

whatsoever.⁴⁴ Of course, such songs were not written with feminism in mind, but their continuing popularity in bluegrass indicated a lack of interest in “cleansing” the genre of such potentially threatening and offensive songs.

For the most part though, mainstream male country singers articulated their discomfort (as well as their fans’) with the “revolution” proposed by feminism in an indirect, typically macho way. As journalist Florence King observed in 1974: “loudly trumpeted supermasculinity is now a trademark of many country songs.”⁴⁵ Indeed, artists like Merle Haggard, David Allen Coe, Dave Dudley, and Buck Owens churned out numerous hit songs about powerful, individualistic, untamable men basking in the joy of freedom, recklessness, and their own supercharged machismo. Touting the virtues of manliness, these artists found an audience among middle American men tired of feeling disempowered and emasculated by the changes in gender relations.

“My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys”

In the seventies, the American male, especially the working-class male, was under siege not just from the women’s movement, but from a variety of other forces. Economic change (automation, unemployment, inflation) increasingly curtailed his ability to be the sole provider for his family. The rapid rise of crime and the development of government initiatives like bussing and open housing seemed to limit his ability to protect his family from threatening external forces. With his self-image as a strong, independent provider and defender eroded by these forces, country music was one of the only places where manliness was still celebrated, where the American male was still a “rugged individualist,” able to provide for his family’s well-being and defend them from malevolent forces.

No other trend in country music expressed this anti-feminist, hypermasculinity quite as vividly as the “Outlaw” movement, whose appearance in the early seventies signalled the resurgence of western styles and the western image in country music. This subgenre’s revival of the cowboy image (unpopular since the mid-fifties when the architects of the Nashville sound made urbane “respectability” the overriding goal of

⁴⁴ Tunnell, “99 Years is Almost For Life: Punishment For Violent Crime in Bluegrass Music,” p.166.

⁴⁵ King, “Rednecks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Fear,” *Harper’s* 249 (July 1974), p.34.

country music) was in large part a response to the politics of feminism. As scholar Thomas F. Johnson explained in 1981: "the feminist movement has caused many men...to question their social function as males. The masculine-dominated world of the cowboy gives them a role to emulate....No wonder the insecure male grasps at the womanless world of safe male comradeship that is at the heart of most western music."⁴⁶

But the emergence of the western-based, western-themed "Outlaw" movement in the early seventies was symbolic of far more than simply country music listeners' male chauvinism. The resurgence of the latter part of the "Country and Western" label (once uniformly applied to all country music) responded to other impulses in the psyche of middle America. The pioneer values honored in "Outlaw" music resonated with the anti-urban, anti-intellectual, anti-bureaucratic tendencies of silent America through songs celebrating the wide open prairie and the world of the grizzled cowboy, the independent loner, and the renegade "outlaw" (a far more endearing criminal figure than the rapists, murderers and drug dealers stalking contemporary city streets). Moreover, the resurgence of the western theme in country music paralleled the emergence of the West-South "Sun Belt" as the new locus of American economic development and political power. With their increasing economic vitality and mutually conservative visions of America, the West-South alliance would drive the conservative ascendance in the seventies and beyond; the rise of country and, once again, *western* music in the 70s was, in journalist Peter Applebome's words: "the cultural version of John Calhoun's political vision of the South and West uniting to dominate American politics."⁴⁷

Led by Willie Nelson, the "Outlaw" movement emerged in Austin, Texas, where a coterie of Nashville singers and songwriters (including Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, Guy Clark, Tompall Glaser, and others) had relocated to escape the corporate homogenization and lack of artistic control in the Nashville music establishment. In Austin they revived more authentic country sounds like honky tonk and western swing, and also mixed in some rock influences, developing a formidable challenge to the hegemonic Nashville Sound. As renegades within the industry, the

⁴⁶ Johnson, "That Ain't Country: The Distinctiveness of Commercial Western Music," pp.82-83.

⁴⁷ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.244.

Outlaws established themselves as critics of corporatism and the bureaucratic oppression of a central "governing" body (the Nashville establishment). Thus, the genesis of the Outlaw movement was itself a musical/cultural expression of the kind of hinterland independence and rebellion expressed in the conservative populism of George Wallace. Like Wallace, who often spoke out against "guideline writers....[and] bureaucrats who try to tell you who you can hire or sell your house to,"⁴⁸ Nelson and the Outlaws moved to Austin and pursued their own vision because, as Johnny Paycheck explains, they "got tired of bein' told how to do things."⁴⁹

The Outlaws' music shared other characteristics with the limited government, anti-Washington perspective coming to dominate the rhetoric of conservatism. By venerating the cowboy image, Outlaw music exalted a figure whose pioneer values of individualism and self-sufficiency were precisely those values which conservatives argued were undermined by the social welfare schemes and bureaucratic guidelines of an overbearing federal government. The cowboy image might also have responded to tensions raised by Vietnam. America had entered the Vietnam conflict as a sort of modern-day cowboy-nation, riding into town on a white horse to free the innocent citizenry from the oppression of evildoers. While the lack of military success in Vietnam exposed the complexity of Cold War-era warfare, patriotic Cold Warriors at home still clung tenaciously to the "good/evil" paradigm of the traditional cowboy approach to war. Even if the disaster in Southeast Asia had suggested the irrelevance of the cowboy dichotomy, many still wanted to believe in the clear-cut idea of war between "good and evil." Such was essential to the dialectic of the Cold War. Thus, the Outlaw image may have helped reinvigorate Americans' Cold War convictions after the international humiliation and domestic polarization of the Vietnam debacle. By reminding Americans of the "romantic horseman who in an earlier age of glory and certainty had supposedly won the west," Outlaw music helped restore faith in America's historical mission, "bringing back to life a confident past for people troubled by an intractable present."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ George Wallace *Tells It Like It Is*, pp. 74, 97.

⁴⁹ Oermann, *The Roots of Country*, p.211.

⁵⁰ Gregory, *American Exodus*, p.236.

Western country music also responded to the anti-urban sentiments of Americans who saw cities as hotbeds of crime, welfarism, and moral perversion. Buck Owens, a leader of the Bakersfield music scene (another anti-Nashville music center) best expressed country music's anti-urban leanings in "I Wouldn't Live in New York City (If They Gave Me The Whole Dang Town)" (1971). Against a sonic backdrop of traffic, sirens, and general urban chaos, Owens sang:

It ain't nothin' but a concrete jungle, with people packed like sardines.
Where everybody tries to live beyond their means.
The natives scurry to and fro,
And like fleas on a puppy dog, they got no place to go
I wouldn't live in New York City, if they gave me the whole dang town!

Talk about a bummer, it's the biggest one around.
Sodom and Gomorrah was tame to what I found.
I wouldn't live in New York City, if they gave me the whole dang town!

I ain't seen the sun shine since the day that I arrived,
'Cause brother I've been busy a-tryin' to survive.
Nobody knows you've been here till you're six feet under ground.
And you become a statistic if they remember to write you down.
I wouldn't live in New York City, if they gave me the whole dang town!

Though they rarely approached the polemical heights achieved by Owens, Austin's Outlaws, through their celebration of the cowboy and his frontier values, provided a broader indictment of the city as a corruptive, degenerate influence on America. Exploiting western imagery, the Outlaws contrasted America's overcrowded, violent, morally corrupt cities with the wide open spaces of the west and the simple honesty of rural life, thereby celebrating the "nobility of the free individual [and] the spiritually restorative qualities of nature in its wilderness state."⁵¹ In short, the Outlaws capitalized on "the image of the cowboy as representing values that were being lost in the urbanization of America"⁵²

The Outlaws' anti-urban bias was further symbolized by their break from the sophisticated, urbane sound of Nashville-centered country music. The Outlaws would not allow the urban powers-that-be in the Nashville establishment to dictate the style and content of their music. The impulse to "sanitize" country music in order to appeal to a broader, middle-class, urban audience was entirely absent from the Outlaws' approach.

⁵¹ Johnson, "That Ain't Country: The Distinctiveness of Commercial Western Music," p. 75.

⁵² Wilgus, "Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly," p. 146.

Their music would be accepted or rejected on its own terms, not those of an "enlightened" urban elite interested only in making a profit.

"The Great White Soul Sound"

Of all the contentious issues at the center of America's polarization in the Nixon years, race was undoubtedly the most central.⁵³ Race in fact was one of the primary issues driving the conservative backlash, as was obvious in the politics of George Wallace.⁵⁴ Thus, it is curious that while country music was quite vocal on every other issue of the era, surprisingly little was said *directly* about racial issues.

Though mainstream country music avoided commentary on race, there was, of course, a considerable market for explicitly racist country music distributed by small record labels throughout the South. The Reb Rebel label out of Crowley, Louisiana was the most notorious sponsor of racist country music, distributing such extreme songs as "Nigger Hatin' Me," "Don't Bus Them Kids," "Lookin' For a Handout," and "A Victim of the Big Mess (Called the Great Society)," a song which told the story of a black soldier ("who doesn't resent bein' called Nigger") returning from Vietnam only to find that "the Commies" have poisoned race relations in the South.⁵⁵ Another song, "Nigger, Nigger," included the lyrics: "They might as well give up the fight / No federal judge can make them white / This job is up to you and me / Let's beat the N double A-C-P." In 1967, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that such records were sold not only at major chain stores like Woolworth's throughout the South, but, through distribution at truck stops, were now becoming part of an "almost nationwide traffic in racist items."⁵⁶

Nevertheless, though some of these racist records sold as many as 25,000 copies (impressive for poorly distributed, non-major label music), they were not part of the country mainstream. On the whole, "race relations...[has] not [been] a prominent theme in country music."⁵⁷ Melton McLaurin suggests that this has something to do with country's superpatriotic, southern orientation. He argues that for the mostly

⁵³ Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, pp.5-7, 80-81.; Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics*, pp.78-79.

⁵⁴ Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, p. 37.

⁵⁵ Lund, "Racism, Fundamentalism, and Political Reaction in Country Music," p.89.

⁵⁶ Maxwell, "The Bigotry Business: Racist Records, Books Are Hits in the South," *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 1967, p.1.

⁵⁷ McLaurin, "Patriotism in Country Music," in: Bindas, *America's Musical Pulse*, p.29.

southern-born performers of country music, discussion of race relations in their music would not flatter their sense of patriotism since the South's sordid history with regard to race relations has been the most significant factor keeping it outside of the national mainstream. In order for the South to be accepted nationally, and for its music to be seen as all-American, country has avoided addressing itself to racial issues.⁵⁸

But while blatant expressions of racism were eschewed by the country mainstream, there were a few songs which subtly alluded to racial tensions. The previously mentioned "Welfare Cadillac" was a thinly veiled diatribe against black welfare recipients, a musical precursor of Ronald Reagan's later harangues against "welfare queens." The race-laden issue of welfare, in fact, was the one issue upon which country singers managed some implicit commentary on current issues related to race. President Nixon's personal favorite "Workin' Man Blues" included the lyric: "I ain't never been on welfare / That's one place I'll never be." In "They Don't Make 'Em Like My Daddy Anymore" (1974) Loretta Lynn sang: "Daddy never took a handout...It only proves one thing to me when folks start bellyachin' / They don't make 'em like my daddy anymore." In these and many other songs which denounced welfare as a means of support, country singers seemed to contrast proud working people unwilling to live on the dole, with the lazy, shiftless free-loaders feeding at the public trough. Though it would be unfair to suggest that any country artist who criticized welfare was a racist, for many country music *listeners* such songs could have inferred all sorts of implicit racial meaning. Since blacks, unfairly or not, were associated in the public mind with food stamps and other such welfare programs, anti-welfare country songs could have been received by white working-class listeners as indictments of minorities living off of government handouts, financed by white tax dollars. Of course, anti-welfare songs might also have been received as no more than tributes to working-class independence and the blue-collar work ethic, but the potential certainly existed for such songs to pique racist attitudes.

Whatever the case, though it rarely displayed explicit anti-black tendencies, there was certainly an undercurrent of racial exclusivity in seventies country music. To begin with, demographic profiles compiled by both trade magazines and scholars sketched

⁵⁸ McLaurin, "Patriotism in Country Music," in: Bindas, *America's Musical Pulse*, pp. 28-29.

country music listeners as almost exclusively white.⁵⁹ More significantly, black performers were essentially unrepresented in country music, the lone exception being Charley Pride. In Pride's case, the exception proved the rule.

When he first emerged as a recording star during the racial tensions of the mid-sixties, Pride's records were shipped to radio stations without the customary promotional photographs. Similarly, his first few albums did not include any pictures of the singer and made no reference to his color, certainly a unique characteristic worthy of mention in liner notes. At many concerts, Pride's initial appearance on stage would bring about a gasping silence, as white patrons unaware of his color would puzzle over how he could "sound like us and look like *them*."⁶⁰ But with a vocal style and lyrical content indistinguishable from white singers, Pride's career took off.

In 1967 he became the first black performer to headline at the Grand Ole Opry,⁶¹ and in 1971, was named CMA Entertainer of the Year, the first (and only) time a non-white performer was given this prestigious honor. The country establishment's recognition of Pride was based as much on the merits of his career as on the industry's conscious effort to escape charges of racism. Honoring Pride as Entertainer of the Year was a symbolic act that allowed the country music industry to say "see, we're not racists." But Pride, and country music in general, certainly did not take up the cause of racial justice. As McLaurin writes: "direct condemnations of those who hold and act upon racial prejudice...[were] rarely encountered in country song lyrics."⁶² Pride, "an astringently non-militant black"⁶³ who steered clear of politics, was accepted by the country establishment precisely because he was *not* representative of black America. As "one of perhaps two or three Negroes in the history of the world to be called a redneck....an honest-to-God, red-blooded 'good ole boy',"⁶⁴ Pride symbolized the kind of American black man that country music listeners wished were more numerous:

⁵⁹ "Store Survey Shows Unique Buying Habits," *Billboard*, September 29, 1973, p.1.; Peterson and DiMaggio, "From Region to Class, the Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis," p.503.

⁶⁰ "Lord, They've Done It All," *Time* 103 (May 6, 1974), p.52.

⁶¹ DeFord Bailey, a harmonica player from the thirties, was the only other black previous to Pride who had appeared on the Opry, though he was never given "headliner" status.

⁶² McLaurin, "Patriotism in Country Music," in: Bindas, *America's Musical Pulse*, p.29.

⁶³ Hedgepeth, "Superstars, Poets, Pickers, Prophets," *Look* 35 (July 13, 1971), p.28.

⁶⁴ Hedgepeth, "Superstars, Poets, Pickers, Prophets," *Look* 35 (July 13, 1971), p.28.

pro-establishment, apolitical, unthreatening, and reverent to white America.

Nevertheless, the country establishment's embrace and shrewd marketing of Pride helped fool the critics and assisted in exorcising the ghost of racism from country music. By 1973, *Billboard* magazine was convinced that "the move of blacks into the country music field...is now well beyond 'token' stage."⁶⁵ But the subsequent history of blacks in country music did not bear out this belief. As country music scholar Nolan Porterfield has argued, Pride may have been "country music's first black superstar, the Jackie Robinson of the genre...[but] his influence on future generations of blacks seems negligible."⁶⁶ Indeed, few blacks followed Pride into country music and few took to his music. Like black Republicans, black country singers were suspect, seen by most of black America as sell-outs and "Uncle Toms." As Porterfield writes:

The almost total absence of black and other minorities from country music is not surprising, considering its origins among white southerners....What would attract paying black audiences to an art form that has traditionally reflected the values of staid, fundamentalist, xenophobic white society?⁶⁷

Despite its embrace of Charley Pride, the country music establishment made other efforts to perpetuate its image as white man's music. In 1973, the CMA commissioned artist Thomas Hart Benton to paint a mural depicting the history and character of country music. The mural, entitled *Sources of Country Music* was finished in 1974 and installed in the entrance foyer of the Country Hall of Fame. The mural depicting the precursors of modern country music included representations of old-time fiddlers, nineteenth century minstrels, singing troubadours, and gospel quartets. But the mural failed to adequately depict the black influence in the roots of modern country. As Vivien Greenfyrd has argued, blacks were "marginalized and isolated in the mural."⁶⁸ Despite the considerable, even seminal influence of black musical forms in the genesis of country music, Benton's mural diminished the importance of blacks in the evolution of the music. Exhibits at the Country Hall of Fame reflected a similar impulse to purge the music of any link to black America. As Greenfyrd points out,

⁶⁵ "Black Talent Prods," *Billboard*, July 28, 1973, p.41.

⁶⁶ Porterfield, "The Day Hank Williams Died: Cultural Collisions in Country Music," in: Bindas (ed.), *America's Musical Pulse*, p.181.

⁶⁷ Porterfield, "The Day Hank Williams Died: Cultural Collisions in Country Music," in: Bindas (ed.), *America's Musical Pulse*, p.180.

⁶⁸ Greenfyrd, "The Sad Twang of Mountain Voices": Thomas Hart Benton's *Sources of Country Music*, p.318.

exhibits at the Hall of Fame honoring country pioneers like Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley failed to "acknowledge the southern black musicians who contributed to their styles."⁶⁹ In the CMA's efforts to enshrine the music as an important part of America's cultural heritage, country's implicit race-bias remained quite evident.

* * *

Country music responded to the political climate of the sixties and seventies, with opinionated, often polemical songs representative of middle America's increasingly conservative politics. As scholar Mary Bufwack writes, while "blacks and students protested their oppression, country singers and songwriters increasingly articulated the pride and problems of working-class people."⁷⁰ John Buckley adds: "if some country music frequently presented a polarized perspective...it was reflecting political and social attitudes of the day."⁷¹ Indeed, in an era when all of American music seemed caught up in the political turmoil of the day, country was no different. While other forms of American music expressed the insurgent and radical politics of feminists, war protestors, militant blacks, and hippies, country music alone stood for the patriotic virtues of the Silent Majority. Country provided a musical equivalent to the "America - Love It or Leave It" bumper stickers so popular in this era.

⁶⁹ Greenfryd, "The Sad Twang of Mountain Voices": Thomas Hart Benton's *Sources of Country Music*," p.319.

⁷⁰ Bufwack, "The Feminist Sensibility in Post-War Country Music," p.142.

⁷¹ Buckley, "Country Music and American Values," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.204.

CHAPTER THREE

GOING SOUTH AND GOING COUNTRY IN THE SEVENTIES

By the mid-seventies country music had achieved unprecedented national popularity. All of America it seemed had awoken to the historical, cultural, and economic significance of the music. Country radio programming spread across the nation at a blistering pace, while more and more television shows utilized country music as soundtrack or subject matter. Scholarly research and journalistic articles about country proliferated, while conservative politicians sought more occasions for photo-ops with country singers. With the growing romanticization of working-class culture, and the growing power of working class conservative politics, the working-class sound of the South was becoming the sound of America.

