"I LOVE THIS BAR": WORKING CLASS EXPRESSION THROUGH KARAOKE SONG SELECTION

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A Thesis

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This thesis probes the meaning and processes of karaoke song selection at Whiskey Dick’s, a working-class bar in Bowling Green, Ohio. Through research, observations, and interviews conducted from 2005 to 2006, it examines how working-class identity manifests itself in karaoke song selection.

As part of positioning the author into the study, I introduce my own background and discuss my history with both karaoke music and working-class culture. An analysis of a single night at Whiskey Dick’s creates a framework for specific observations and gives the reader greater context, while the lengthy ethnography provides for more generalized observations.

In interviews and discussions with the singers I attempt to uncover the meaning behind each song selected, discovering how conscious singers are of their choices. For some participants my research eventually impacted how they pick songs thus raising issues of intrusion by the ethnomusicologist. I examine several of the most popular songs at Whiskey Dick’s and analyze the lyrics of each, focusing on class representation within the lyrics. In addition, the difficulties of speaking about music and our musical preferences are explored and discussed in reference to the singers at Whiskey Dick’s.
This thesis is dedicated to everyone who enjoys making music a part of life.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of the people in my life who have supported me and who continue to inspire me. To my parents: Thank you for always supporting me even when you didn’t agree with my decisions, for exposing me to so much music early in life, and for allowing me to pursue my dreams. To my colleague Sidra Lawrence: thank you for always pushing me to do my best and not letting me give up when the seas got rough. You have been an inspiration to me.

Thank you to all of the musicians I’ve played with over the years, and especially to Chad, Liz, and Julio, without whom I wouldn’t be the musician I am today. Thank you to all of the teachers I have had over the years. To Dr. Cornelius: thank you for literally showing me the world; I will never see it the same way again. To Dr. Harnish: thank you for your infinite patience and commitment to me. I have not always been the ideal student but you have always supported and guided me, I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you. Finally, thank you to Whiskey Dick’s and all of the people there who have helped me with this project. It wouldn’t be possible without you.
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Figure 1: Sign in front of Whiskey Dick’s
Figure 2: Entrance to Whiskey Dick’s
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Figure 4: The stage area
Figure 5: Songs with artist and genre
It’s a little before midnight on a Sunday evening in a bar on the south side of small midwestern city in northern Ohio. Cigarette smoke hangs thick in air while two men are called up to the stage. Easily in their sixties, the two men have been sitting at the end of the bar together drinking domestic draught beer from their mugs. Taking their mugs with them, the two men ascend to the stage while the opening notes to “Pancho and Lefty” fill the air. It’s a Townes Van Zandt song, but these men are performing the Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard duet version. Outlaws. And proud of it. Neither man can sing in tune but this doesn’t seem to bother them or the audience that cheers enthusiastically. Not really sure where one singer is supposed to leave off and the other begin, there are overlaps in their singing. As they sing, one man puts his arm around the other’s shoulder and they sway back and forth. Obviously drunk, they nearly fall over while swaying. As the song gets to Lefty leaving for Ohio, the crowd cheers to show support for their home state. Around the bar the other patrons, most of whom are half the age of the singers, smile at each other and at the men on stage. The two old friends finish the song, give each other a handshake, and make their way back to their seats at the bar, receiving pats on the back and comments of “good job” along the way from the audience. Back on their stools, where they will remain until the bar closes at 2:00 a.m., the men light cigarettes and resume their conversation as the next singer takes the stage.
INTRODUCTION

The Thesis

For well over a year I have been attending, observing, and participating in karaoke nights at Whiskey Dick’s bar in Bowling Green, Ohio. I originally attended not because I wished to do research, but as an escape from the worlds of the academy, graduate school, the city, and of the elitism that I perceived in that side of town. I wanted to feel like I was back in my small rural hometown with the kind of people I grew up with.

The more I attended karaoke nights at Whiskey Dick’s, the more I began to feel that what was going on was important. I could see people expressing their emotions, morals, beliefs, loves, and fears through the songs that they were singing. Whether they sang well or poorly seemed to matter little to the crowd gathered around, and poor singers would frequently get more applause and cheers than good singers. I became deeply interested in how the songs that people chose reflected their identity as working-class citizens, as well as how people were aware of the choices they were making.