"Success"

The boom in country during the seventies was reflected in the new economic vitality of the music. Between 1967 and 1973, recorded country music sales jumped from \$85 million to \$350 million, dramatically increasing country's market share of all recorded music sales in America from 9% to 18%.¹ By the mid-seventies, Nashville booking agents were scheduling approximately \$100 million worth of personal appearances for Nashville-based artists (a figure which did not include the personal appearances of stars based in Austin, Bakersfield, and other satellite centers of country music activity).² Advertisers recognized the growing popularity of country by buying rights to country songs for use in television commercials and jingles.³ And throughout the decade, more and more country artists signed on as celebrity pitchpersons for consumer products; Loretta Lynn hawked Crisco Oil; Charlie Rich sold Dr. Pepper soft drinks; Tom T. Hall hustled Chevy trucks. Charley Pride even opened a chain of restaurants called Country Pride Chicken; Bill Anderson did the same, naming his franchise "Po' Folks" after a class-conscious hit song of his from the early sixties. By the mid-seventies, country music was, in the words of *US News and World Report*, "suddenly big business."⁴

¹ "The Golden Sound of Nashville," *The Economist* 249 (October 20, 1973), p. 68.

² "Why Country Music is Suddenly Big Business," *US News and World Report* 77 (July 29, 1974), p.58.

³ "Jingles into Singles," *Time* 102 (September 17, 1973), p.50.

⁴ "Why Country Music is Suddenly Big Business," *US News and World Report* 77 (July 29, 1974), pp.58-60.

Nashville sat at the center of the newly thriving country music economy. In the mid-sixties there were half a dozen recording studios in Music City - a decade later there were over sixty, and the number continued to grow. This was only one facet of the fantastic economic growth centered in Nashville in the decades after 1970. In 1972, the \$35 million Opryland theme park and recording complex opened just outside of Nashville; five years later the massive Opryland Hotel and Convention Center opened, drawing more and more tourist dollars to the home of country music. Most telling however was the move in 1974 of the Grand Ole Opry, the spiritual center of country music for decades, from its longtime home in the historic but uncomfortable Ryman Auditorium to a \$12 million air-conditioned theater in the Opryland complex. The abandonment of tradition in favor of opulence showed just how mainstream the country industry had become. And the appearance of Richard Nixon at the dedication of the new Opryhouse cemented country's identification with patriotism and conservative politics. After getting a yo-yo lesson from Roy Acuff on the Opry stage, Nixon proceeded to give country music its strongest presidential endorsement yet, hailing the fact that country "talks about family. It talks about religion. And it...makes America a better country." Concluding, the President declared: "The peace of the world...is going to depend on our character, our belief in ourselves, our love of our country, our willingness to not only wear the flag but to stand up for the flag, and country music does that."⁵

"A Little Good News"

There were no surer signs of country's popularity and newfound "respectability" than the boom in national press coverage of country music, beginning in 1970. For the first time, America's national news organs were paying major attention to the southern sound. Articles on country music appeared in magazines like *Saturday Review*, *The Economist*, and *US News and World Report*, while newspapers like *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* devoted front page stories to the music. In 1973, *Newsweek* did a feature story on the "Country Music Craze," putting Loretta Lynn on its cover.⁶ The following year, the nation's other leading news magazine, *Time*, did a

⁵ King, "Red Necks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Fear," *Harper's* 249 (July 1974), p.30.

⁶ "Lookin' At Country With Loretta Lynn," *Newsweek* 81 (June 18, 1973), pp. 1, 65-72.

similar feature, putting Merle Haggard on the cover. For the most part, these reports were favorable, lauding the "whole unsophisticated, down-to-earth mood of country music,"⁷ and highlighting the music's special attraction to the conservative middle- and working-class constituents of Nixon's Silent Majority.

Not all of the press was gratifying however - many liberal publications were eager to condemn the music as the narrow-minded expression of southern racism, hard-hat intolerance, and rural ignorance. *The Nation*, one of the first national magazines to discuss the country boom, highlighted the music's authoritarian overtones and special ability to "echo unmistakably the fears and reactions of silent America."⁸ Author Florence King wrote an article for *Harper's* in 1974 in which she, a former fan of the music, admitted that she was now "repelled, offended, and occasionally frightened by the music" due to its newly accentuated jingoism and redneck militancy.⁹ Richard Goldstein, a New York writer, published an article in *Mademoiselle* in which he revealed his misgivings about country music, which to him represented a "culture against which I have very ancient and tenacious biases."¹⁰

Nevertheless, the attention that national news publications (liberal and otherwise) devoted to country music signalled that it could no longer be dismissed as the exclusive domain of southern backwaters. With the music's growing popularity in northern and western urban areas, journalists could not neglect its broad cultural significance. After years of dismissing country as music for rednecks and bigots on the fringe, national press organs now recognized the music's mainstream appeal across the nation. A surer sign of the "southernization" phenomenon could not be found.

The journalists who discussed the country boom may have had varying opinions as to the positive or negative attributes of the music, but all agreed more or less on the reasons for the music's newfound popularity. "As the nation turns away from an era dominated by war, riots, protest and drugs," explained one writer in 1974, country music "echo[es] an important shift in the national mood."¹¹ Vanderbilt University English

⁷ "The Golden Sound of Nashville," *The Economist* 249 (October 20, 1973), p. 68.

⁸ Dickson, "Singing to Silent America," *Nation* 210 (February 23, 1970), p.211.

⁹ King, "Red Necks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Fear," *Harper's* 249 (July 1974), p.31.

¹⁰ Goldstein, "My Country Music Problem - And Yours," *Mademoiselle* 77 (June 1973), p.115.

¹¹ "Why Country Music is Suddenly Big Business," *US News and World Report* 77 (July 29, 1974), p.58.

professor John Colley explained further that country music appealed to millions of Americans because "it reminds them of quieter, more peaceful times and it describes their everyday life."¹² With this *Newsweek* agreed, adding: "listeners can identify now more than ever with the heroes and heroines of country song: real people struggling with the real problems of jobs and homes and survival in a complicated world."¹³ As Nashville songwriter Tom T. Hall put it in 1971, country appealed to "the guy who has two kids and a car payment, [and] sort of digs Agnew."¹⁴

"When You're Hot You're Hot"

American magazines and newspapers were not alone in jumping on the country bandwagon. Television and radio joined the nation's print media in recognizing the growing prominence of country music. Seeing the colour green in the music's increasing popularity, these media moved to capitalize on country.

Since the early sixties, country music had been featured on American television. Bluegrass had gained its first national exposure through Flatt and Scruggs' rendering of the theme song to the popular television sit-com *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Other programs of the sixties, such as *Green Acres*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, and *Petticoat Junction* featured bluegrass and country music in their popular weekly sketches of rural life. These programs however contained more than a hint of condescension toward the hillbilly rubes they depicted. With twangy, more old-timey country as soundtrack, these shows used the music as a means of highlighting the anachronistic principles of a sector of society hiding from the realities of modern life. But in the late sixties, new programs appeared in which country was treated with respect as an accomplished modern musical form. Now used more specifically as subject matter rather than simply soundtrack, the music was cast as a wholesome cultural expression of an upright, moral, religious, and patriotic segment of society.

As early as 1966, when NBC gave Roger Miller his own country/variety show, television had recognized the commercial possibilities in country music. The real boom began in 1969, when three network television variety shows devoted to country music

¹² "Why Country Music is Suddenly Big Business," *US News and World Report* 77 (July 29, 1974), p.58.

¹³ "Lookin' At Country With Loretta Lynn," *Newsweek* 81 (June 18, 1973), p. 66.

¹⁴ Wren, "Country Music: The Great White Soul Sound," *Look* 35 (July 13, 1971), p.10.

debuted: ABC's *Johnny Cash Show*, and from CBS, the *Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour* and *Hee Haw*. These joined the already established *Porter Wagoner Show* and the *Wilburn Brothers Show* in popularizing country music on television. Cash's program offered a "romantic view of country as the music of the common man."¹⁵ It combined hard-core country with pop and even contemporary folk/rock acts - Bob Dylan made a much-celebrated appearance on the program. Though Cash's show lasted only until 1971, it helped bring a greater degree of exposure to country music and through its association with artists like Dylan, helped encourage the kind of crossover appeal that would later lead to a growth in country's popularity among educated urbanites and college youth. Compared to Cash's, Glen Campbell's show was far more "smooth, fast-paced, and countryopolitan in mood."¹⁶ The suave Campbell, who was also a frequent guest on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*, helped attract viewers who might have previously only associated country music with the less progressive image imparted on the rural sit-coms of the era.

Undoubtedly, the most successful of the prime-time country variety shows was *Hee Haw*. Patterned after the popular series *Laugh-In*, *Hee Haw* featured cornball comedy vignettes of rural life, interspersed with musical performances by the top artists in contemporary country. Though the program was, in the words of Bill Malone, "hillbilly to the point of grotesque parody,"¹⁷ it treated its stars and viewers with respect, as representatives of a noble rural culture to be emulated in an era of moral laxity and urban decay. Within three weeks of its debut in the summer of 1969, *Hee Haw* became the highest rated program in its prime-time slot.¹⁸ Despite its success, CBS cancelled the program in 1971 as part of an effort to shed the network's rural image (*The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres* were also cancelled at the same time), but *Hee Haw* was soon syndicated, after which it thrived on for more than twenty years, becoming the longest-running country variety show in television history. Incidentally, George Wallace was known as "the show's most famous admirer."¹⁹

¹⁵ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.311.

¹⁶ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.273.

¹⁷ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.273.

¹⁸ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.17.

¹⁹ "A 10th Birthday Party Confirms That Those Who Hee Haw Last, Hee Haw Best," *People* 10 (October 16, 1978), p.116.

In addition to these programs, many other syndicated series, such as PBS' *Austin City Limits* (debuted in 1974), and ABC's *Dolly* (1976), starring Dolly Parton, appeared throughout the seventies, each attempting to tap the increasingly lucrative country music market. Country stars also began appearing on broader-based variety and talk shows like *Today*, *The Mike Douglas Show*, and *Donahue*. By the mid-seventies country television programming was booming - in 1974, 208 stations across the nation carried *Hee Haw*, and another 100 showed the *Porter Wagoner Show*; meanwhile, a prime-time show about rural life, *The Waltons*, was the top-rated drama on television.²⁰ With programs like these, Americans could turn their television sets from news footage of riots, protests, Vietnam, and Watergate to the more tranquil vision of America embodied by country music/lifestyle and its down-home, pastoral image. While critics consistently derided such programs as crude and insulting, for many Americans they represented a welcome respite from the chaos and malaise of the seventies.

Complimenting the national exposure that television gave to country music was a boom in country radio programming. In 1961, only 81 stations in America had an all-country music format, and practically all of these were located in the South. Ten years later, there were 525 radio stations in America programming all country music, a good number of which were outside of the South. The next four years witnessed even more stunning growth, with the number of all-country radio stations in America more than doubling, to 1,116. The largest increases came outside of the South and in urban areas; the midwest and far west witnessed the most astounding growth in country radio, but inroads were also made in the urban areas of the northeast.²¹ In the mid-sixties only 3% of American radio stations had all-country formats, but by the end of the seventies, 1,534 stations played country music full time, representing nearly 20% of all American radio stations. And this figure does not include the thousands of other stations that programmed country music on at least a part-time basis. The CMA estimated in the mid seventies that at least 50% of American radio stations played some country music.²²

The spread of country radio provided the most compelling evidence of the music's

²⁰ Schorin and Vandenberg, "Advertising's Role in the Diffusion of a Country and Western Trend," p.519.

²¹ Carney, "From Down Home to Uptown: The Diffusion of Country-Music Radio Stations in the United States," pp.106-109.; Lomax, *Nashville, Music City USA*, p.215.

²² "Why Country Music Suddenly is Big Business," *US News and World Report* 77 (July 29, 1974), p.59.

conquest of the city, and by implication, the spread of southernization. Predictably, the nation's two largest urban areas, New York and Los Angeles, held out the longest against country radio, but both cities had all-country stations by the end of 1973, and multiple country stations by the end of the decade. New York's WHN had been the first station in the Big Apple to switch to full-time country. When the switch was made, some questioned the wisdom of the move, but within eight months, the station had doubled its audience to over 1.2 million listeners.²³ Clearly, there was a "big-city hunger for music with a small town flavor."²⁴ WHN's program director explained: "there's a back-to-the-soil feeling among urbanites nowadays. People are ecology-conscious, they long for the simple days when music reflected love and loneliness and death."²⁵

More and more country singers also began performing in big cities and selling out large venues. In 1971, Conway Twitty, Loretta Lynn, Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton each played sold-out shows at New York's Madison Square Garden.²⁶ The following year, George Jones and Tammy Wynette became the first country performers to play New York's Philharmonic Hall, and in 1974, Merle Haggard sold-out New York's Felt Forum twice in one night.²⁷ Other major cities, like Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, Cleveland, and Los Angeles became meccas for concerts by country music stars, and also developed thriving local country scenes of their own. By the late seventies, the country music audience was clearly "more national than regional."²⁸ As Ben Marsh emphatically put it in 1977: "country music has more listeners outside the South than in it."²⁹

"American Cosmic Music"

One of the great ironies of country's rise in the seventies was its growing popularity among urban middle-class youth, college students, and counterculture types, the very people vilified by conservative country singers and fans. Country's appeal to

²³ Albin Krebs, "WHN Joins Country Music Camp," *New York Times*, February 26, 1973, p. 62.; "Why Country Music Suddenly is Big Business," *US News and World Report* 77 (July 29, 1974), p.58.

²⁴ McCandlish Phillips, "Leaders in Country Music See Chance to Win the City," *New York Times*, April 16, 1973, p.1.

²⁵ Albin Krebs, "WHN Joins Country Music Camp," *New York Times*, February 26, 1973, p. 62.

²⁶ Lomax, *Nashville, Music City USA*, p.213.

²⁷ "Lord, They've Done It All," *Time* 103 (May 6, 1974), p. 51.

²⁸ Buckley, "Country Music and American Values," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.204.

²⁹ Marsh, "A Rose-Colored Map: Country Music's Ideal Landscape," *Harper's* 255 (July 1977), p.81.

American youth signalled an acceleration of the southernization phenomenon. If hippies could like country, who couldn't?

Country's gradual acceptance among American youth was encouraged by the musical leaders of the counterculture. Following the disastrous Altamont rock festival and the drug- and alcohol-related deaths of acid-rock icons Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Jim Morrison, a sense of disillusionment set in among the rock and folk musicians who had provided the soundtrack to the age of aquarius. There emerged an impulse to simplify and get back to roots, to cut through the drug-clouded haze and produce less contentious music. Many of these artists turned to country for inspiration. Creedence Clearwater Revival, The Band, and The Byrds had already shown how country-flavored rock could resonate with the counterculture. The floodgates opened in 1969 after Bob Dylan went to Nashville to record a country-flavoured album that included a collaboration with Johnny Cash. Soon after, the kings of San Francisco psychedelia, the Grateful Dead added to their live performances country songs like Marty Robbins' "El Paso" and Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried." In 1970 the Dead released *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*, two breakthrough hit albums featuring banjo, mandolin, acoustic and pedal steel guitars, and a bluegrass/country-influenced sound. These album's titles reflected the back-to-roots, Americana impulse sweeping through mainstream rock. Meanwhile in southern California, The Flying Burrito Brothers, The Eagles, Jackson Browne, Linda Ronstadt, and Emmylou Harris were emerging as the leaders of a country-rock sound dubbed "American Cosmic Music" by its spiritual leader Gram Parsons.

Mirroring the emergence of California country-rock was the development of "southern-rock," a rowdy fusion of country, jazz, blues, and psychedelia, that owed its genesis almost entirely to Georgia's Allman Brothers Band. With an unabashedly southern image and country-flavored songs like "Blue Sky"(1972) and "Ramblin' Man"(1973), the Allman Brothers inspired an entire generation of southern groups who imitated their style, including Lynard Skynard, the Marshall Tucker Band, and the Charlie Daniels Band. These bands attracted followings not only among bikers, truckers, and southern rednecks, but also with hippies and college youth. The broad national popularity of the Allmans and their fellow southern-rockers indicated the power of the southernization

impulse, and as Scott Freeman writes: "personified the resurgence of the New South."³⁰

In 1972, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band released *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, a landmark album which brought together generations of southern musicians, spanning the gulfs of age, genre, and ideology, in order to pay tribute to the roots of country music.³¹ Including contributions from country legends like the Carter Family, Doc Watson, Roy Acuff, and Earl Scruggs, the album served as a musical affirmation of the South, casting the music in a more positive historical light and helping to free it from negative connotations. The endorsement of country music by the long-haired hippies of the Dirt Band made even the pronounced conservatism of country stars like Acuff palatable to the counterculture. Despite its politically conservative, anti-hippie orientation, country music was gaining new fans among the counterculture, and in many ways, actually fusing with rock music.

One of the clearest manifestations of country's growing popularity and economic potency was the spread of bluegrass festivals, which by the early seventies had become sufficiently big business to attract the attention of money-minded observers like the *Wall Street Journal*.³² The most striking characteristic of these festivals was their ability to bring together patrons of widely differing cultural and political perspectives, namely working-class, silent majority-types and hippies. As *Newsweek* observed at a bluegrass festival in 1969: "there was a good fellowship among leather-faced men in western garb, teen-age groupies posturing around the musicians, long-haired hippies with no-bra chicks and redneck farmers with their wives sprawled in lawn chairs and print dresses."³³ It was surely a great paradox that bluegrass, which Robert Cantwell has called the purest form of country music,³⁴ soared in popularity in the seventies as a result of its appeal to counterculture types.

But it was not a new paradox - since the emergence of the folk revival in the early-sixties, bluegrass partisans were composed in equal parts of working-class southerners

³⁰ Freeman, *Midnight Riders*, p.308.

³¹ Hilfer, "'Wreck on the Highway': Rhetoric and Religion in a Country Song," pp.118-119.

³² Winter, "Sentimental Songs: Awaah With Nostalgia, 'Bluegrass Festivals' Revive Old-Time Music," *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1972, p.1.

³³ "Pickin' and Singin'," *Newsweek* 75 (June 29, 1970), p. 85.

³⁴ Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, p.14.

and middle-class urban college kids. As a form based on a conscious veneration of the past, bluegrass never approached the politically-charged lyricism of mainstream country. Though the values expressed in bluegrass undoubtedly reflected the rural conservatism and religious fundamentalism of the southern mountain folk who invented the form, it lacked the presentism of mainstream country in espousing such values. Thus, bluegrass possessed a special ability to appeal across the political schisms dividing America in the sixties.

The emergence of bluegrass festivals (the first of which was held in 1965) galvanized major growth in that music's popularity. By the early seventies, bluegrass festivals had become an important part of America's cultural landscape and were attracting more and more patrons every summer. Hippies were drawn to bluegrass festivals for the same reasons that brought them to rock festivals. First, they provided an opportunity to engage in the rite of passage glorified in novels like Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and in the film *Easy Rider*: the "road trip." The festival atmosphere itself also provided a semblance of the communal environment the hippies idealized - the romance of camping out, cooking your own meals, sitting around the campfire, being in intimate communion with nature, and depriving oneself of the amenities of modern life. And, not to be overlooked, bluegrass festivals were also an ideal opportunity to smoke pot. But above all, the music itself was the appeal, and served as the lubricant of the clashing cultural perspectives that the festivals brought together. As one fan wrote about his festival experience in the fanzine *Bluegrass Unlimited*: "about the only thing that we all had in common was an unswerving commitment to the music we all loved."³⁵

More mainstream country music festivals staged by the leaders of the Outlaw movement held a similar appeal to the counterculture. As a subgenre developed in opposition to Nashville's hegemonic control over the industry, the Outlaw image appealed to the anti-establishment values of the counterculture. Furthermore, by donning hippie attire, growing beards and long hair, making no effort to conceal their affection for marijuana, and incorporating stylistic elements of rock into their music, the Outlaws (who were also dubbed "redneck rockers," "hipbillies," and "cosmic cowboys") held special

³⁵ McCeney, "Festivals and Friends," *Bluegrass Unlimited* 4 (October 1969), p.23.

appeal to hippie rock fans. Beginning in 1971, major country music festivals were organized by Willie Nelson in and around Austin, Texas, attracting a good number of hippies and college youth, along with older, more traditional country fans. The disparate crowds at these "picnics" did not mix quite as well as at bluegrass festivals. As Bill Malone writes: "the swirling dust, unrelenting heat, boogieing fans, uninhibited youth in scanty or no clothing, marijuana fumes, and the proliferation of non-country performers like Leon Russell combined to give the events the aura of country Woodstocks."³⁶ Nevertheless, even if the older crowd eventually became turned off by this scene, Nelson's picnics had proven that "country music could attract huge crowds to fill even massive outdoor spaces and sports arenas,"³⁷ and led to the creation of other, more "pure" country music festivals. As Stephen Tucker writes, thanks to Willie Nelson "the festival phenomenon, which, aside from bluegrass, had previously been all but unknown in country music, became a recurring feature of country entertainment."³⁸

The appeal of bluegrass and Outlaw music, the rise of southern rock, the country-rock experiments of artists like Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, and Gram Parsons, and the emergence of hippie bluegrass bands like Newgrass Revival and Old and In the Way (which included Jerry Garcia on banjo) brought together the youth market and the country music market for the first time in the early seventies. This was one of the most significant factors in the national growth of country music, not only in the seventies, but also later, in the eighties and nineties when the baby boom youth of the seventies grew up. Infusing country music with their youthfulness and their money, hippies and middle-class urban youth provided an impressive testament to the power of the southernization phenomenon.

"I Take A Lot of Pride In What I Am"

Perhaps dismayed by the infusion of the counterculture into country music, other country artists, not involved with bluegrass or the Outlaw movement, recorded many songs in this era which highlighted the music's working-class identification. Hippies might be able to infiltrate music festivals, but they could not change the soul of the music. In a decade when working-class culture seemed to be in vogue, mainstream country music

³⁶ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.397.

³⁷ Tucker, "Progressive Country Music, 1972-1976: Its Impact and Creative Highlights," p.100.

³⁸ Tucker, "Progressive Country Music, 1972-1976: Its Impact and Creative Highlights," pp. 99-100.

continued to reflect and flatter (often in contradictory ways) the lives of its core of working-class fans

Denise Noe argues that industrial work has been portrayed in country music as "hard and meaningless; it keeps one alive but leaves the worker with little time or energy left to enjoy life."³⁹ Indeed, as scholar Ben Marsh observed in 1977, country music exhibits "almost Marxian overtones in its treatment of the injuries of class."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, given blue-collar Americans' anti-communal ethos, their firm belief in the "American Dream," and their antipathy for communists, socialists, and hippies, country music has done little to encourage the development of true working-class consciousness, in the Marxian sense. Thus, Richard Peterson argues that while the rise of country music and the backlash phenomenon in the seventies seemed to mark the dawn of a new era in American working-class cohesion, in other ways the music actually undermined blue-collar solidarity and led to a kind of working class *unconsciousness*.⁴¹ This manifested itself in songs which cast working class hardship not as a collective burden, but as a personal experience to be dealt with through "individual acts of defiance and cinderella dreams."⁴²

Examples of such songs abound. Johnny Cash's "One Piece at a Time"(1976) told the tale of a disaffected auto worker who, rather than expressing his malice toward oppressive industrial labour on a collective level (perhaps by raising the consciousness of his fellow workers and organizing a union), pursues an individual solution by stealing car parts "one piece at a time" in order to build his own homemade jalopy. Another song by Cash, "Oney"(1973), solved the problem of working-class resentment toward management by telling the story of an industrial worker who dreams of returning to his factory the day after his retirement to punch out his foreman. Merle Haggard's "If We Make It Through December"(1973), described by one reviewer as "probably the most depressing Christmas song ever to hit the charts"⁴³ (it made number one on Christmas Day, 1973), told the sad

³⁹ Noe, "Parallel Worlds: The Surprising Similarities (and Differences) of Country-and-Western and Rap," *The Humanist* 55 (July/August 1995), p.21.

⁴⁰ Marsh, "A Rose-Colored Map: Country Music's Ideal Landscape," *Harper's* 255 (July 1977), p.82.

⁴¹ Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness in Country Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, pp. 47, 56-58.

⁴² Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness in Country Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.47.

⁴³ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.414.

tale of a man who has been laid off from his factory job and has to explain to his daughter why there won't be any Christmas presents. The song's protagonist dreams of moving to California to solve his problems - again an individual solution, rather than a collective one. Johnny Paycheck offered a similarly individualistic "protest against the rough and repetitive nature of a blue-collar man's work"⁴⁴ with "Take This Job and Shove It"(1977), an anthemic lament that quickly became a commonly-used colloquial phrase. In scores of country songs like these, the American working man could take vicarious satisfaction in such individual acts of defiance, but as Curtis Ellison argues, was rarely encouraged to see his individual hardship as "an economic or social-class experience that might be addressed by collective political action."⁴⁵

In lieu of this however, pride itself in simply being blue-collar emerged as the new form of working-class consciousness expressed in country music.⁴⁶ The trend seemed to begin when Merle Haggard hailed his working-class identity with "I Take a Lot of Pride in What I Am"(1968), and when Loretta Lynn sang that she was proud to be a "Coal Miner's Daughter"(1970). Dolly Parton took up the theme in autobiographical songs like "Coat of Many Colours"(1971), "My Tennessee Mountain Home"(1972), and "Chicken Every Sunday"(1974), each of which related how her family's love for each other helped them triumph over their abject poverty - "if that's the lower class," she sang in one of these, "than I'm glad that's what I am." John Conlee celebrated the virtues of working class life in a similar manner with "Common Man"(1973), in which he sang that he would rather eat at McDonald's than a fancy restaurant, rather drive a Chevy than a Mercedes, and rather drink beer than wine. Songs celebrating specific working-class vocations, such as truck-driving, were another component of the working class pride songs that proliferated in the seventies. Artists like Dave Dudley, Roger Hallmark, and Terry Fell built their careers exalting the trucker, "a mythic hero, symbolizing self-reliance and personal independence."⁴⁷

These type of songs honouring the American working man were accompanied by

⁴⁴ Noe, "Parallel Worlds: The Surprising Similarities (and Differences) of Country-and-Western and Rap," *The Humanist* 55 (July/August 1995), p.21.

⁴⁵ Ellison, "Keeping Faith: Evangelical Performance in Country Music," p.141.; Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness in Country Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.47.

⁴⁶ Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness and Country Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, pp. 47, 56-58.

⁴⁷ Buckley, "Country Music and American Values," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.201.

the appearance in the mid-seventies of a number of songs glorifying the "redneck." Johnny Russell kicked off the trend in 1973 with "Rednecks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Beer," which was advertised in the pages of *Billboard* magazine as a "red, white, and blue all-American hit."⁴⁸ This was followed by a great number of "redneck" tribute songs, including Lonnie Mack's "Rednecks Need Lovin' Too"(1974), David Allan Coe's "Long-Haired Redneck"(1976), Bobby Bare's "Redneck Mother"(1976), Jerry Reed's "(I'm Just a) Redneck in a Rock n' Roll Bar"(1977), and, the apotheosis of the genre, Vernon Oxford's "Redneck! (National Anthem)"(1976). Though the term "redneck" had previously been seen as a derogatory epithet for narrow-minded, lower-class southerners ("white trash"), the national popularity of these songs indicated that being a "redneck" was now "a proudly worn badge of identification."⁴⁹ As Richard Peterson has written, "to call oneself a redneck" in the mid-seventies was "not so much to be a redneck by birth or occupational fate but rather to identify with an anti-bourgeois attitude and lifestyle."⁵⁰ Responding to the anti-elite, working-class populism of the seventies, the cult of "redneckism" went hand in hand with the spread of conservatism and southernization, and in the opinion of journalist Florence King, "encourag[ed] *all* working people to emulate and identify with the very worst sort of southern reactionaries."⁵¹

"The South's Gonna Rise Again"

The spread of "redneckism" was but one indication of the strength of the southernization impulse in the mid-seventies. Many other aspects of American life seemed under the influence of Dixie. By the time America celebrated its bicentennial, many would have agreed with Vanderbilt University Chancellor Alexander Heard's declaration: "the third century of American independence will be distinguished by a massive emergence of the South from the shackles of its inheritance into a major locus of the nation's economic, social and cultural strength."⁵²

The election of Georgian Jimmy Carter to the presidency in 1976 was perhaps the

⁴⁸ Numerous issues of *Billboard* from 1973 contained this ad.

⁴⁹ Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness in Country Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.58.

⁵⁰ Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness in Country Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.58.

⁵¹ King, "Red Necks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Fear," *Harper's* 249 (July 1974), p.31.

⁵² "The South Today: Other Voices," *Time* 108 (September 27, 1976), p.99.

strongest evidence that all things southern were in vogue. With a conservative southern Democrat in the White House, it seemed the South had finally been purged of the unfavorable image it had earned during the civil rights tumult of the previous decade. Or perhaps it was merely a case of Americans outside of the South, given their own now highly visible racial problems, coming to the realization that they were "very much like the folks from Dixie."⁵³ As a southern journalist put it in an article addressed to holier-than-thou northern hypocrites: "the sorry fact is that we've all been white racists, and you deserve as much of the tarnished trophy as the sons of Dixie."⁵⁴

Whatever the case, Carter's election ushered in "an authentic country music reign"⁵⁵ in Washington, as opposed to the more opportunistic endorsement Nixon had given the music in his pursuit of the "southern strategy." Carter, not Nixon, was in fact the first President who "seemed genuinely to love and understand country music."⁵⁶ The Carter White House played host to numerous country music events, including visits and performances from prominent Carter-supporters like Johnny Cash, Loretta Lynn, Tom T. Hall, Conway Twitty, Bill Monroe, Doc Watson, and Willie Nelson (who later bragged of smoking a joint on the White House roof).⁵⁷ And though Carter himself was somewhat more urbane than the average country music listener, "first-brother" Billy Carter helped cement his brothers' identification with "good-ole-boys" by sporting REDNECK POWER T-shirts and appearing on *Hee Haw*.⁵⁸

The election of Carter was only one symptom of the new American attitude toward southerners and their culture. Undoubtedly, a major component in the rise of this newest "New South" was the growth of the region's economy. As northern and midwestern cities struggled with ongoing racial tension, urban decay, poverty, unemployment, and de-industrialization, the center of American economic growth shifted South. Many cited the

⁵³ "The South Today: The Spirit of the South," *Time* 108 (September 27, 1976), p.30.

⁵⁴ King, "We Ain't Trash No More!: How Jimmy Carter Led the Rednecks From the Wilderness," *Esquire* 126 (November 1976), p. 88.

⁵⁵ Schorin and Vandenberg, "Advertising's Role in the Diffusion of a Country-Western Trend in the U.S.," p.517.

⁵⁶ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p. 373.

⁵⁷ "Jimmy Says Y'all Come, So Loretta, Conway, and Tom T. Stage a White House Hee Haw," *People* 9 (March 1, 1978), p. 24.; Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.373.; Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.386.

⁵⁸ Cobb, "From Rocky Top to Detroit City: Country Music and the Economic Transformation of the South," in: McLaurin, and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.75.; "A 10th Birthday Party Confirms That Those Who Hee Haw Last, Hee Haw Best," *People* 10 (October 16, 1978), p.116.

region's "gracious lifestyle, unspoiled surroundings and relatively abundant raw materials" as factors attracting Northern industry, along with an ever-growing workforce who "still respect authority and...are loath to join unions."⁵⁹ The rise of the fast-growing, easy-living states of the southern and western "sun belt" reversed the traditional northward movement of capital, manpower, and entrepreneurial energy, bringing to the South and West a great number of expatriate Yankees who, the *New York Times* observed in a front page story, "have adopted open collars, drawling speech and bourbon mixed with Coca-Cola."⁶⁰ As James Cobb writes: "Dixie's newfound affluence greatly enhanced its respectability," sparking a nationwide renaissance of southern culture.⁶¹

By mid-decade, with the new economic vitality of the South and the election of Carter, journalists throughout the nation seemed suddenly in the throes of a love-affair with Dixie. In 1976, *Saturday Review* praised "The South as the New America."⁶² The same year, *Time* magazine devoted an entire special issue to "The South Today," which James Cobb later described as a "sympathetic, almost slobbery tribute to a risen and forgiven Dixie."⁶³ *Time* clearly hit the mark in arguing that now "the rest of the nation is looking to the South to see what it has been missing - and what it might learn."⁶⁴ As southerner Larry L. King exclaimed in an article for *Esquire* published after Carter's election: "We ain't trash no more!"⁶⁵

As one of the major growth industries of the "sun belt," and through its close association with Jimmy Carter, country music stood at the vanguard of the reemergence of the South in national life. The bicentennial year in particular seemed to mark a watershed in the music's ascent to mainstream respectability. In 1976, country music not only helped elect a southern president, but scored its first platinum album (sales of over one million copies) with *Wanted: The Outlaws*, a combined effort from Willie Nelson, Waylon

⁵⁹ "The South Today: Surging to Prosperity," *Time* 108 (September 27, 1976), p.73.

⁶⁰ Roy Reed, "Migration Mixes a New Southern Blend," *New York Times*, February 11, 1976, p. 1.

⁶¹ Cobb, "From Muskogee to Lukenbach: Country Music and the 'Southernization' of America," p.86.

⁶² Murphy, "The South as the New America," *Saturday Review* 5 (September 4, 1976), pp. 8-11.

⁶³ Cobb, "From Rocky Top to Detroit City: Country Music and the Economic Transformation of the South," in: McLaurin, and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.75.

⁶⁴ "The South Today," *Time* 108 (September 27, 1976), p. 29.

⁶⁵ King, "We Ain't Trash No More!: How Jimmy Carter Led the Rednecks From the Wilderness," *Esquire* 126 (November 1976), pp. 88-90, 152-156.

Jennings, Tompall Glaser, and Jessi Colter.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Dolly Parton's 1976 appearance at the Grammy awards drew a "riotous ovation,"⁶⁷ demonstrating that country was now respected, indeed much loved by the mainstream American music establishment. Country artists also drew much attention by saluting the nation's 200th birthday with a number of popular patriotic anthems, including Johnny Cash's "Sold Out of Flagpoles"(1976), Loretta Lynn's "Red, White, and Blue"(1976), and Vernon Oxford's previously mentioned "Redneck! (National Anthem)"(1976), which, significantly, seemed to equate the bicentennial spirit with the redneck lifestyle.

The rise of the southernization phenomenon buoyed country singers' confidence in their region. Some of the most popular country songs of the mid- and late-seventies were musical meditations on the rebirth of the South. In 1975, Charlie Daniels seemed to anticipate Carter's election with "The South's Gonna Do It Again," a "free-wheeling, rambunctious, footstomping" song that quickly emerged as "the anthem of the New South," and garnered Daniels a major role in the Carter campaign.⁶⁸ In 1976, Tanya Tucker attempted to outdo Daniels, recording "I Believe The South's Gonna Rise Again (And Not the Way We Thought It Would Back Then)," in which she celebrated the virtues of modern southern life, rejoiced at the new "brotherhood" between the races, and dismissed the sordid past with the line: "forget the bad and keep the good." Hank Williams Jr. (who would soon turn the craft of south-boosting into the bread and butter of his career) offered "The South's Gonna Rattle Again"(1978), another musical affirmation of Dixie, but one not quite as chauvinistic as some of his pro-South anthems to follow.

Each of these tunes, and many others like them expressed the new confidence that southerners and country singers had in their region. And the national popularity of such tunes indicated that Americans everywhere now believed that the South represented not the worst America had to offer (as might have been the perception a decade earlier), but in fact, the best. A nation battered by the trials of Vietnam, Watergate, racial tension, inflation, unemployment, and general malaise now "showed considerable inclination to put aside its critical, high-magnification lenses and view the South through spectacles that

⁶⁶ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.404.

⁶⁷ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.391.

⁶⁸ McLaurin, "Songs of the South: The Changing Image of the South in Country Music," in: McLaurin, and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.25.

often seemed almost rose-colored."⁶⁹

In 1977, cultural geographer Ben Marsh published an article in *Harper's* magazine that offered one of the most penetrating analyses of America's growing affection for country music and the South. He argued that country's rising popularity symbolized a "deep displeasure....about what is happening to America in general." The newfound affinity for country music, he theorized, reflected a desire to escape the national malaise through "vicarious life in the rural South," where "old-fashioned family, old-fashioned religion, [and] old-fashioned values" still reigned supreme. "Country music's South," he continued, "provides escape from modern America....[its] function is to replenish the system of values that we seem to be losing." Elaborating further, Marsh argued:

Country music's image of America contradicts that of the 'mainstream American media - and that is its appeal. The South is presented as a virtuous place to country music fans all over America not for what it is, but for what it is not. Unlike the North, the seat of the media, the South is not responsible for the shape we are in. According to the media's own reporting, the South has had nothing to do with inflation, taxes, shortages, abuses of federal power, Supreme Court rulings, and so forth. The same innocence of power that let Jimmy Carter go from ex-Governor of Georgia to President in twenty-two months lets country music paint the South as a haven from the sins of the nation.⁷⁰

Marsh's analysis was dead-on. The southernization phenomenon and the accompanying rise of country music symbolized more than simply changing musical tastes and the South's growing political and economic power. It betokened a deep psychological stirring among Americans across the nation to return to a less cynical and complex time, when patriotism, religion, and family were still fashionable, when people were not so deeply divided by racial, sexual, ideological, and age differences. Country music and the region it represented offered one of the easiest means of reconnecting to simpler times, for country music's South presented "a picture of how the nation would be if it had not gone astray."⁷¹ As C. Vann Woodward wrote in 1976: "in their present state of disenchantment and demoralization, Northerners are apprehensively looking south for leadership."⁷²

⁶⁹ Cobb, "From Rocky Top to Detroit City: Country Music and the Economic Transformation of the South," in: McLaurin, and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.75.

⁷⁰ Marsh, "A Rose-Colored Map: Country Music's Ideal Landscape," *Harper's* 255 (July 1977), pp.81-82.