This thesis attempts to answer some of these questions through a combination of observations at the bar, interviews with participants and audiences, and analyses of some of the most popular songs in order to gain a better understanding of how song selection in karaoke music can be a direct reflection of class.

Outline of Chapters

In Chapter one I first explore my personal background and experiences that led me to be interested in this kind of research. I examine how my hometown and childhood experiences influenced my perspective on class in America. I look at the karaoke communities that I was first
a part of and examine their importance to me. The field site, Whiskey Dick’s bar in Bowling
Green, Ohio, is then introduced and discussed.

Chapter two gives a brief history of the technology of karaoke singing and its
dissemination around the world. Chapter three attempts to recreate a single karaoke night at the
bar for the reader. From the setup to the last call, I wish to give the reader an idea of the entire
experience, including the people, the music, and the atmosphere.

From the information gleaned from interviews and conversations with singers, I examine
in chapter four how self-aware the singers are of their decisions. I also talk with the DJ about his
experiences and observations and take a look at my influence as a researcher on the singers’
decisions.

In Chapter five I look at the lyrics of four of the most popular songs at Whiskey Dick’s -
“I Love This Bar,” “Redneck Woman,” “Don’t Take the Girl,” and “Goodbye Earl” - analyzing
how class and class culture are represented in each one. Finally, I present my conclusions in
chapter six.
CHAPTER 1
MY LIFE, KARAOKE, AND WHISKEY DICK’S

My Life

The assertion that “All ethnomusicological research is partial, but some is more obviously partial than others”¹ (Gourlay, 1978) can certainly be applied to this study. My background with both karaoke music and working-class culture has no doubt given me personal biases that affect my research, and in turn, my conclusions. At the same time, it is my hope that my background will allow me to interpret my findings in an original way. In order for the reader to understand my personal biases and reasons for going into this project, I would like to begin with a brief personal history.

I was raised in the small rural town of East Bloomfield in the Finger Lakes region of New York State. The school district I attended consisted of four towns: East Bloomfield, West Bloomfield, Ionia, and Bristol, together giving a total of about 520 students in the school, grades 7-12. The demographics of these towns varied. Traditionally agricultural townships, with Rochester only a forty-minute drive away, there were a number of commuting professionals with middle and upper-middle class households who were starting to live in the area by the mid-1990s when I was in high school. This population has continued to expand dramatically in the past decade. The only major employer inside East Bloomfield was (and still is) the Crossman Air Gun factory.

Kids growing up in Bloomfield tended to think in one of two ways concerning the town: you either resented having to grow up somewhere with no movie theatre, arcade, national-chain

restaurants or stores, businesses open after 9:00 p.m., and only one stoplight, or, you took immense pride in your small town “redneck” status. While I grew up in a middle-class family (father a music teacher, mother a music therapist turned nurse), most of my friends were from working-class families and I spent a large part of my youth associating with farmers, mechanics, factory workers, and the children of all of the above.

In a large way I bought into the ideal of the working-class. Long a history buff, I remember once thinking, while helping to load a truck of hay, that life in Bloomfield was the Jeffersonian America in perfect focus: a small town of agrarian land-owners making ends meet. Whether my parents were working-class or not, through my teenage years I made sure to play the part. My friends and I spent our time working on cars, riding dirt bikes, hunting and fishing; I drove a pick-up truck, I smoked Marlboros, wore work boots, carried a Zippo and a pocketknife, thought politically conservatively, and, when the weekends would arrive, my friends and I would gather around a bon-fire in the middle of a field somewhere for the express purpose of getting drunk on Genesee beer, the staple cheap regional beer for Western New Yorkers.

The romanticization of working-class culture extended into the musical realm as well. By the eighth grade I had begun to listen to country music (neither of my parents can tolerate country music and I was not exposed to it through them) and by my sophomore year of high school, I had become interested in folk and bluegrass music and had started learning the guitar in addition to studying the trumpet. By my junior year of high school, I had started the habit of bringing a guitar to the weekend gatherings of my friends. While a variety of songs were sung, themes and sentiments generally reflected the cultural values of the people I associated with. Particular favorites included Kenny Roger’s “The Gambler” and Tennessee Ernie Ford’s “16 Tons,” one of the greatest working-class songs of all time. Even a song like Ricky Nelson’s
“Garden Party,” a song in no way inherently working-class, would be turned into just that as everyone would join in and sing “if memories were all I sang, I’d rather drive a truck.” A single line was enough for us to claim the song as “ours.”