⁷¹ Marsh, "A Rose-Colored Map: Country Music's Ideal Landscape," *Harper's* 255 (July 1977), p.81.

⁷² Woodward, "The South Tomorrow," *Time* 108 (September 27, 1976), p.98.

CHAPTER FOUR

URBAN COWBOYS AND THE COUNTRY CRAZE

"The southernization of American pop culture," writes Patrick Carr, "was at one of its historic peaks as the 1970s gave way to the 80s."¹ Indeed, with Jimmy Carter in the White House, the continuing growth of the sunbelt economy, and the ever-increasing popularity of country music, southernization seemed to have reached a pinnacle. The presidential triumph of Ronald Reagan in 1980, a watershed in the rise of modern conservatism, only accelerated the trend, seeming to mark the political consolidation of the southernization phenomenon.

Though on the surface the defeat of Jimmy Carter may have symbolized a rejection of the South, in fact the opposite was true. The South *itself* had rejected Carter by a margin of two-to-one, allowing Reagan to capture every state of the Old Confederacy, except for Carter's own Georgia. Carter's ineffectual handling of the Iran hostage crisis and his suspicious association with leftist elements in the Democratic Party must have convinced many southerners to opt for Reagan's more pronounced conservative agenda, his hawkish stance on the hostage crisis (not to mention communism), and his distinctly pro-southern disposition. The nation's continuing racial problems and flagging economy also played a role in Carter's defeat, assisting in Reagan's effort to pry away from the Democratic party millions of white, northern, working-class voters (the "Reagan Democrats") by exploiting the same confluence of racial, social, and economic tensions that had prodded smaller numbers of these voters into supporting George Wallace a decade earlier.

In the Reagan/Bush years, the South and the increasingly southernized portions of the West and urban North would be the bedrock of the GOP. As America's political tenor shifted to the right, and as the South enjoyed its greatest national political power since the New Deal, country music's growing popularity served as a poignant cultural manifestation of the nation's new conservative consensus and growing love affair with all things southern. Country music and cowboy hats replaced disco and bell bottoms as America turned away from the "excess" of the seventies, and found more to identify with in the music and cultural sensibilities of the South.

¹ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.386.

"Country State of Mind"

On the eve of Reagan's election, *Billboard* magazine wrote: "Country music is exploding across the radio dial, knocking out all sorts of other formats."² While the country radio gains of the early seventies had certainly been impressive testaments to the music's growing nationwide popularity, the growth of the late seventies and early eighties was even more spectacular. In 1980 alone, more than two hundred stations switched to country, dropping jazz, rock, and adult contemporary formats in favor of the southern sound. The most significant gains were made in America's major cities. In 1980, Los Angeles saw the appearance of four new country radio stations, while many other cities, ranging from New York and Minneapolis to Denver and Miami Beach also witnessed the addition of new country stations to their local radio dial.³ Between 1977 and 1983, the number of American radio stations exclusively playing country music doubled from 1,140 to 2,266, an average growth of nearly 200 new stations per year. While country radio had accounted for 10% of the American radio market in 1973, it represented nearly 25% by 1983.⁴

Lifestyle trends of the early eighties also suggested that Americans were exchanging the styles of the disco age for the more folksy affectations of country music culture. In 1980, *Billboard* reported that "a new C&W entertainment format craze is nudging out Disco's glitter and finery at US nightspots."⁵ In cities like Chicago, Cleveland, Houston, and Atlanta, nightclubbers were no longer doing The Hustle to the bass-heavy urban grooves of Donna Summer and Earth, Wind and Fire, but dancing the Texas Two-Step and the Cotton-Eyed Joe to the honkytonk drawl of Willie Nelson and Mickey Gilley. The country and western fad was even displacing disco music at roller rinks, one of the prime centers of seventies disco culture; as one roller-skating industry spokesperson told *Billboard*: "country music is the biggest thing since sliced bread."⁶ Indeed, the passing of the one fad and the emergence of the other was even marked by

² Doug Hall, "N.Y. WRVR Now Country," *Billboard*, September 20, 1980, p.1.

³ "Los Angeles Now Boasting 4 Country Format Stations," *Billboard*, September 27, 1980, p.3.; Doug Hall, "N.Y. WRVR Now Country," *Billboard*, September 20, 1980, p.1.

⁴ Lomax, *Nashville: Music City USA*, p.215.

⁵ Alan Denchansky and Robyn Wells, "Disco's Convert to Country," *Billboard*, August 16, 1980, p.1.

⁶ Karen Kelly, "Roller Rinks to 'Adopt' Country," *Billboard*, September 13, 1980, p.50.

the temporary appearance of country/disco fusion bands, like the Los Angeles (where else) act Spurrz, which rather awkwardly tried to bridge the enormous gulf between the two musical styles.

Accompanying the boom in country programming at discos and roller rinks was the rising popularity of country and western attire. Fashion magazine *Vogue* first noticed the trend in 1978; by 1980, *Time* magazine could report: "from the canyons of Manhattan to the chic watering holes of Beverly Hills....city dudes are sporting wide-brimmed cowpoke sombreros, yoke shirts, off-the-range Levi's, brass or gold-buckled belts and high-steppin' boots of alligator or snakeskin."⁷ With similar imagery, *US News and World Report* echoed the observation: "from the big-city canyons of the East to the asphalt prairies of the West, America has become cowboy country."⁸

Country music itself both encouraged and reflected the new vogue for cowboy wear. As *Billboard* observed in 1980: "the western motif is back in country music and stronger than ever....the Old West and its related themes seem to be a favorite topic these days for country songs."⁹ Indeed, the country hit charts of the early eighties showed a sudden disproportion of songs with the word "cowboy" in the title, including the Bellamy Brothers' "Dancin' Cowboy," Lynn Anderson's "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues," Willie Nelson's "Mama Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys," Buck Owens' "Happiness is a Warm Cowboy," and countless others. Lacy J. Dalton ought not have bothered asking the musical question "Are There Really Any Cowboys Left in the Good Ol' USA?" (1980), for the answer was a clear and resounding yes.

As both journalists and scholars observed, the cowboy fad was in part a reflection of the type of America symbolized by Ronald Reagan.¹⁰ Hailing from California, Reagan's association with the West was evident in his former movie career (he often starred in "B" westerns) and in his fondness for riding, ranching, and wearing cowboy garb. His identification with the West however was most powerfully reflected in his political ideology of rugged, western-style individualism and in the contours of

⁷ Madden, "Why Not the West? Range Style Dressing Takes Over," *Vogue* 168 (September 1978), pp.152, 166.; Demarest, "Lone Ranger Meets Tonto," *Time* 116 (August 4, 1980), p.43.

⁸ "Cowboy Fever Rises - and Merchants Cash In," *US News and World Report* 90 (February 16, 1981), p.62.

⁹ Kip Kirby, "Western Themes Back in Country Hit Tunes," *Billboard*, July 12, 1980, p.1.

¹⁰ "Cowboy Fever Rises - and Merchants Cash In," *US News and World Report* 90 (February 16, 1981), p.62.; Schorin and Vandenberg, "Advertising's Role in the Diffusion of a Country-Western Trend in the U.S.," p.518.

his cowboy-style foreign policy, which rejuvenated America's Cold War vision of itself as the "good guys" facing the "evil empire" of Soviet communism. America's enthusiastic embrace of both Reagan and the cowboy style in music and fashion was indicative of the national mood in the eighties. Fed up with urban liberalism and national malaise, America found in country music and in Reagan's image and political philosophy a nostalgic, comforting vision of itself before the cultural upheavals, military humiliations, economic shortages, and government scandals of the previous decades. Reaganism held that a return to old virtues like free enterprise, untrammelled individualism, "family values," religious devotion, and military readiness (values which had remained popular across the sunbelt) would once again make America great.

"When Two Worlds Collide"

Another significant component of the country and western craze in the Reagan era was Hollywood's resurgent interest in the music of Nashville. Though it had been featured prominently in the "singing cowboy" films of the thirties and forties, since WWII country music had gradually disappeared from the big screen, shunned for its unfashionable rural, southern image. But as cities and urbane sophistication came in for criticism in the seventies, and as the new chic for country music and its down-home culture grew, Hollywood slowly rediscovered Nashville (and Bakersfield, and Austin). By the eighties, Hollywood films featuring country music were appearing at a blistering pace, providing one of the clearest indications of the music's growing popularity and commercial vitality.

It was the "high lonesome sound" of bluegrass that first rekindled Hollywood's interest in country music. Movie producers may have been following the lead of their television cousins in Burbank, where rural sitcoms had been featuring bluegrass prominently since the debut of *The Beverly Hillbillies* in 1962. Whatever the case, in 1967 Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, starring Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway, inaugurated the use of bluegrass in a Hollywood film score. With the driving sound of Flatt and Scruggs backing the screen antics of the legendary bank-robbing couple, this film established a lasting screen convention: bluegrass as stereotypical "chase" music. Five years later, the screen version of James Dickey's best-selling novel

Deliverance(1972) established another lasting screen convention: the use of bluegrass to evoke images of rural life and the “gothic” South. Furthermore, the film immortalized “Dueling Banjos” as the best-known bluegrass song of all time. In all, the use of bluegrass in these two films, and many others which followed, contributed mightily to the popularization of this subgenre in subsequent years.¹¹

More mainstream country styles returned to Hollywood in 1970 when Tammy Wynette did the soundtrack for the Jack Nicholson film *Five Easy Pieces*. But it was only in 1975 that country music itself began to emerge as a popular subject for big-budget movies. In that year, *Deliverance* star Burt Reynolds was featured in *W.W. and the Dixie Dance Kings* as a southern con man trying to make Nashville stars out of a third-rate country band. Real-life country stars Jerry Reed, Don Williams, and Mel Tillis made cameos in the movie. The same year, Robert Altman’s controversial *Nashville* was released. Using the Nashville music world as a metaphor for modern American culture, this cynical film exposed the seamy underside of the country music industry and the American success ethic. While the film garnered great box-office receipts and critical acclaim, it provoked a pronounced defensiveness from the country industry. Nevertheless, as Bill Malone argues, despite its generally negative portrayal of “music city,” *Nashville* “probably won a new audience to country music,” or at least expanded the national stature of the music.¹² Other films of the late seventies assisted in this effort. Clint Eastwoods’ *Every Which Way But Loose*(1977), a silly tale about a good ole boy and his orangutan on the run from the cops and a biker gang, utilized a country score that eventually became a best-selling soundtrack album. Burt Reynolds continued his on-screen association with country music by co-starring with Jerry Reed in *Smokey and the Bandit*(1978), a “good ole boy” movie that, in the words of Bill Malone: “was the prototype for shows both in theaters and on television which featured hedonistic, simple-minded young men and their sexy girlfriends riding in fast cars or trucks with a backdrop of country music.”¹³

The year 1980 was as much a watershed for country music in Hollywood as it

¹¹ Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History*, p.250.

¹² Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.370.

¹³ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.371.

was for conservatism in Washington. In that year, a deluge of films featuring country music poured out of the movie capital. Clint Eastwood starred in *Any Which Way You Can*(1980), a dim-witted follow-up to his previous man-meets-orangutan film, and *Bronco Billy*(1980), a more endearing tale about the star/owner of a modern-day Wild West Show. Both used a country soundtrack and featured guest appearances from Charlie Rich, Merle Haggard, and Mel Tillis. Not to be outdone, Burt Reynolds reprised his role as the heart-throbbing, fun-loving "Bandit," in the inane sequel *Smokey and the Bandit II*(1980), which rehashed the fast cars/good ole boys/country music formula of its predecessor. A much better film was Robert Redford and Jane Fonda's *The Electric Horseman*(1980), which not only used a country soundtrack by Willie Nelson, but also featured the grizzled outlaw singer in an acclaimed supporting role. Even countercultural comedians John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd managed to sneak some country music into their blockbuster comedy *The Blues Brothers*(1980). In a hilarious scene parodying honky-tonk nightlife, their rhythm and blues band impersonated a country act called, stereotypically enough, The Good Ole Boys, performing such favourites as "Stand By Your Man" and the theme to the TV show "Rawhide" for a crowd of rowdy, bottle-throwing rednecks at a rural Illinois nightspot called Bob's Country Bunker (complete with a dancing neon cowboy hat marquee).

Country music featured prominently in two of the biggest films to come out of Hollywood in 1980. The screen version of Loretta Lynn's best-selling song and autobiography, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, met acclaim from audiences and critics alike and landed Sissy Spacek a Best Actress Academy Award for her portrayal of Lynn. The ultra-elite Academy's recognition of the film (which received a few other nominations in addition to Spacek's, including Best Picture) was poignant testimony to the mainstream "respectability" country music had by now earned.

Though less critically acclaimed than *Coal Miner's Daughter*, John Travolta's *Urban Cowboy*(1980) had a far more powerful impact on American popular culture. Based on an article about Texas honky-tonk culture written for *Esquire* magazine in 1978, the film featured cameos from Mickey Gilley, Johnny Lee, and Charlie Daniels, and sparked a nationwide craze for cowboy hats, cowboy boots, designer jeans,

mechanical bull-riding, and country "clubbing."¹⁴ In the wake of *Urban Cowboy* hundreds of "hip" Texas-style nightclubs modelled on the one featured in the film sprang up in cities across America, attracting "modern-day cowboys and cowgirls [from] just about every description and station in life."¹⁵ As scholars Gerald Schorin and Bruce Vandenberg write: "by showing a hero engaged in blue-collar drudge work and penthouse seduction - not cowpunching or sagebrush shootouts - the movie transformed the cowboy myth of self-reliant freedom, connecting it to a whole new generation. If a baby-faced New Jersey boy like John Travolta could pass for a brave Texan, then anyone could."¹⁶ Coupled with his starring role in *Saturday Night Fever*(1977), Travolta's involvement in the *Urban Cowboy* phenomenon cemented his reputation as an on-screen working-class hero. These two films in fact were strikingly similar in their depiction of working-class nightlife among New York Italians and Texas honky-tonkers, respectively. Judging from their depiction in these films, these seemingly different cultures actually appeared to have much in common. This testified to the increasingly convergent cultural and political perspectives of working-people across America. Contributing significantly to the growing vogue for working-class culture, these films provided cultural evidence of the centrality of white, working-class voters in the social and political trends of the era.

In 1980, country stars themselves also began moving from cameos to starring roles in films. Kenny Rogers' *The Gambler*, based on his hit song of the same name, was the highest rated television movie for 1980.¹⁷ After his on-screen debut in *The Electric Horseman*, Willie Nelson starred in *Honeysuckle Rose*(1980), playing a struggling honky-tonk singer who is saved from his own self-destructive drinking, drugging, and sexual escapades by the love of a good woman. Emmylou Harris, Kenneth Threadgill, and Hank Cochran also appeared in the film, which, though a box-office disappointment, produced a best-selling soundtrack album. More successful was Dolly Parton's *Nine To Five*(1980), the first of many Hollywood films for the buxom

¹⁴ Latham, "Ballad of the Urban Cowboy: America's Search For True Grit," *Esquire* 90 (September 12, 1978), pp. 21-31.; "Cowboy Fever Rises - and Merchants Cash In," *US News and World Report* 90 (February 16, 1981), pp.62-63.

¹⁵ "Cowboy Fever Rises - and Merchants Cash In," *US News and World Report* 90 (February 16, 1981), pp.62-63.

¹⁶ Schorin and Vandenberg, "Advertising's Role in the Diffusion of a Country-Western Trend in the U.S.," p.518.

¹⁷ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.423

singer. Patrick Carr has argued that Parton's move into film and television, though detrimental to the integrity of her music, "drew millions into the country music marketplace," and her success in these visual media served as "a kind of coming-out party for county music, the point in history at which expansion finally became the main dynamic of the country music business."¹⁸

As the Reagan years unfolded, Hollywood continued to produce "major vehicles for the mass exposure of country entertainers"¹⁹ *Hard Country* (1981) introduced Tanya Tucker and Kim Basinger to the silver screen, while *Take This Job and Shove It* (1981), an "undistinguished" film version of the hit song, included appearances by Johnny Paycheck, Charlie Rich, Lacy J. Dalton, and David Allen Coe.²⁰ In 1982, two country icons were the subjects of successful television movies called *Living Proof: The Hank Williams Jr. Story*, and *Stand By Your Man: The Tammy Wynette Story*. The same year, Clint Eastwood produced, directed, and starred in *Honky Tonk Man*, about a grizzled country singer looking for one last shot at the big-time. Bruce Beresford's *Tender Mercies* (1983), also about an aging country singer coming to terms with his life, was hailed by many as "the finest movie ever made about country music,"²¹ and earned star Robert Duvall a Best Actor Oscar in 1983. The following year Jessica Lange won an Oscar nomination for her portrayal of Patsy Cline in *Sweet Dreams* (1984).

The marriage of Hollywood and Nashville also resulted in great gains for country record sales. CMA figures reveal a 50% rise in sales of recorded country music in the year following the release of *Urban Cowboy*.²² In addition, the accompanying soundtrack albums from *Coal Miner's Daughter*, *Urban Cowboy*, *Bronco Billy*, *The Electric Horseman*, *Nine To Five*, and *Honeysuckle Rose* performed exceptionally well on *Billboard's* record charts.

Hollywood was not alone among America's culture industries in exploiting the profitability of country music. Television too expanded its repertoire of programs with country and southern themes. One of the most popular television shows of the early

¹⁸ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.395.

¹⁹ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.371.

²⁰ Austin, "Hollywood Barn Dance: A Brief Survey of Country Music in Films," p.121.

²¹ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.371.

²² Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.426

eighties was the *Dukes of Hazzard*. Patterned after the “fast cars and good ole boys” paradigm of *Smokey and the Bandit*, the *Dukes* focused on a pair of happy-go-lucky southerners and their souped up roadster, the “General Lee” (complete with Confederate Battle Flag painted on the hood). The show featured a cast of supporting characters that included every stereotype of working-class southern life: the corrupt sheriff, the stumbling lackey deputy, the innocent young southern maiden (dressed in short-shorts and halter top), and the not-too-bright, overall-clad mechanic with a mountain-man beard and a heart of gold. Waylon Jennings performed the program’s theme song, appropriately titled “Just Good Ole Boys,” and a rollicking bluegrass breakdown always accompanied the numerous chase sequences. One of the male leads on the show, John Schneider capitalized on his television fame by launching a singing career that netted him four number one country hits throughout the decade, despite one critic’s description of him as “Merle Haggard’s wimpy, anaemic baby cousin.”²³

While such network shows as the *Dukes* and the popular prime-time soap opera *Dallas* provided ample evidence that programs about southerners could be national successes, the increase in the number of programs devoted specifically to country brought the music even greater exposure. Singers like Dolly Parton and Barbara Mandrell were featured in HBO specials and new nationally-syndicated programs like *Nashville on the Road*, *This Week in Country Music*, *That Nashville Sound*, and *Pop! Goes the Country* joined *Hee-Haw* in bringing country music to television audiences across the nation. More significantly, the rise of cable television and new specialized cable channels devoted exclusively to country music, country living, and southern lifestyles testified to the cultural power of the southernization phenomenon and country music. In 1983 the Gaylord Entertainment Corporation, parent company of Opryland USA, launched The Nashville Network (TNN), a cable channel featuring hearty doses of country talk/music shows, mixed with “lifestyle” programs devoted to hunting, fishing, car racing, tractor pulls, and other favourite southern past-times. The network was a huge success, its subscribership growing from 7 million in 1983, to over 53 million by the nineties.²⁴ Another more specialized cable network, Country Music Television

²³ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.458.

²⁴ Ellison, “Keeping Faith: Evangelical Performance in Country Music,” p.22.

(CMT), also debuted in 1983. As the Nashville equivalent to MTV, CMT helped "br[eak] down many of the old stereotypes of country music" by using the hip visual medium of video to attract the teenage market to country music for the first time on any major scale.²⁵ With music videos emerging as one of the most important marketing tools in the American music industry, CMT and country video programs on TNN were instrumental in propelling country music to its broadest mainstream popularity yet.

"Get Down On Your Knees and Pray"

An account of the modern conservative ascendance would be incomplete without mention of the Religious Right. In the late seventies and early eighties, Evangelical Protestantism re-emerged in mainstream American politics for the first time in decades, and helped catalyze the rise of the Right. It is constructive to explore the link between Evangelicism and country music, for if the music's rising popularity was a sign of growing conservatism and southernization (and vice versa), it also signalled the revitalization of Evangelicism as a mainstream social and political force.

In the half-century or so since the twenties, Christian fundamentalism had all but disappeared as a mainstream political force in America. Defeated and humiliated in their efforts to impose staunch Christian morality on America through prohibition and anti-evolutionism, Christian fundamentalists retreated from public life, cloistering themselves in insular religious communities to hold off the twin evils of modernism and secular humanism. Though dismayed by the secularization of America, fundamentalists gave up on persuading America that it was going to hell in a handbasket, choosing instead to focus on their own individual salvation in the next world.²⁶

But by the late sixties and early seventies, Christian fundamentalists had begun to emerge from their shell. A number of factors have been cited in accounting for the increased public profile of Christian evangelicals, including: the growing sophistication of evangelical organizational apparatus; the growth of the "electronic church," beginning with the rise of the radio ministry in the thirties and forties and eventually culminating in the televangelism of the eighties; the adoption of sophisticated, modern techniques of

²⁵ Cusic, "Country Green: The Money in Country Music," p.234.

²⁶ Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics*, pp.209-210, 215.

persuasion and fund-raising, such as direct mail; the emergence of urbane, charismatic, modern evangelists like Billy Graham; an evangelical awakening in the late-sixties and early seventies that saw a rise in conservative church affiliation at the expense of more liberal churches.²⁷ Most important however was the growing sense of moral outrage, not only in Evangelical circles but in the broader domain of the silent majority, at the erosion of traditional values and the encouragement of perverse social behaviour by the "liberal" media, feminists, and the federal government (especially the Supreme Court, with its controversial decisions on school prayer, pornography, birth control, abortion, and various other "moral" issues). Evangelicals equated these transgressions with what Reverend Jerry Falwell called "national sin," warranting the political mobilization of Christians in order to save themselves from their own nation's moral turpitude. As E.J. Dionne observes: "the paradox of the Religious Right is that it became an important factor in American politics primarily because of liberal victories."²⁸

Dionne, among many others, has cited the election of Jimmy Carter as "the first evangelical breakthrough in American politics since prohibition." Carter, a proud Southern Baptist, touted his born-again faith and southern upbringing with dignity and candor. He owed his election in no small part to having won back Evangelical southern constituencies that had been drifting Republican since the early sixties. With Carter in the White House, the Religious Right rejoined the mainstream (at least symbolically) for the first time in decades.²⁹

During the Carter years, the Religious Right emerged as one of the most powerful forces in American politics. The formation of the Moral Majority by Reverend Falwell in 1979 marked the coalescence of this new power, creating a sophisticated political instrument for the articulation of Evangelicals' ever-more commanding political/social views. By 1980, the Religious Right had become a major component in the insurgent conservatism of Reagan Republicanism, thus consolidating the South's "Bible Belt" as one of the primary catalysts of the GOP's conservative breakthrough and vindicating the logic behind the party's decade-long southern strategy.

²⁷ Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics*, pp.215-224.

²⁸ Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics*, p.224.

²⁹ Dionne Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics*, p.224.

Country music's ties to the South's conservative Evangelical heritage run deep. The music's foundations in religious sources like gospel singing has already been mentioned, as has the music's historical association with fundamentalist causes (chapter one). Needless to say, country standards like Uncle Dave Macon's "The Bible's True," a harangue against evolutionists, the Bailes Brothers' "Dust on the Bible," a lament about secularization, and Wayne Raney's self-explanatory "We Need A Whole Lot More of Jesus (And a lot Less Rock n' Roll)," attest to country's highly religious worldview. Country music scholar Curtis Ellison has written at length about the link between Evangelical thought and country music culture. Ellison argues that for country fans the music serves as an "imaginative means for transcending the negative effects of modernity."³⁰ In short, the world of country music is a nostalgic one, uncomplicated by the complex moral, social, and political struggles of modern America. It is a world where contemporary disputes over race, gender, and sexuality are proscribed by an absolutist Christian morality rooted in the "old-time religion." This orientation is obvious in the anti-feminist and anti-hippie country songs of the sixties and seventies. But it also surfaces in more subtle ways.

Echoing Richard Peterson "class *unconsciousness*" argument, Ellison writes: "hard times in country music typically are presented as an intimately *personal* condition - one that can best be confronted romantically or spiritually," rather than as "an economic or social-class experience that might be addressed by collective political action."³¹ But Ellison delves deeper into country's strong individualist orientation, adding to Peterson's analysis that "this emphasis on one's personal experience in country music parallels the emphasis on individual salvation in Protestant evangelical religious traditions."³² By emphasizing the connection to evangelicism, Ellison not only adds more weight to Peterson's argument (accenting in country music what is often cited as a factor discouraging a socialist mentality among America's working class) but expands it, thus highlighting country music's religious worldview.

Ellison underlines country's evangelical orientation in another way, identifying a

³⁰ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.xvii.

³¹ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.xviii.; Ellison, "Keeping Faith: Evangelical Performance in Country Music," p.141.; Peterson, "Class Unconsciousness in Country Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.47.

³² Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.xviii.

strong theme of salvation through piety and self-discipline running through the music and the lives of its stars. As he plainly writes: "direct references to the saving power of Jesus are prolific across all forms of country music."³³ Indeed, numerous country songs meditate on the perils of forsaking God. Roy Acuff's perennial classic "Wreck on the Highway"(1946) is one of the best examples. In a solemn condemnation of drinking and driving and Godlessness, the song's narrator recounts a horrible car crash, noting how blood, whiskey, and broken glass mingled in the wreckage, and repeatedly lamenting that he "didn't hear nobody pray," suggesting that the accident could have been avoided had the driver been a Godly, teetotaling man. Scholar George Lewis sees this song as an evangelically-inspired "metaphor for modern America - rushing blindly down a rain-soaked highway, jacked up on whiskey and relying on the secular values of technology, not the sacred ones of religion."³⁴ If so, its continuing popularity (many artists have recorded it since Acuff) indicates that its message has continued to resonate with country music listeners for decades.

Ellison also identifies a strong salvation-through-God theme in the country music films of the early eighties. In *Honeysuckle Rose*, *Honky-Tonk Man*, and *Tender Mercies*, observes Ellison, the country-singing protagonists are first depicted as out-of-control rounders headed for personal destruction at the hand of alcohol, drugs, and casual sex, but are "saved" after seeing the error of their ways and turning to God. This theme is not simply a Hollywood creation. Ellison sees in the careers of many country singers real-life evidence of the saving power of religion. Unlike rock musicians, who more often than not have seemed unable to save themselves from their own self-destructive behavior (eg. Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Keith Moon, etc.), country music stars have quite often reformed themselves from alcoholics, drug addicts, and criminals, as is evident in the careers of George Jones, Hank Williams Jr., Merle Haggard, and Johnny Cash (who has frequently sung for Billy Graham's famous "crusades"³⁵). In country music culture, it seems, salvation from personal excess is more easily attained due to the strong religious underpinnings of the music. In their

³³ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.111.

³⁴ Lewis, "Tension, Conflict, and Contradiction in Country Music," in: Lewis (ed.) *All That Glitters*, p.213.

³⁵ Danker, "The World According to Johnny Cash: Lyrical Themes in His Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson(eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.148.

typically self-serving autobiographies, country stars themselves have attested to the role of religion in their success. In her best-selling account of her life, *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1978), Loretta Lynn attributed her success to having "gotten stronger in my religion. When things were looking bad for me, I just put myself in the hands of Jesus, and let Him do what was best for me."³⁶

Country music's strong religious underpinnings are most evident in bluegrass. An average bluegrass performer's repertoire is composed in equal parts of both secular and religious material. Historically, the gospel tradition has remained far more present in bluegrass than in any other form of country music. In fact, the gospel quartet, a four-part harmony song-style performed with minimal musical accompaniment and perfected by Bill Monroe and the Stanley Brothers, is one of the most popular and lasting song traditions in bluegrass. Titles of bluegrass standards like "Get Down On Your Knees and Pray," "Standing in the Need of Prayer," "Hold To God's Unchanging Hand," and "I'll Meet You In Church Sunday Morning," attest to the highly religious worldview of this subgenre. The bluegrass festival phenomenon is also suggestive of religious ritual. In a report on a bluegrass festival published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1972, bluegrass scholar Robert Cantwell described the affair as "an evangelical retreat of the very kind that rural folk a century ago waited all summer for."³⁷ In further writings, Cantwell has argued persuasively that bluegrass festivals "ha[ve] swept into the the social and psychic space occupied a century ago by religion and by religious revivals and camp meetings."³⁸

Country music's reverence for the family values coveted by religious conservatives provides even more testimony to the music's attraction to Evangelicals. One of the most prevalent themes in country music throughout its long history, has been the celebration of the traditional family unit that survives through thick and thin by sticking together and respecting the authority of the male head of the family. Moreover, throughout country music history, there have been numerous brother acts (The Monroes, the Osbornes, The Louvins, The Stanleys, the McReynolds), husband and

³⁶ Quoted in: Tharpe, "Homemade Soap: The Sudsy Autobios of the Linsey Crowd," p.156.

³⁷ Cantwell, "Believing in Bluegrass," *Atlantic Monthly* 229 (March 1972), p.54.

³⁸ Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, p.38.

wife acts (Johnny Cash and June Carter, George Jones and Tammy Wynette), family acts (The Carter Family, The Lewis Family, The Whites), and even mother/daughter acts (the Judds). Country music's affinity for the performing family unit offers attractive symbolism for religious conservatives, an affirmation of their own reverence for the integrity of the family unit in a period when socioeconomic pressures have weakened the traditional nuclear family to an unprecedented degree. And the close bond that country artists have with their fans further attests to Curtis Ellison's claim that "participants in country music culture behave something like a vast extended family at an endless church supper in a rural American small town."³⁹

"God Bless America Again"

By the eighties, America had weathered nearly two decades of domestic strife, government scandals, and economic decline. In the midst of this national malaise, "for perhaps the first time, many Americans wondered if the United States had passed its peak."⁴⁰ Ronald Reagan's rise to the presidency reflected Americans' deep yearning for a rebirth of optimism about the nation's future. As Haynes Johnson has written: "Americans did not want to accept the idea that their country was in decline, and they looked to Ronald Reagan for a restoration of national power and prosperity....He sent forth the message that people wanted to hear: better days were ahead; national pride had been rekindled, faith in the future restored....It was 'morning again in America'."⁴¹ In his inaugural speech, Reagan told the nation that America was not "doomed to an inevitable decline," and blamed big government, liberal excess, and a flagging commitment to Cold War vigilance as causes of the recent decline in the national spirit. With his program of tax-cutting, deregulation, and increased military spending, Reagan proposed to set right what the liberals had messed up by getting the government "off our backs" and by reinvigorating the Cold War spirit of America as a beacon of freedom in contrast to the "Evil Empire" of communism.

Country music played a big role in the Reagan-era White House. In 1983, the CMA held its twenty-fifth anniversary celebration in Washington, a black-tie affair

³⁹ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.xvii.; Oermann, *America's Music: The Roots of Country*, p.233.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History*, p.32.

⁴¹ Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History*, p.139.

which Reagan attended. Reagan also attended the Kennedy Center's honoring of Roy Acuff in 1984. Reagan's affection for country music had been evident since his reign as California's Governor - from that post he had pardoned ex-con Merle Haggard for his previous crimes. As President, Reagan invited Haggard to the White House often, an unsurprising piece of photo-op political strategy given the convergence in the worldview of Haggard, the "poet of the working class," and the "Reagan Democrats."

Many country songs of the eighties reflected the new national mood of reborn patriotism and optimism that Reagan personified. In 1980, the Charlie Daniels Band released a song entitled "In America," which denounced the nation's critics at home and abroad in what amounted to a musical affirmation of Reaganism. In this edgy, hard-driving anthem, Daniels sang:

Well the eagle's been flying slow, and the flag's been flying low,
And a lot of people sayin' that America's fixin' to fall.
But speakin' just for me, and some people from Tennessee,
We've got a thing or two to tell you all.
This lady may have stumbled, but she ain't never failed.
And if the Russians don't believe that they can all go straight to hell.
We're gonna put her feet back on the path of righteousness and then,
God bless America again.
...We're walkin' real proud and we're talkin' real loud again, in America.

Like Reagan, Daniels told his listeners that the naysayers were wrong, that America was not in decline but experiencing rebirth. With his reference to the Russians, Daniels underscored the Reagan campaign theme of a re-energized Cold War, and in declaring that America was getting back onto the path of righteousness, he captured the centrality of the New Christian Right's morality campaign in the politics of the new conservatism. Finally, in speaking for himself and "some people from Tennessee," Daniels seemed to single out the South as the most patriotic region of America, a central player in the emerging national renaissance. Judging from the enthusiastic embrace of Reagan, America certainly was "walkin' real proud" and "talkin' real loud again."

As we have seen, the economic revitalization of the Sunbelt South helped catalyze the Reagan revolution. But the resurgence of the South also "produced a certain amount of chauvinism and regional snobbery,"⁴² which found expression in Reagan-era country music. Hank Williams Jr. was the undisputed leader in this field.

⁴² Cobb, "From Rocky Top to Detroit City: Country Music and the Economic Transformation of the South," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.76.

Since the late seventies, Williams had been refashioning his image from a pale imitator of his legendary father into that of a rowdy, macho, anti-establishment, redneck country-rocker. Williams signalled his emergence as the leader in chauvinistic, pro-South country music with "The South's Gonna Rattle Again"(1978), a song which cast country music as the symbol of the reborn South. By the eighties, Williams' musical salutes to the South grew more ominous. In "Dixie On My Mind"(1981) he sang from the perspective of a southerner in New York city who misses home. Like Buck Owens' anti-New York anthem of a decade earlier, this song scandalized the Big Apple as a place of unfriendly, money-hungry urban parasites out of touch with nature, in contrast to the hospitable, laid-back, freedom-loving South, where people hunt and fish in the region's forests and streams rather than scurry around frantically in the quest to earn more money. In other songs, Williams continued to make New York the object of his derision. In "If Heaven Ain't a Lot Like Dixie"(1982) he again praised the South, and concluded that if heaven wasn't like his homeland, he'd rather go to hell - or New York city, which in his eyes was basically the same thing. Even more provocative was "A Country Boy Can Survive"(1982), in which, with "a menu of implied and explicit prejudice, paranoia, and menace,"⁴³ Williams warned a New York City mugger that he planned to hunt him down, spit tobacco in his eye, and kill him with his .45 pistol.

Williams tuneful southern nationalism reached its apex in 1988 with the highly offensive and controversial "If the South Woulda Won." In this musical fantasy, subtle racist overtones mixed with an odd combination of Lost Cause nostalgia, Sunbelt boosterism, and contemporary Republican politics:

If the South woulda won we'd have had it made.
I'd probably run for president of the southern states....
I'd make my Supreme Court down in Texas,
And we wouldn't have no killers gettin' off free.
If they were proven guilty, then they would swing quickly,
Instead of writing books and stylin' on TV.
We'd all learn cajun cooking in Louisiana.
And I'd put that capital back in Alabama.
We'd put Florida on the right track, cause we'd take Miami back,
And throw all them pushers in the slammer.

⁴³ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.437.

I'd have all the whisky made in Tennessee,
 And all the horses raised in the Kentucky hills.
 The national treasury would be in Tupelo, Mississippi.
 And I'd put Hank William's picture on one hundred dollar bills.
 I'd have all the cars made in the Carolinas,
 And I'd ban all the ones made in China.
 I'd have all the girl childs sent to Georgia to learn to smile,
 And talk with that southern accent that drives me wild.
 I'd have all the fiddles made in Virginia,
 Cause they sure can make them sound so fine.
 I'm goin' up on Wolverton mountain and see old Clifton Flowers,
 And have a sip of his good old Arkansas wine.

As if to confirm the seriousness of his contention, as the song fades out on the record, Williams solemnly asserts: "we might even be better off." Though this song was about as tasteless as one could imagine, the CMA honored Williams that year with his second consecutive award as Entertainer of the Year.

Curtis Ellison describes Williams' concerts as "luxuriat[ing] in a tone of relentless aggression....the drift of the event seems to be intensive bonding around a popular culture of defiance. Rebel imagery is one indicator of this."⁴⁴ Indeed, by the end of the eighties, Williams had become a poster-boy for the kind of neo-Confederate, right-wing paranoia characteristic of the anti-government militia movements that began dotting the landscape of America in growing numbers. In fact, his song "What You Don't Know"(1988), which meditates on the notion that "Big Brother" is spying on America, is practically an anthem for the paranoid patriots of the militia movement, containing the lyric: "Try to keep a low profile, sometimes that's hard to do / Especially when you know that Uncle Sam is watching you."

Though Hank Williams Jr.'s "popular, hell-raising redneck songs"⁴⁵ represented the extreme of country music's pronounced southern nationalism in the eighties, other artists also touted the virtues of Dixie in similarly provocative ways. Ricky Skaggs, hailed by one scholar as "country music's reigning neoconservative,"⁴⁶ recorded "Country Boy" in 1984, a song which took up the age-old theme of comparing the South to northern urban life. With an implicit anti-urban and anti-black message, the video for the song pictured Skaggs and his musical hero Bill Monroe playing on the

⁴⁴ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.137.

⁴⁵ McLaurin, and Peterson, "Introduction," in: McLaurin, and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.8.