Karaoke

While I was aware of karaoke, and had witnessed it once in Junior High (1994 or 1995), my first real experiences with it occurred in the summers of 2001 and 2002 while working as the cook at Camp Babcock-Hovey, a Boy Scout camp in Ovid, New York. Less than a mile from the camp entrance was a bar known as The Getaway, which featured karaoke on Thursday nights, and during those two summers the older camp staff would walk there to sing every week. Besides the camp staff in the summer, The Getaway was mainly frequented by area farmers and by the staff of the two state prisons located in the town. During the summer of 2002 there were also a large number of construction workers who were working on building a new prison on the former Seneca Army Depot just outside of town.

Before my experiences at The Getaway, I could not understand the appeal of singing karaoke. It seemed like having complete amateurs get up and sing in public would do little more than annoy the audience and make fools of themselves. After a couple of weeks of attendance, my outlook changed. I began to notice that many of the patrons came out every week and that singing karaoke frequently with the same people actually built us all into a single community. Instead of wondering whether the person getting up to sing was “good” or “bad,” you began to wonder, what are they going to sing this week?

As I started singing karaoke myself, I realized that choosing what song to sing is probably the hardest part of singing karaoke. You have to pick a song that you know well, it has
to be in a comfortable singing range, and, perhaps most importantly, you have to agree with what it is saying. I began to notice that people generally sang songs that reflected their own lifestyle, age, and belief system (both cultural and/or religious). Though most of the people were essentially strangers, I felt like I knew many of them because week after week I heard them sing. The more songs I heard someone sing, the better I felt that I knew them.

When I moved to Bowling Green, Ohio, to start work on my master’s degree I had not been involved with a karaoke community for several years. In Bowling Green many of the bars have karaoke during the week, but in the college bars I did not get the same sense of community that had existed at The Getaway. Feeling a bit homesick for my working-class roots one Sunday night, I decided to walk from my apartment away from the college-centered downtown bars to the outskirts and made my way to Whiskey Dick’s (then Checker’s). I had never been to this bar before but had heard that it was strictly a place for locals and the working-class. Making my way inside I was immediately comforted by the atmosphere and was reminded of both The Getaway and several of the bars in my hometown. The people singing karaoke seemed genuinely supportive of each other and I felt the sense of community that was missing from my other Bowling Green karaoke experiences.

Subsequent trips confirmed that this was a community similar to the one I had experienced at The Getaway. I began to wonder how the choice of songs reflected each individual. How conscious of their song choices were the patrons? Did they intend to pick songs that reflected their lives? How did their status as working-class play into the sense of community and was this sense of community connected to their musical selections?
Whiskey Dick’s

Located at 809 South Main Street, Whiskey Dick’s is nestled between a small used car dealership and an abandoned filling station surrounded by a half-dozen decomposing cars from the forties and fifties, relics of a bygone era when industry sustained this area of the Midwest and cities like Toledo, Ohio and Flint, Michigan held the promise of good paying blue collar jobs. Now, the cars sit in front of an old garage, each one a rusty American dream. In the front window of the bar, a Miller Genuine Draft sign in the shape of an electric guitar glows neon and beckons to those who pass by.

FIGURE 1.
Sign in front of Whiskey Dick’s:
The entrance to the bar is at the rear of the building, where the small gravel parking lot holds the patrons’ vehicles. Upon entering Whiskey Dick’s, it takes a minute for your eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. Other than a single strip of lights behind the bar so that the bartenders can see, all light in the bar comes from neon signs, the beer lights over the three pool tables and the shuffleboard table, and the lights above the stage. The floor is linoleum and looks like a giant checkerboard with black and white spaces. It is from this floor that I presume the bar had taken its former name, Checker’s.