⁴⁶ Ken Tucker, "The Old Sound of New Country," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.311.

streets of New York, surrounded by urban chaos and breakdancing black teenagers. Similarly, David Allen Coe's pro-southern "If That Ain't Country"(1988) contained lyrics which one scholar has deemed "blatantly racist."⁴⁷

Despite the examples above, there have been artists who managed to celebrate the South without cutting down another region or injecting racist overtones into their music. Though often lampooned by critics as purveyors of "country-western muzak" or as "country music's answer to the Monkees,"⁴⁸ the group Alabama emerged in the early eighties as one of the biggest acts in contemporary country, and throughout the decade recorded many vacuous but harmless odes to the South. These culminated in 1989 with the regional tribute album *Southern Star*, and its anthemic centerpiece "Song of the South."

"Don't Let Me Cross Over"

By the mid-eighties, it was clear that "country music had finally permeated every nook, cranny, and cleavage of the American scene."⁴⁹ However, many feared that country's ongoing fusion with pop and soft-rock styles was diluting the music beyond recognition. As *Newsweek* observed in 1984: "at a time when the country-music audience had reached an all-time high, the music's actual country content seemed to have hit rock bottom."⁵⁰ This was the natural result of the countrypolitan experiment begun in the late fifties. Since that time, many purists had worried that the music was selling its soul in the name of profit. By the mid-seventies, the country-pop fusion had come far enough to warrant protest from many of country's leading stars. In reaction to the selection of Australian pop star Olivia Newton John as the CMA's Female Entertainer of the Year in 1974, about fifty country stars met at George Jones and Tammy Wynette's house to form the Association of Country Entertainers (ACE), a short-lived group that accomplished very little other than drawing attention to the music's internal battle for identity in the face of cross-over dreams. The following year, Charlie Rich (who, ironically, is best-known for his pop-flavored country ballads)

⁴⁷ Melton McLaurin, "Songs of the South: The Changing Image of the South in Country Music," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote My Life*, p.27.

⁴⁸ Quoted in: Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.432.

⁴⁹ Davis, "...When Country Wasn't Cool," p.158.

⁵⁰ David Gates, "Country Purists Fight Back," *Newsweek* (January 9, 1984), p.93.

burned on national television the envelope containing the selection of folk-pop country boy John Denver as the CMA's Entertainer of the Year. Again the protest was more symbolic than effective. Country-pop continued to flourish with artists like Denver, Kenny Rogers, Barbara Mandrell, Anne Murray, and Alabama churning out the top hits of the era, songs which may have been country in theme, but were often "thoroughly Las Vegas in tone."⁵¹

Like many others, William Ivey, Director of the Country Music Hall of Fame, worried in 1984 that "country music was about to disappear. After having evolved to a point where it was virtually identical to pop music, and after pop artists were successfully imitating country style and generating country hits, it seemed that the artistic tradition, begun in the 1920's, was about to end in a flurry of crossover hits and pop impersonations."⁵² Indeed, at the very time that the country-pop synthesis reached its peak, industry figures indicated that country's popularity was waning, as country record sales in the mid-eighties showed a sharp decrease.⁵³ Many blamed the boom sparked by *Urban Cowboy* for turning country into an ephemeral fad based more on fashion and style than on the music itself. This was a reasonable contention, for as Priscilla Painton writes, by mid-decade, the frill jackets and cowboy boots were "tucked away next to the platform shoes and the *New York Times* was declaring that country music might soon be 'as dated as the ukelele'."⁵⁴

By diluting its soul with pop sounds, Nashville not only turned off country's traditional fan base, but curtailed its appeal to those who had been gradually moving toward the music over the past decade. The nation's conservative shift and the rise of the Sunbelt had provided the ideal climate for country music's continuing growth. But it was the music's homespun, folksy charm that had attracted converts, its ability to transmit traditional values through its lyrics and unadorned musical style. By the height of the conservative ascendance in the eighties, country had pressed too far beyond its roots, becoming less resonant with the increasingly conservative public that had powered its rise from down-home to uptown.

⁵¹ Malone, *Country Music USA*, p.381.

⁵² Lewis, "Tension, Conflict, and Contradiction in Country Music," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.215.

⁵³ Lomax, *Nashville: Music City USA*, p.214.

⁵⁴ Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p.64.

Thus, as the logic of the country-pop synthesis came into question, a new movement emerged in the mid-eighties to take back country music from the pop-meisters and redirect it toward its traditional conservative fan-base. As RCA Nashville President Jerry Bradley predicted in 1984: "it's all going back to fiddles and pedal steel guitars, back to the basics of the music."⁵⁵ Led by artists like Ricky Skaggs, Dwight Yoakum, Emmylou Harris, and Randy Travis, the "neo-traditionalists" infused more authentic styles back into contemporary country. Skaggs's recording of Bill Monroe's "Uncle Pen"(1984) became the first bluegrass song to reach number one on the country charts.⁵⁶ Yoakum's authentic honky-tonk style garnered him hits with anti-urban odes like "I Sing Dixie"(1985) and "Guitars, Cadillacs, Etc"(1986), which indicted L.A. as a "land of lost and wasted lives." Referring to honky-tonker George Strait, one of the leading lights of the neo-traditionalist movement, scholar Ken Tucker wrote in the late eighties: "if five years ago you'd told the average country music A&R man that the next country superstar would be a fellow who idolized [Bob] Wills and mumbled like Merle Haggard, you'd probably have been greeted with raucous laughter and a swat upside your head with a Barbara Mandrell album."⁵⁷ Indeed, the country-pop juggernaut had seemed so powerful in the early eighties that few could foresee a change in the direction of the music. But by the end of the decade, country had, at least temporarily, righted its course away from pop dilution and back toward tradition.

In suggesting that the rise of the neo-traditionalists might be "a reflection of the conservative politics of the Reagan era,"⁵⁸ journalist Don Shewey captured the logic behind country's swift turn back toward its roots. By the mid-eighties, country had begun to lose site of the cultural forces that had powered its rise over the previous decades. Decreasing fan interest in the eighties indicated that the music had gone too mainstream to still speak for the insurgent conservatism of Reaganism. Reaching back toward its roots, country music realigned itself with the conservative majority. As upstarts within the industry, challenging the forces of corporate homogenization and control, the neo-traditionalists were far more in step with the conservative style of

⁵⁵ Lewis, "Tension, Conflict, and Contradiction in Country Music," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.215.

⁵⁶ Lomax, *Nashville: Music City USA*, p.214.

⁵⁷ Ken Tucker, "The Old Sound of New Country," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.310.

⁵⁸ Shewey, "America's New Honky-Tonk Heroes," *Harper's Bazaar* 120 (October 1987), p.284.

Reaganism than were Kenny Rogers or John Denver. Their dominance of country music in the latter-half of the eighties demonstrated that fact.

* * *

But the vogue for traditional styles would not last long. By the nineties, a new demographic had gravitated toward country. The baby boomers, once the acid-rock flower-children of the sixties, had now reached middle-age. Their political and cultural values had grown more conservative, and their tastes in music had moved away from mainstream rock music, which had by now mutated into various spinoff genres more suited to the tastes of teenagers. But with continuing affection for the music they grew up on, and with a residual liberalism left over from the idealistic crusades of the sixties and seventies, the baby boomers led country music toward classic rock sounds and a more inclusive conservative worldview that may still have revered God, family, and country, but did so with a new sensitivity to liberal issues like feminism, environmentalism, and poverty. Country music in the nineties would rise to unprecedented heights of popularity by fusing the baby boomer's moderate conservatism and affection for classic rock, with the religious, patriotic, family values perspective that had always been at its core.

CHAPTER FIVE

NEW COUNTRY AND THE SOUND OF AMERICA

The country music boom of the 1990's can only be described using adjectives like explosive, stunning, and mind-blowing. Between 1988 and 1993 country music record sales quadrupled from \$425 million to \$1.7 billion annually, increasing country's share of all recorded music sales from 10% to nearly 25%.¹ In 1985 only sixteen country albums went Gold (sales of 500,000 units); in 1991, thirty-three achieved Gold status and another thirty-five made Platinum (sales of one million units).² By 1992, country radio stations ranked first in nearly half of the top one hundred largest radio markets in the nation.³ By 1994, over 2,600 radio stations played country music full time, eclipsing all other formats and making the country music radio audience of 67 million people the largest in America (figures for the closest competitors, adult contemporary and rock, were 56.8 million and 46.9 million respectively).⁴ In the mid-eighties, only six major recording labels had divisions in Nashville; by 1992, fourteen "majors" had set up shop in music city, joining hundreds of other smaller, independent labels.⁵ In 1991, income for the top 10 pop/rock touring acts declined 32%, while country music touring acts increased their revenue by 40%.⁶ And between 1991 and 1992, Gaylord Entertainment, parent company of Opryland USA and TNN increased its net income from \$2 million to an astounding \$29 million; by 1996 Gaylord would be taking in annual revenues of \$700 million.⁷

¹ Applebome, "Country Music Boom Has Nashville Dancing," *New York Times*, September 29, 1993, p. a14.; Tichi, "Editor's Note," p.4.; Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.218.

² Gubernick and Newcomb, "The Wal-Mart School of Music," *Forbes* 149 (March 2, 1992), p.72.

³ Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p.64.

⁴ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.519.; Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.229.

⁵ Tannenbaum, "Country's New Gold Rush," *Rolling Stone* 628 (April 16, 1992), p.17.

⁶ Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p.64.

⁷ Sharpe, "Country Music Finds New Fans and a Firm in Nashville Prospers," *Wall Street Journal*, January 19, 1994, p.1.; Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.239.

"Time Changes Everything"

"The demographic power of the baby boom has taken hold of country music,"⁸ wrote Susan Holly in 1993, capturing the primary reason for the music's sudden explosion in popularity: As the most numerous group of consumers in America, the baby boomers were positioned to set the tone and pace not only for America's culture but its politics as well. In the nineties they did just that, catapulting country music to the top of the American music industry, and helping to elect the first Democratic president in a dozen years, a man whose age and moderately conservative politics made him the perfect representation of their own lives and values. The "New" Country of nineties pop stars like Garth Brooks sprung from the same demographic, social, and political trends that invigorated the "New" Democratic politics of Bill Clinton.

Intimately linked to the increasing power wielded by the baby boomers in brokering America's politics and culture, were two related demographic trends: suburbanization and southernization. The national census of 1990 revealed that for the first time, a majority of Americans now lived in suburban areas.⁹ The same census figures revealed that 55% of Americans now lived in the Sunbelt states of the South and West (compared to 32% at mid-century).¹⁰ In fact, between 1970 and 1990, the population of the states of the former Confederacy grew by 40% (20 million people), more than twice the national average, thus reversing, indeed eclipsing the region's population losses of the first two-thirds of the century.¹¹ With the Sunbelt economy booming, Henry Grady's century-old vision of the South as America's economic leader had finally come true. By the early nineties, the South contained eight of the top ten states in terms of new manufacturing, and the Interstate 85 corridor between Richmond and Atlanta had emerged as "the new manufacturing center of America."¹² Along with country music, the major catalysts of the Sunbelt surge were the automotive, high-tech, medical, aerospace, and telecommunications industries. Major-league sports also helped invigorate the Sunbelt economy, with each of the four major sports (baseball,

⁸ Holly, "A Country Twist at Every Turn," *Nation's Business* 81 (March 1993), p.33.

⁹ Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *Atlantic Monthly* 270 (July 1992), p.33.

¹⁰ Wright, *A Twentieth-Century History of United States Population*, p.11.

¹¹ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.8.

¹² Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.186.

football, basketball, and most notably, hockey) adding new franchises in the late-eighties and nineties in cities like Miami, Orlando, Tampa Bay, Charlotte, Nashville, Dallas, Denver, Phoenix, Anaheim, and San Jose.

The Sunbelt's rapid population growth also resulted in greater political clout for the South. By 1996, the eleven states of the Confederacy, plus Kentucky and Oklahoma, elected 137 members to the House of Representatives, seventeen more than in 1960, while in the same period states like Massachusetts and New York lost representation.¹³ Even more striking testimony to the South's new power in pacing America's economy, culture, and politics, was the fact that by 1996 southerners held practically all of the most influential posts in American government, including President, Vice-President, Speaker of the House, House Majority Leader, House Majority Whip, Senate Majority Leader, and Republican Party Chairman. As journalist Peter Applebome wrote in reflecting on the new power enjoyed by country music, Southern politicians, suburban voters, and the Sunbelt economy: "demography...has proved to be destiny."¹⁴

Both the country music boom and the Sunbelt boom were in part driven by a nineties vogue for "country living," a trend that hinged on increasingly negative perceptions of cities. "Country's suddenly mainstream image," wrote South-watcher Applebome in 1993, "has an indelible demographic logic: people are listening to the suburban country of heartthrobs like Garth Brooks and Alan Jackson for pretty much the same reasons they're moving to Nashville and Charlotte."¹⁵ Cities had come to be seen as centers of "crime and noise and traffic and angry minorities, a place to get mugged or have your car broken into rather than a glittering mecca of sophistication and class. And country - at least the midsize towns, cities, and suburbs of the South and West - is more likely to mean a place where you can afford a house, get to work in fifteen minutes, and get home in time to coach Little League."¹⁶ As Don Cusic adds: "to live in the 'country' [read suburbia] meant having fresh air and freedom from inner-city conditions. A home in the country became a status symbol, and 'country' clothing,

¹³ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.9.

¹⁴ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.8.

¹⁵ Applebome, "Country Music Boom Has Nashville Dancing," *New York Times*, September 29, 1993, p. a14.

¹⁶ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.245.

furniture and music became increasingly popular."¹⁷

Curtis Ellison illuminates many other ways in which the trend toward country lifestyles intersected with "rusticity" trends of the nineties, including "environmentalism, the popularity of 'casual' outdoor clothing bought from mail-order houses like L.L. Bean and Land's End, the growth in sales of 'rugged' four-wheel drive vehicles as routine means of suburban transportation, the witty localism of television dramas such as *Northern Exposure* and *Picket Fences*, and the marketing success of 'natural' foods."¹⁸ The strength of the "country living" trend was visible not only in the growing popularity of country music, but also in the growth of related culture industries. Magazines devoted to "country life and entertainment" proliferated at a fantastic pace - one such magazine, *Country America*, saw its readership grow by 300,000 people per year after its start in 1989, reaching one million subscribers by 1992.¹⁹ Country nightlife also became popular in a very short time, just as it had during the *Urban Cowboy* boom. In locales as diverse and seemingly "uncountry" as Dayton, Ohio, Washington, DC, and Seattle, country dance clubs sprang up to serve the new entertainment impulses of people described by *Nation's Business* magazine as "yuppies you would expect to find at *TGI Friday's*....'wannabe' wranglers from...swanky suburbs."²⁰ Line dancing became their passion, and as a result, the hottest dance step of the early nineties. Line dancing owed a great deal of its popularity to TNN's live broadcasts from Nashville's Wild Horse Saloon, where young, hip, suburban cowboys, alongside string-tie-wearing elderly relics of country music's earlier days, lined up in boy-girl formations and danced the night away to perhaps the tamest dance craze ever.

The popularity of country living and country music led to a boom in tourism at country music theme parks, like Opryland in Nashville, and Dollywood in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, both of which saw their tourist volume explode in the nineties, reaching an average of more than two million visitors per year by mid-decade.²¹ By

¹⁷ Cusic, "Country Green: The Money in Country Music," pp. 235.

¹⁸ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, pp.231-232.

¹⁹ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, pp.231-232.

²⁰ Holly, "A Country Twist at Every Turn," *Nation's Business* 81 (March 1993), p.33.

²¹ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.240.

1996 the Opryland Hotel had completed a \$175 million renovation that added a thousand more rooms, bringing the total to three thousand, and making Opryland the biggest hotel/convention center under one roof in the entire world.²² Even more spectacular was the growth of Branson, Missouri from a sleepy town in the Ozarks into a "little Nashville." With its neon-lit "strip" of concert halls and country music complexes sponsored by stars like Conway Twitty and Mel Tillis, Branson became "a replica of Las Vegas with all the glitter but no gambling,"²³ a place where middle-class families and polyester-wearing RV enthusiasts soaked up all the country music, patriotic fervor, and family values they could at friendly prices. Together, these new country vacation spots emerged as "the Coney Islands and Catskills of the nineties."²⁴

"Put a Little Drive in Your Country"

As we have seen, country music survived its momentary drought in the mid-eighties by turning back toward its roots. "New traditionalist" artists like Ricky Skaggs and Randy Travis revived older forms to inject new life into modern country, saving the music from its own irresistible urge to cross-over into the pop market. But as the nineties dawned, the country music industry once again turned toward fusion with other forms of popular music, principally classic rock and folk. Learning the lessons of the *Urban Cowboy* boom-and-bust, the country music industry pinned its hopes on the reliable logic of America's new demography, rather than on a passing fad. This newest fusion, calibrated to resonate with a younger, more "hip" audience of teenagers and middle-aged baby boomers, might have posed an equally substantial threat to the music's soul as did the country-pop fusion of the eighties, but far from threatening the extinction of country, it guaranteed its survival, indeed, its thriving success.

"Country music," wrote *Rolling Stone*'s Anthony DeCurtis in 1992, "has become the refuge of older rock n' roll fans."²⁵ Turned off by the fragmentation of rock music "into diverse subgenres of varied political and ethnic affiliation"²⁶ (including

²² Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.239.

²³ Goddu, "Bloody Daggers and Lonesome Graveyards: The Gothic and Country Music," p.60.

²⁴ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.9.

²⁵ DeCurtis, "Opinion," *Rolling Stone* 644 (November 26, 1992), p.23.

²⁶ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, pp. xxi-xxii.

heavy metal, punk, grunge, alternative, techno, rap, and hip-hop), the baby boom generation, which had nurtured the rise of rock and roll from the fifties through the seventies, found itself turning toward what became known as New Country music. Having recognized the boomers' alienation from the musical mainstream of the late-eighties, Nashville developed new marketing strategies and a new aesthetic for its music in order to increase its appeal to middle-aged, middle-class, suburban Baby Boomers and their children. New Country would fuse the family values perspective and honest, "slice-of-life" lyrical style that had always been country's fort , with the more rambunctious rhythms, sounds and image of classic rock. Tim DuBois, President of Arista Records' Nashville division and an admitted boomer himself, explained:

I think most baby boomers are alienated from urban dance, rap. All that left these people cold. It didn't translate with their value system, and it didn't translate with their musical tastes. When they began to search around they found that some of the music that was coming out of Nashville in the early nineties was more like the rock n' roll they were comfortable with than anything else out there....Very few of us grew up listening to the Grand Ole Opry. Most of us grew up listening to the Beatles and the Eagles. But when people started listening to country, they found something that wasn't all about truck drivers and cheating; it was about life, a lot of baby-boomer issues, and there were still stories there, and there still great harmonies, and it was just a comfortable place to be.²⁷

As DuBois made clear, New Country's link to classic rock was perhaps its most important drawing factor for baby boomers. New Country artists struck a chord with the rock-weaned, former youth of the seventies by citing classic rock artists as major influences on their art. Among those routinely hailed as musical heroes by New Country artists were the Eagles, the Allman Brothers, Lynard Skynard, James Taylor, Carole King, Elton John, and Billy Joel. In his song "Put a Little Drive in Your Country," Travis Tritt highlighted the rock-country fusion animating New Country by singing: "I still love old country, I ain't tryin to put it down / But damn I miss Duane Allman, I wish he was still around." In another of his songs, "Don't Rock the Jukebox"(1989), Tritt rhymed "George Jones" with "the Rolling Stones," and revealed his preference for the latter. Tritt was not alone in reflecting New Country's musical and spiritual affinity with classic rock. George Strait's concerts were described by reviewers as "a cross between Saturday night at the Grand Ole Opry and The Beatles at Shea Stadium."²⁸ Clint Black's music was likened to the seventies soft-rock of the

²⁷ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, pp.251-252.

²⁸ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.490.

Doobie Brothers, Jim Croce, and “even Bob Seger in his quieter moments.”²⁹ Vince Gill’s virtuosic guitar-playing was impressive enough to warrant an invitation from Mark Knopfler (no slouch himself on the six-string) to join the rock group Dire Straits. And Garth Brooks was described by Jimmy Bowen, the president of Brooks’ label Liberty Records, as “Roy Rogers meets Led Zeppelin.”³⁰

In concert, New Country artists hearkened back to the grandiose spectacle of seventies arena-rock. Following Brooks’ lead, New Country singers spiced up their live performances with special effects like smoke machines, light shows, fireworks, and on-stage outrageousness borrowed from the antics of 70s rockers like Kiss and The Who. Brooks even developed a penchant for smashing guitars on stage à la Pete Townshend.

But New Country artists managed to capture “the excitement of rock without the hard edge.”³¹ They limited their use of distortion and made sure their decibel levels stayed at a reasonable level for middle-aged ears. Even when they were smashing guitars and provoking Beatles-esque hysteria from females in the audience, New Country artists’ concerts remained wholesome affairs. Audiences may have been excited, but they remained “extremely orderly and polite,” and “virtually no drinking, smoking or rowdy behavior was visible.”³² In their lyrics, New Country artists eschewed the violence, existential angst, and glorified substance abuse of contemporary rock and rap. Even the heightened sexuality of heart-throbbing New Country artists like Ricky Van Shelton and Alan Jackson remained within reasonable bounds for a generation concerned with promiscuity, teen pregnancy, STD’s, and family values. New Country artists, especially in their slick music videos aired widely on TNN, CMT, and VH1, managed to transmit an image that was “sexy but safe.”³³ As *Forbes* magazine observed: “the sexual electricity is there, but it isn’t vulgar or violent.”³⁴

With this sexy new edge and obvious resemblance to the soft-pop and

²⁹ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.494.

³⁰ Gubernick and Newcomb, “The Wal-Mart School of Music,” *Forbes* 149 (March 2, 1992), p.72.

³¹ Goddu, “Bloody Daggers and Lonesome Graveyards: The Gothic and Country Music,” p.60.

³² Ellison, *Keeping Faith: Evangelical Performance in Country Music*, p.167.

³³ Goddu, “Bloody Daggers and Lonesome Graveyards: The Gothic and Country Music,” p.60.

³⁴ Gubernick and Newcomb, “The Wal-Mart School of Music,” *Forbes* 149 (March 2, 1992), p.73.

introspective lyrics of seventies rock, New Country exploded in popularity among a broad segment of middle- and even upper-class Americans. By 1993, CMA statistics showed that the fastest growing segment of the country music listening audience was the 18-34 age group earning more than \$60,000 per year.³⁵ The Nashville Network revealed that 32% of its regular viewers earned more than \$40,000, while 13% made more than \$50,000.³⁶ Meanwhile, figures on the growth of subscribers to CMT in 1993 showed the largest increases in the Northeast (48% growth) and the West (19%).³⁷ Country had not only escaped its exclusive identification with the urban and rural working-class, but had truly eclipsed its regional identification as the music of the South. As *Rolling Stone*'s Rob Tannenbaum wrote in 1992: "the current country audience is no longer made up of just cowboys, farmers, truck drivers and hicks....many baby boomers now find more to relate to in country music."³⁸

One of the most important elements of New Country that baby boomers identified with was the artists themselves. "If the baby boomers have discovered country," wrote *Time* magazine in 1992, "it is not just out of nostalgia. They have looked across the musical landscape and found a cast of artists who are very much like themselves."³⁹ Indeed, the biggest stars of New Country were middle-class boomers who had grown up during the cultural convulsions of the seventies. Many (if not most) were college graduates. Garth Brooks went to Oklahoma State University, where he was an avid fan of arena-rockers Kiss, Boston, Journey, and Styx. Before moving into country music in the eighties, Reba McEntire had "analyzed Mozart in every which way" while studying classical violin and piano at college.⁴⁰ Trisha Yearwood, a banker's daughter, became the first person with a music business degree to reach the top of the country charts.⁴¹ Mary Chapin Carpenter, a New Jersey native with a degree in American Civilization from Brown University, spiced her lyrics with

³⁵ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.230.

³⁶ Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p.65.

³⁷ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.230.

³⁸ Tannenbaum, "Country's New Gold Rush," *Rolling Stone* 628 (April 16, 1992), pp.16-17.

³⁹ Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p.63.

⁴⁰ Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p.63.

⁴¹ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.512.

sophisticated references to literature and art - a far cry from the "working-class poetry" of Merle Haggard songs like "I'm a Lonesome Fugitive." Unlike the "dropouts with prison records"⁴² who dominated country music in the seventies, the stars of New Country were urbane, educated, and middle-class, like Vince Gill, a golf fanatic who one reviewer described as looking "as if he stepped out of an L.L. Bean catalogue."⁴³ Rather than driving dusty pick-up trucks and raising hell, the country stars of the nineties "put Mercedes and Volvos in their videos and refer[ed] to wine and cafes as much as beer and honky-tonks."⁴⁴ Though they called it New Country, scholar Ken Tucker arrived at a more appropriate term for Nashville's new image: "yuppie-billy."⁴⁵

As important as the artists themselves in attracting the suburban, boomer audience, were their songs. Gone was the reactionary conservatism of seventies country music: the polemical redneck anthems, the odes to barefoot-and-pregnant housewives, the "in-your-face rebel flag waving"⁴⁶ of Neo-Confederate singers like Hank Williams Jr. and Charlie Daniels. New Country artists replaced the arch-conservatism of previous country music with more moderate politics, so moderate in fact, that Peter Applebome had to admit in 1996 that: "country at times these days feels vaguely, well, liberal."⁴⁷

The leading artist in New Country, Garth Brooks, epitomized the music's newfound liberal streak. In his songs, Brooks sang out against evils ranging from poverty and domestic violence, to racism and sexual discrimination. Discussing his song "Freedom of Choice"(1993), Brooks told the *New York Times*:

The song is about the choices people make, whether its partners taken in life by homosexuals, or interracial couples. I think the Republicans' big problem is that they believe family values are June and Walt and 2.3 children. To me...it means that if a set of parents are black or white, or two people of the same sex, or if one man or one woman acts as a parent, that the children grow up happy and healthy: that's what family values are.⁴⁸

Many other Brooks songs reflected his counter-conservative social conscience. "We

⁴² Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p.63.

⁴³ Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p.63.

⁴⁴ Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p.63.

⁴⁵ Ken Tucker, "The Old Sound of New Country," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.304.

⁴⁶ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.256.

⁴⁷ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.256.

⁴⁸ Watrous, "Seizing a Chance to Make Changes," *New York Times*, September 2, 1992, p. c15.

Shall Be Free"(1992) was a "plea for racial and sexual liberation,"⁴⁹ while the video "Change"(1995) juxtaposed graphic images of the Oklahoma City bombing with an impassioned Brooks (wrapped in the stars and stripes of course) calling for tolerance and implicitly indicting the right-wing, anti-government zealots who perpetrated the bombing. In "The Thunder Rolls"(1989), Brooks delivered so searing a message against spousal abuse (the victimized woman ends up murdering her abusive husband) that the video for it was banned by CMT.⁵⁰ Brooks also managed to push baby boomer buttons in "The Dance"(1989), the video for which featured newsreel clips of Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, racial violence in Birmingham, Nixon's resignation, and a host of other cliché images encapsulating the previous three decades of American history. The song was described by *Time* magazine as "a palliative for a generation that has begun to lick old wounds as it approaches middle age."⁵¹ With the refrain "I could have missed the pain / But I'd have had to miss the dance" Brooks touched a nostalgic nerve with baby boomers, those who had survived the chaos of the sixties and seventies, experienced (in some cases even caused) its upheavals, and for the pain and tumult of it all felt they had come through it on the upside.

And yet, even while he took up liberal causes, Brooks' image and music remained rooted in the kind of family-values conservatism identified with the Republican party. He sang about personal responsibility, about being a faithful husband and strong father. And despite the sex appeal built into his image, Brooks seemed rather traditional, perhaps even prudish on matters of sexuality. Combining these more traditional impulses with his empathy for mainstream liberal causes, Brooks managed to "project himself as a devoted family man who deeply identified with white, middle-class social concerns."⁵² As Curtis Ellison writes, these were "essential ingredients in his unprecedented appeal."⁵³

As the Garth Brooks phenomenon demonstrated (by 1997, Brooks had already

⁴⁹ Carr (ed.), *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, p.500.

⁵⁰ "Garth Brooks' Black Eye," *People* 35 (May 20, 1991), p. 93.

⁵¹ Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time* 139 (March 30, 1992), p.63.

⁵² Ellison, *Keeping Faith: Evangelical Performance in Country Music*, p.160.

⁵³ Ellison, *Keeping Faith: Evangelical Performance in Country Music*, p.165.

sold over a hundred million records), "you d[id]n't have to be a right-wing zealot"⁵⁴ to like New Country music. New Country managed to hold on to its traditional base of more conservative fans by remaining true to its family values orientation and remaining wrapped in a thick cloak of good old-fashioned patriotism, even while it embraced such un-conservative causes as racial equality, environmentalism, and even AIDS awareness.⁵⁵ Without question however, nineties country found itself furthest from the music's conservative tradition in its changed attitude toward women and in the emergence of truly liberated female singers.

"Independence Day"

In the early eighties, the country music female was still closely tied to the stereotype of dependence and weakness. In 1980, Crystal Gayle's number one hit "If You Ever Change Your Mind" depicted a woman so desperately weak that she was willing take back her errant man at any cost, despite his cheating and ill-treatment of her. In 1981, Janie Fricke sang "I'll Need Someone to Hold Me When I Cry," a tear-jerking anthem of female dependence that would have made Tammy Wynette proud. A decade later however, a new kind of strong and independent country female had emerged, "giving voice to higher expectations of male behavior than country music has conventionally expressed."⁵⁶ As country music scholar Karen Saucier Lundy wrote in 1992: "women performers and writers have begun questioning the authority of men and expressing dissatisfaction with their drinking, cheating, and outlaw behavior....Women are beginning to take the initiative in the sexual relationship and are even expressing an enjoyment of sex."⁵⁷

The first female country singer to meaningfully refashion the archetype of the country music female was Reba McEntire. Throughout the mid- and late-eighties, McEntire had been developing her image as a no-nonsense career woman unwilling to be held back by men. Building on the strides forward made by Dolly Parton, by the nineties, McEntire, along with artists like K.T. Oslin, had shattered the old stereotype

⁵⁴ Shewey, "America's New Honky-Tonk Heroes," *Harper's Bazaar* 120 (October 1987), p.284.

⁵⁵ Elliot, "The Country Music Industry Climbs on the Anti-AIDS Bandwagon," *New York Times*, August 24, 1993, p. d18.

⁵⁶ Ellison, *Keeping Faith: Evangelical Performance in Country Music*, p.151.

⁵⁷ Lundy, "Women and Country Music," pp.214-215.

of the country music female. Singing from the perspective of a career-minded business woman, and addressing issues ranging from wife-beating and prostitution to working women recovering from divorce and adult homemakers returning to college, McEntire's songs were characterized by a feisty confidence and independent spirit. "In the sixties and seventies," McEntire told an interviewer in 1992, "Loretta would sing a song like 'Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' With Lovin' On Your Mind,'" but nowadays I'll sing a song with a message like 'don't even consider coming home, because we're not gonna put up with it any longer'."⁵⁸ Indeed, in songs like "Take It Back"(1992) McEntire depicted women standing up to their men and issuing an ultimatum: either you change your ways or we're through. In "Is There Life Out There?"(1992) McEntire paid homage to women finding lives for themselves outside of traditional occupational and relationship roles. In "For My Broken Heart"(1992) she hailed the strength of women who get on with their lives despite broken relationships and continuing sexist barriers. In "short dramatic presentations about women's pride and the salvation of dignity through hard work and determination,"⁵⁹ McEntire's music videos were the hallmark of her feminist image. As she once told an interviewer: "I'm tryin' to sing songs for women, to say for them what they can't say for themselves."⁶⁰

But McEntire was also careful to stay within acceptable bounds for more traditionally-minded fans. "I quit wearing spandex pants," she told an interviewer in 1993, "I thought women might be offended by me walkin' out there in a pair of tight pants. So I went to western skirts and boots."⁶¹ With this good-old-girl image tempering her feminism, McEntire maintained and broadened her appeal among a diverse spectrum of fans. As Ken Tucker writes: "she hasn't alienated her audience by being 'too aggressive' or 'uppity'."⁶²

Following McEntire's lead were a host of other female singers singing about strong, independent women fed up with men. Patty Loveless, Loretta Lynn's cousin, expressed frustration and anger with men who take their "better halves" for granted in

⁵⁸ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.208.

⁵⁹ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.208.

⁶⁰ Bufwack, "Girls With Guitars - and Fringe and Sequins and Rhinestones, Silk, Lace, and Leather," p.207.

⁶¹ Bufwack, "Girls With Guitars - and Fringe and Sequins and Rhinestones, Silk, Lace, and Leather," p.207.

⁶² Ken Tucker, "The Old Sound of New Country," in: Lewis (ed.), *All That Glitters*, p.311.

"Blame It On Your Heart"(1993). In "Five Minutes"(1993), Lorrie Morgan sang "Lately you've forgotten what lovin' me's all about/ Now you've got five minutes to figure it out," as the song's female protagonist packs her bags in front of her "disbelievin'" man. Trisha Yearwood sang that she was looking for a man "who will cry on my shoulder" but won't "follow me around, while Martina McBride urged her female listeners to celebrate their own "Independence Day"(1994) by not putting up with domestic violence any longer. And Mary Chapin-Carpenter meditated on the problems of suburban married life when she sang about a disillusioned housewife who has decided to leave her insensitive husband - the man is so out of touch with his spouse's dissatisfaction that "He Thinks He'll Keep Her"(1994).

As in McEntire's case, these other strong country women of the nineties avoided taking their feminism too far. Before performing "Take It Like a Man" for a national television audience in 1993, Michelle Wright was careful to preface the song with the qualifier that this critique of insensitive men was "not a man-bashing song" but rather "a guideline for all you fellows out there."⁶³ The perils of taking feminism to too great an extreme were evident in the case of Canadian country singer k.d. Lang. Her songwriting abilities were hailed far and wide by critics, and many likened her smooth vocal style to Patsy Cline, but Lang's "overtly feminist point of view" proved a little too extreme for the mainstream country audience.⁶⁴ Lang seemed to cross the line in songs like "Nowhere to Stand," a salute to unwed motherhood, and "Big-Boned Girl," a straightforward discussion of female sexuality. Lang never achieved the superstar status that her talent might have warranted, remaining more of a "niche" singer playing to a specific and smaller market of fans. That she was an open lesbian and looked more like Johnny Cash than Dolly Parton also probably limited her appeal, for even though New Country women could be more defiant and liberated than their predecessors, hard bodies and sultry feminine sex appeal remained important factors in their success.

Some have argued that Lang's popularity was curtailed by the simple fact that she was not a southerner.⁶⁵ However, the case of fellow Canadian Shania Twain

⁶³ Ellison, *Keeping Faith: Evangelical Performance in Country Music*, p.151.

⁶⁴ Banca, "Dixie's Daughters: The Country Music Female," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote my Life*, p.108.

⁶⁵ Banca, "Dixie's Daughters: The Country Music Female," in: McLaurin and Peterson (eds.), *You Wrote my Life*, p.108.

dismisses this argument. Despite her non-southern background, Twain emerged in the mid-nineties as the biggest phenomenon in country music since Garth Brooks, thanks in large part "to her flat stomach and puckering bellybutton."⁶⁶ Appearing in her videos in oh-so-tight blue jeans, halter top, and cowboy hat, Twain unabashedly flaunted her sexuality, earning as many male as female fans. Twain also sang from the perspective of a strong, independent woman who would not put up with unsupportive, insensitive males. She reversed the typical scenario of the domestic male-female relationship, instructing her man in "Honey, I'm Home"(1997) to: "Pour me a cold one and oh, by the way/Rub my feet and gimme something to eat." In her musical persona, Twain set the pace for her relationships, rambling off a laundry list of qualifications that "Any Man of Mine"(1995) would need to have to satisfy her. In another song she advised men "If you're looking for a place in her heart/First you gotta learn to *listen*." Nevertheless, though her aggressive female persona helped draw many fans, her image as a first-rate sex symbol, a woman whose "feminism was softened by femininity"⁶⁷ was what drove her to the top of the country industry.

The changed persona of the country female in the nineties also impacted male-sung country music. New Country males seemed to be moved by the messages of their female counterparts, as well as by the nineties vogue toward personal responsibility and compassion on the part of husbands and fathers. As Curtis Ellison writes: "a trend of sensitive males devoted to women...emerged in the early 1990's as country music culture's leading masculine image."⁶⁸ In the previous decades, Conway Twitty had helped draw the outlines for this image of the sensitive country male, but it was Garth Brooks who brought it to its pinnacle, a fact which may have in part accounted for his phenomenal success. In addition to Brooks, many others cultivated images as sensitive, supportive men, including Clint Black, Vince Gill, and John Michael Montgomery, who scored a number one hit with "I Swear"(1993), in which he solemnly pledged to be an attentive husband and responsible father.

Country music also reached toward more enlightened views on gender issues by

⁶⁶ Feiler, "Country's New Women Find Fans Who Get It," *New York Times*, November 2, 1997, p. AR41.

⁶⁷ Feiler, "Country's New Women Find Fans Who Get It," *New York Times*, November 2, 1997, p. AR41.

⁶⁸ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.244.

developing interesting gender role reversals in the scenarios of their songs. This had begun early in the Reagan era when Conway Twitty's "Tight Fittin' Jeans"(1981) featured "a man pining over a woman who has used him for her own gratification...a novel experience for a man in country music."⁶⁹ Twitty recorded another classic sex-role reversal song called "I Want To Know You Before We Make Love"(1987), an uncharacteristic sentiment coming from a male, but a direct precursor of the "sensitive man love songs"⁷⁰ of the nineties.