FIGURE 2.
Entrance to Whiskey Dick’s:

As you enter there are two pool tables on the left and two video slot machines on the right. Beyond the slot machines (a recent addition with the change of management) along the right side is the simple bar, approximately twenty feet long. A touch-screen game of the type
found in many establishments adorns the far end of the bar. Behind it are two rows of liquor bottles and several shelves, one of which holds a thirteen-inch television, the only television in the establishment that is used to watch TV. There are two video monitors located in the stage area, but these are used solely for karaoke. The presence of only one television sets the bar in opposition to the status quo in Bowling Green, where the vast majority of drinking establishments have their walls and ceilings lined with televisions.

FIGURE 3.
Just inside the door to Whiskey Dick’s:

There are seven beers on tap behind the bar: Miller Lite, Blue Moon, Coors Light, Labatt Blue, Budweiser, Bud Light, and Guinness. Though two of the beers are imported (Labatt from Canada, Guinness from the U.K.), there is an even heavier emphasis on domestic brands in the signs that adorn the room: Michelob Ultra, Budweiser, Coors Light, Great Lakes Brewing Company, and Bud Light. There are two non-beer signs, one for Jack Daniel’s and another for
Red Bull. One Labatt Blue sign is the only representation of a “foreign” brand, and given our relatively close proximity to Canada’s Ontario Province where it is brewed, it would probably be better classified as a regional beer instead of an import.

This emphasis on domestic alcohol brands is symbolic of greater trends in Whiskey Dick’s. Strong feelings of patriotism and national pride are expressed again and again at the establishment, whether it is in alcohol choice, the brand of car or truck in the parking lot, or the music that is being played. Most of the patrons I have talked to are ardent supporters of the Iraq war, and many have friends and family in the military or are veterans themselves. The continuous string of patriotic hit country songs since 9/11 by artists like Toby Keith and Darryl Worley has provided a number of favorites for the karaoke crowd at Whiskey Dick’s.

Beyond the bar along the right wall is a shuffleboard table, one of the two lights over it hanging broken. Along the back wall is the DJ (Disc Jockey) booth; next to it is a slightly raised area that was formally the stage. Now it houses a pool table, lit by a large glass Camel Light light fixture. Making the turn to the left wall is where the new stage is, still facing the old dance floor. The stage is nothing other than a raised floor with two microphones on stands in the middle of it. The dance floor has a handful of colored lights shining down and a mirror-ball spinning in the middle. Strangely, however, there is no spotlight to shine on the mirror-ball so spin is all it does, without ever throwing off a speck of reflected light.

While the stage was moved from the back wall to the back part of the left wall, the P.A. speakers were not; these remain located on the ceiling by the dance floor pointed towards the entrance of the establishment. This creates a somewhat odd experience when singing because both speakers are on your left hand side shooting their sound from left to right. The speaker closest to the singer can be heard adequately, but the other channel is almost impossible to hear.
There are no other monitors or aids for the singers. The monitor that is used for the karaoke lyrics hangs from the ceiling several feet in front of the stage. One other monitor is at the opposite end of the dance floor projecting the lyrics out towards the patrons at the bar.

FIGURE 4. The stage area, note the speaker above the singer’s head:

Next to the stage along the left wall are two tables followed by four booths. The booths were added with the change of ownership and subsequent renovation. Each booth has a small, decorative light hanging down from the ceiling throwing off barely enough light to see your drink. Very modern in design, these small lights look extremely out of place and seem like a desperate grasp to make the bar “nicer.” Working our way past the booths along the left wall, we make it to the two pool tables that were initially on our left upon entering.
In the center of the room are two island tables of bar height and with bar stools, each one seating about eight people. At the end of one of the islands is a large (60 gallon?) wooden barrel on end with a large plastic bowl of peanuts on it. Strewn around the checkered floor lays the shells of said peanuts along with cigarette butts, despite the fact that there is an ashtray on every bar, table, and booth throughout the entire room.
CHAPTER 2
WHAT IS THAT SOUND? A BRIEF HISTORY OF KARAOKE

Origins

Many different accounts on the origins of karaoke exist. Discrepancies between sources frequently stem from different definitions of what is or is not karaoke. Toru Mitsui outlines the development of the recording technology needed to bring karaoke into existence. As early as 1967 the record store Yamachiku, in Kanazawa, Ishikawa, produced “music-minus-one” singles, in which the vocal track was missing, and distributed them in co-operation with Japan Victor to clubs outfitted with Victor jukeboxes on which Yamachiku would install a microphone.\(^2\) This was not an entirely new idea, as such recordings had been made for instrumentalists since 1953.\(^3\)