The Amazing Rhythm Aces seemed to take a cue from Twitty with their song "Modern Day Romance"(1986), in which a man's car breaks down on the highway and he is picked up by a jet-setting woman who whisks him off to Reno for a whirlwind weekend of passionate love-making. The man wakes up on the third morning and discovers the woman gone, having left only a note saying "thanks for the memories." The man is hurt and does not know how to deal with the situation, lamenting only that this "modern-day romance" has caused him some "old-fashioned pain." Michael Martin Murphy's "Will It Be Love By Morning"(1984) also seemed drawn from Twitty's songbook. Here, a man is unsettled by the woman who he has picked up and had a one-night affair with. She tells him that not only will she have trouble respecting him, but she may not even remember him the next morning. Female artists too inverted gender roles and turned the sexual double-standard on its head, as Mindy McReady sang in "Guys Do It All the Time"(1996):

Will you bring me a cold one baby?, and turn on the TV
We'll talk about this later, there's a ballgame I want to see
Guys do it all the time, and you expect us to understand.
But when the shoes on the other foot, that's when it hits the fan.
Get over it honey, that's a two-way street, or you won't be a man of mine.
Sure, I had some beers with the girls last night, guys do it all the time.

These type of role reversals and the sensitive man testimonies of artists like Brooks, Black, and Montgomery reflected how far country music had come by the nineties from the weak women/macho men country songs of the sixties and seventies. Feminism had finally seeped its way into country music.

Nevertheless, the heightened stature and aggressiveness of women in nineties

⁶⁹ Rogers, *The Country Music Message: Revisited*, p.88.

⁷⁰ Ellison, *Keeping Faith: Evangelical Performance in Country Music*, p.152.

country music should not be overstated. Though women had a greater and more assertive presence in country music, they still faced challenges in the male-dominated world of Nashville. In 1991, thirty-six female artists secured country music recording contracts, while three times as many men were signed.⁷¹ In the following years, this disparity was corrected to some degree with the rise of female country sensations like Twain, Deanna Carter, Mindy McReady, and Leann Rimes, but nevertheless, the genre was "still virtually a 'boys club'."⁷² Of the seventy-seven people sitting on the CMA Board of Directors in 1996, only five were women.⁷³

"Rose Garden"

In the presidential election of 1992, as in previous years, both the candidates courted country music stars and the all-important votes of country fans. But this time, the "country music vote" was not a lock for the GOP, as it had been under Nixon and Reagan. The baby boomer converts to New Country had changed the nature of that vote, and as a result, created an opening for the "New" Democratic politics of Bill Clinton. Clinton had reformulated Democratic liberalism in the same way that country music had reformulated its inherent conservatism - each had moved away from extremes, toward a more moderate center, which, though animated by the conservative groundswells of the previous decades, was now tempered by the mild suburban liberalism of middle-aged voters. Clinton appealed to the "forgotten middle class" by mixing his sixties-born social conscience with some of the very issues that had driven the conservative ascendance: fiscal conservatism, family values, welfare reform, personal responsibility, and law and order.

In attempting to capture the country music vote, the Republican party had a major liability in 1992: George Bush. The patrician Bush not only "lack[ed] an instinctive understanding of his working- and lower-middle class base,"⁷⁴ but held little personal appeal to the baby boomers. Together, these two pillars of the country music audience were the key to the presidency in 1992.

⁷¹ Sanjek, "Blue Moon of Kentucky Rising Over the Mystery Train: The Complex Construction of Country Music," p.51.

⁷² Sanjek, "Blue Moon of Kentucky Rising Over the Mystery Train: The Complex Construction of Country Music," p.51.

⁷³ Applebome, *Dixie Rising*, p.258.

⁷⁴ Edsall and Edsall, "1992 Election Analysis," in *Chain Reaction*, p.2.

Inheriting Reagan's "top-down" voting coalition, Bush's path to victory relied on the ongoing Republican strategy of uniting wealthy and working-class Americans around the vilification of rights-oriented liberalism and elitist "tax-and-spend" Democratic policies. But after reneging on his promise of "no new taxes" and signing the controversial Civil Rights Act of 1991, Bush seemed as out-of-touch with ordinary voters as the two most notable casualties of Democratic presidential politics in the previous two decades, George McGovern and Michael Dukakis.⁷⁵ Little wonder then that Bush made an extra special effort to establish his credentials as a country music fan. If his actions in office had left him looking like less than a salt-of-the-earth, ordinary guy, perhaps his affection for fiddles and steel guitars would convince voters otherwise.

Bush let it "leak" to the press that he was a subscriber to *Country Music* magazine, and did an interview spot during the campaign on TNN's evening variety show *Nashville Now*. Throughout the campaign he engineered numerous photo-ops with conservative country stalwarts like Ricky Skaggs, Loretta Lynn, Lee Greenwood, the Judds, and Tanya Tucker (the latter two even performed at the 1992 GOP convention). And like Reagan before him, Bush used "God Bless the USA" (1984) as his campaign song, hoping to generate a GOP landslide on the basis of its ultra-patriotic lyrics:

If tomorrow all the things were gone I'd worked for all my life,
And I had to start again with just my children and my wife.
I'd thank my lucky stars to be living here today,
Cause the flag still stands for freedom, and they can't take that away.

I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free.
And I won't forget the men who died, who gave that right to me.
And I'd gladly stand up next to you and defend her still today,
Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land, God bless the USA.

Despite his efforts, Bush's purported love of country music "seemed mostly a marketing tactic."⁷⁶ His efforts to woo country stars and their fans were unconvincing at best, and disingenuous at worst. After attending the 1992 CMA awards at the Grand Ole Opry, in his official capacity as President and his unofficial one as an aspiring two-term, Bush was met by a backlash of hostility from some country stars. Rodney

⁷⁵ Edsall and Edsall, "1992 Election Analysis," in *Chain Reaction*, pp.2, 6-7.

⁷⁶ Pareles, "Pop Can Survive Almost Anything. But Respect?," *New York Times*, January 10, 1993, p. h27.

Crowell was particularly annoyed by Bush's cynical attempt to be identified with country music, and may have spoken for a number of country singers and fans when he indignantly told the *New York Times* that Bush had been wrong to think the country industry "would just turn our award ceremony into a campaign event for a guy who doesn't even talk about our problems."⁷⁷

If Bush seemed an unlikely fan of country music, Bill Clinton was just the opposite. As country music scholar John Morthland told the *New York Times*: "I'm pretty certain there has never been a presidential candidate that seems to spring more clearly from the world of country music than Bill Clinton."⁷⁸ But while Bush went out of his way to be identified with country music, Clinton made very little effort to do so. He did not have to - the fact that he was a southerner, a baby boomer, and a "New" Democrat with conservative politics was enough to put him in good stead with nineties country music fans and heartland voters.

Months before the election, political analyst William Schneider recognized that 1992 would be a watershed in American political history - it would be "the first election of the suburban century."⁷⁹ Schneider argued that demographic change had altered the realities of American politics, that the Republicans could no longer simply rely on implicit race-baiting and their quarter-century old southern strategy, as they had four years earlier. Schneider argued that the new key to American politics, in this election and those to follow, would be "a suburban strategy, which would target the so-called 'new collar' Baby Boom voters....They are relatively affluent and well educated. They tend to be fiscally conservative and socially liberal....They don't like racial politics. They are pro-choice on abortion. And they feel betrayed by George Bush on the economy."⁸⁰ It was with these voters that Clinton's hopes lay.

At the Democratic convention, Clinton set the tone for a campaign that would be characterized by the same impulses underlying New Country. In the strong language of an insurgent outsider, Clinton declared that he was "fed up with politicians in Washington lecturing the rest of us about 'family values.' Our families have values.

⁷⁷ Specter, "Crazy for Country Music: Do Republicans Hear the Words," *New York Times*, August 23, 1992, p.E3.

⁷⁸ Specter, "Crazy for Country Music: Do Republicans Hear the Words," *New York Times*, August 23, 1992, p.E3.

⁷⁹ Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *Atlantic Monthly* 270 (July 1992), p.33.

⁸⁰ Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *Atlantic Monthly* 270 (July 1992), p.42.

But our government doesn't. I want an America where family values live in our actions, not just in our speeches."⁸¹ These were ironic words from a man whose Presidency would be riddled with allegations of adultery and various other forms of misconduct. Nevertheless, Clinton's embrace of the "family values" mantle, hypocritical as it was, put him in step with the core country music audience, the suburban baby boomers and Reagan Democrats he hoped to woo back to the Democratic Party.

Clinton ended his convention speech by accepting the nomination "in the name of all the people who do the work, pay the taxes, raise the kids and play by the rules...the hard-working Americans who make up our forgotten middle class."⁸² Months later, *Rolling Stone* magazine described Garth Brooks' fans in language strikingly similar to that used by Clinton in describing his own constituents. In fact, the rock journal revealed even more about Clinton's targeted voters, describing Brooks' audience as:

The real forgotten middle class, the real people worried about family values....They are the people who worked hard and never complained, who went to church and trusted their leaders, who thought they knew the rules and believed that if they followed those rules, their lives would get better. They are neither oppressed minorities, whose needs have been etched into the nation's consciousness, nor members of the ruling elite, born with their hands on the reins of power."⁸³

Clinton's other showcase issues - welfare reform, law and order, the economy, education - also resonated with the sensibilities of New Country fans. Welfare reform especially highlighted the similarities between Clinton and the country music ethos. As journalists Thomas and Mary Edsall wrote: "welfare appeared to many voters to institutionalize worklessness, family pathology...illegitimacy, criminality, drug abuse, and long-term dependency."⁸⁴ Country music culture had always been critical of these kind of dysfunctions, standing instead for the values of hard work, independence, family integrity, personal responsibility, and honest living. Clinton's strong stand on law and order also struck a chord with New Country fans, many of whom had moved to suburbs in search of safe streets and secure neighborhoods in which to raise their

⁸¹ "Transcript of Speech By Clinton Accepting Democratic Nomination," *New York Times*, July 17, 1992, p.A14.

⁸² "Transcript of Speech By Clinton Accepting Democratic Nomination," *New York Times*, July 17, 1992, p.A14.

⁸³ DeCurtis, "Opinion," *Rolling Stone* 644 (November 26, 1992), p.23.

⁸⁴ Edsall and Edsall, "1992 Election Analysis," in *Chain Reaction*, p.3.

children.

It was Clinton's personal campaign style however which most resembled the down-to-earth populism of country music culture. As Curtis Ellison writes:

Clinton's key strategic move to impress American voters with his sincerity and personal touch was taken directly from the playbook of country music stars - a six-day bus tour of 1,000 miles through seven states from New York City to St. Louis immediately after his nomination. The bus tour was a glad-handing, quick-stop-touch-the-people affair that at least outwardly paralleled artist-fan interaction in country music culture. Coupled with his campaign pitch for restoring family values and lifting tax burdens from the 'middle class,' Clinton was moving effectively in the same terrain as Nashville entrepreneurs.⁸⁵

Indeed, and while Clinton never came right out with a stirring endorsement of country music, he helped show the public in subtle, indirect ways that his cultural compass pointed toward Nashville. The same note of nostalgia for classic rock that New Country music struck with baby boomers was communicated through Clinton's publicized affection for Elvis Presley, and his use of Fleetwood Mac's soft-rock seventies anthem "Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow"(1978) as his campaign song. Along with his belief in family values, safe streets, and middle-class tax relief, Clinton's nostalgia for classic rock resonated with suburban New Country converts, who could safely assume that if he liked Fleetwood Mac and the King, then he must like Garth and Reba.

The combination of idealism, tolerance, and social liberalism with which Clinton balanced his "New" Democratic conservatism further exhibited his synergy with the inclusive, socially conscious New Country personified by Garth Brooks. On women's issues especially, the Clinton campaign and New Country seemed to come from the same feminist point of view. As an assertive career woman herself, Hillary Clinton measured up with the new, independent, professional women of New Country. The First Lady-in-waiting even risked alienating more traditionally-minded country fans by criticizing Tammy Wynette's anti-feminist anthem "Stand By Your Man" for encouraging female dependence. Though she later apologized for her impolitic slight of country music's first lady, her criticism was not out of step with the new feminist perspective animating New Country.

The symmetry between Bill Clinton's "New" Democratic politics and the ethos of New Country helped explain the outcome of the 1992 election. The "liberalizing"

⁸⁵ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p.233.

impulses of New Country were matched by "conservatizing" impulses on the part of Clinton - each was a result of the recognition that there was a new center in American political culture. It was a center that had been pushed to the right over the previous decades, but which had been tentatively pulled back toward the left by the new demographic logic of American society, which had put suburban voters and baby boomers in the driver's seat of American politics. With his campaign "aimed squarely at the suburban middle class,"⁸⁶ Clinton's victory had, as *New York Times* music critic Jon Pareles argued, paralleled the rise of Nashville in the nineties.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *Atlantic Monthly* 270 (July 1992), p.42.

⁸⁷ Pareles, "Pop Can Survive Almost Anything. But Respect?," *New York Times*, January 10, 1993, p. h27.

CONCLUSION

The rise of New Country in the nineties, and its convergence with the dominant social, political, economic, and demographic trends of the late twentieth-century brought country music to the apex of American culture. Country had truly become America's music. But, as *Rolling Stone's* Don McLeese asked in 1992: "Did Nashville's cross-over dreams come true at the expense of its soul?"¹

Ever since Chet Atkins' "compromise" and the advent of the "Nashville Sound," purist partisans of traditional country music had lamented that the urge for mainstream respect and financial success would deplete the music of its identity. These concerns continued to mount in the nineties, as country fused ever-more indistinguishably with rock, pop, and folk. By the mid-nineties, practically any rock or pop recording could get airplay on country radio simply by adding a chorus of steel guitar or by clothing the artist in a cowboy hat. In an article written at the height of "Garthmania" in late 1994, Tony Scherman spoke on behalf of many traditionally-minded country fans:

Country music has spread....from margins to mainstream, from regional to national, from ridiculed stepchild to full legitimacy in the family of American music. But the price of its acceptance has been the music's pungency - more, its very identity. To write a history of country music in 1994 is, intriguingly but sadly, to write more than a mere history-up-to-now, with the present as an arbitrary terminus; it means writing a self-enclosed chronicle, a story with an end.²

While many might have agreed with Scherman's hyperbole, his dire pronouncement was no doubt an exaggeration. Certainly the country music of the nineties bore little resemblance to that of the sixties. But then again, the country music of the sixties was quite different from that of the twenties and thirties. Evolution and change have always been significant characteristics of country music over its long history. Country's "dynamic ability to keep in tune with changing tastes, technologies, and times"³ is in fact one of its defining characteristics.

Observers like Scherman, who hear in nineties country music the death of the form, are not listening carefully enough. While the instrumentation, production values, and musical stylings have undergone major changes over the past decades, there still has remained one consistent element in country music: its values. Despite the insurgence of

¹ McLeese, "Country," *Rolling Stone* 645/646 (December 10-24, 1992), p.75.

² Scherman, "Country," *American Heritage* 45 (November 1994), p.39.

³ Charles F. Gritzner, "Country Music: A Reflection of Popular Culture," p. 858.

feminist perspectives and a social conscious, the lyrical content of the music still remains tied to the same core of values that have always been its essence: love, home, family, religion, patriotism, and freedom. And even though country has broadened its appeal in order to reach out to a younger and more middle-class audience, it has done so without sacrificing its essentially working-class perspective. In fact, middle-class patrons of New Country are perhaps made more receptive to the music as a result of socioeconomic pressures which have put them in a similar position to that of country's traditional fan base. One of the recurring catchphrases of the nineties has been the "shrinking middle-class." With economic change transforming the American economy, and the disparity between America's haves and have-nots increasing, middle-class Americans can better identify with the feeling that they work harder and get less for their efforts. Like the traditional partisans of country music, America's shrinking middle-class identifies increasingly with the "working man's blues." For those challenged or displaced by the socioeconomic changes of the late-twentieth century, "country music culture offers one path to a sense of identity."⁴

* * *

"Country music," writes Charles Gritzner, "serves as a barometer for certain aspects of American popular culture. As the mood of the nation changes, country music adapts to express popular opinion quite accurately."⁵ Indeed, the history of country music over the postwar period reads as a poignant cultural reflection of the social, political, and economic changes of the same era. As the nation's political climate grew increasingly polarized in the sixties, so too did its popular music. While rock, folk, and soul spoke for civil rights activists, feminists, the counterculture, and war protestors, country music alone stood up for "traditional" values and the nobility of hard work, family integrity, and patriotism. As southern-styled political conservatism (in the personage of leaders like George Wallace and Richard Nixon) gained converts across the nation, the "silent majority" of middle- and working-class Americans galvanized a backlash against the forces of disruption and disloyalty. By turning to the conservative, southern sound of country music, middle America registered a cultural protest against the forces of domestic

⁴ Ellison, *Country Music Culture*, p. xxiii.

⁵ Gritzner, "Country Music: A Reflection of Popular Culture," p.858.

insurrection, adopting as their own the good old-fashioned Americanism of the South.

As socioeconomic and political developments transformed the nation throughout the seventies and beyond, country music's growing popularity opened "a revealing window on a nation that culturally and demographically continue[d] to move South and West."⁶ In the mid-seventies and eighties, while the Sunbelt emerged as the new locus of America's politics, economy, and culture, country music spread across America at a blistering pace, influencing major trends in popular culture and playing a significant role, at least symbolically, in the increasingly conservatized national political culture. With its decidedly anti-liberal posture, and God-bless-America mystique, country music provided the soundtrack to the conservative insurgence that culminated with the election of Ronald Reagan, and continued to reverberate long after.

The emergence of New Country in the nineties signalled an ideological broadening of country music's audience, as baby boomers and American youth gravitated toward the newest hybrid country sound. Yet even while country superstars attracted their new fans with a more moderate conservatism and a nostalgic musical aesthetic modelled on the classic rock sounds of the seventies, the music continued to represent "family values" and the kind of suburban, middle-of-the-road, middle-class conservatism that elevated Bill Clinton to the White House. Country music's complete conquest of America by the late twentieth-century was but one component of the South's emergence from its dark past to become the leader of the nation. While Americans from New York City to Los Angeles listened to country music, southern-styled conservatism set the tone for the nation's political dialogue, and southerners held nearly every significant post in American government. At the same time, the Sunbelt economy lay at the heart of America's economic renaissance, while the nation's major population growth was focused south of the Mason-Dixon line and west of the Mississippi. America had truly been southernized.

* * *

"Too often," writes Kenneth Bindas, "popular music is ignored by teaching professionals."⁷ Indeed, the study of popular music in the context of broader social and political developments holds an important key for understanding history. It is not enough

⁶ Applebome, "Country Music Boom Has Nashville Dancing," *New York Times*, September 29, 1993, p. A14.

⁷ Bindas, "Preface," in: Bindas (ed.), *America's Musical Pulse*, p.ix.

to examine politicians, leaders, parties, and social movements, for in the realm of popular culture we discover a great deal more that can help shape our understanding of the past, as well as the present and future. By studying modern country music we discern a great deal about the history and nature of one of the most significant forces shaping the last half-century of American history, the modern conservative ascendance. In the sound of country music we can hear far more than guitars, fiddles, and tear-jerking voices. We can hear the sounds of pride, prejudice, war, social conflict, economic insecurity, and political upheaval. In short, we can hear the forces of history at work. All we need to do is listen.

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