By 1972 both Columbia and Victor developed technology that allowed for the alteration of vocal tracks on recordings, Columbia with its “voice-changer” and Victor with its “Vocaless-function.” Other accounts of the “origins” of karaoke frequently involve not commercial recording companies but single individuals. Nightclub owner Seiji Kawabata recorded a pianist playing a number of accompaniments so that patrons could sing along with the tape in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Initially the lyrics were printed in a volume published by a music publisher, but eventually Kawabata attempted to photograph the lyrics and project them on a screen, somewhat foreshadowing the later years of televised lyrics.\(^4\)


\(^4\) Mitsui. 37.
In 1971, in Kobe, Hyogo, Daisuke Inoue and five other musicians/colleagues recorded accompaniment tracks for a business owner who wished to entertain his employees on a recreation trip with his singing. Mitsui contends that Inoue is “the person presumed to have recorded commercial accompaniment music for amateurs on tape for the first time.”

There are various stories on the origins of karaoke from different popular sources. The online newsletter www.karaokescene.com gives the following “legend”:

It is now widely recognized that the use of karaoke started at a snack bar in Kobe City. It is said that when a strolling guitarist could not come to perform at the bar due to illness or other reasons, the owner of the bar prepared tapes of accompaniment recordings, and vocalists enjoyed singing to the tapes. Even though it is only legend, this might have been the beginning of karaoke, and since then, karaoke has been commercialized and has become popular all over Japan.5

It is suffice to say, that, through the development of recording technology through the late 1960s and early 1970, and the diffusion of that technology to the consumer market, karaoke was a natural development for all sorts of different people to sing or play along with their favorite song. By the early 1980s a large variety of karaoke machines were available, designed for spaces from large clubs to family living rooms. By the late 1980s, Japanese karaoke manufacturers were exporting karaoke machines and tapes, initially to diasporic populations of Japanese office workers.6 By 1990 karaoke was becoming common in bars in American cities. It soon disseminated into just about every type of bar in every region of the country.

**Around the World**

How people view and participate in karaoke varies and depends greatly on context and location. Rob Drew, in *Karaoke Nights*, discusses how performers at large karaoke bars in major

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5 Ibid. 37.
7 Mitsui. 42.
cities hope to be “discovered” and spend time practicing at home. Casey Man Kong Lum has discussed how Chinese Americans use karaoke to construct and maintain identity. William Kelly has examined karaoke in the United Kingdom, Paolo Prato in Italy, and Johan Fornas has looked at Swedish forms of karaoke.

Differences in karaoke performance and perception can be both great and small. For example, when I relate to other Americans that it is becoming increasingly common for taxis in Japan to have karaoke machines in them, I am usually met with astonishment. “Why would anyone want to sing karaoke in a taxi?” is the usual response. Indeed, it is hard for most Americans who sing karaoke to imagine doing so without the lowering of inhibitions caused by alcohol consumption. Yet even inside a town such as Bowling Green, Ohio, with a generally homogeneous population, there are noticeable differences in how karaoke is performed, what songs are sung, and audience response. While karaoke as a medium for singing can be transported, exchanged, dispersed or otherwise spread, at the root of all performances is what is at the root of all musical performances: people. As Ogawa correctly asserts, “the repertoire of karaoke depends on the locality. Japan cannot export songs for karaoke. The technology of karaoke is global, but karaoke will sink its roots into each local culture and grow differently.”

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Tracking the growth of karaoke in the United States is difficult as there are few ways to record how many people or bars are participating. In the 1990s researchers followed sales of karaoke machines to try to gain some idea, but with downloadable karaoke even that is not an accurate gauge. Despite not really arriving in the United States until the early nineties, its rise into the collective conscious of the country happened quickly. Karaoke began appearing in mainstream popular media as early as 1996 in “The Cable Guy.” It has also appeared in movies such as “My Best Friend’s Wedding,” “Rush Hour 2,” “High School Musical,” and “Lost in Translation.” It is central to the plot of the 2000 movie “Duets,” in which the characters embark on a road trip to a national karaoke competition.\(^\text{14}\)

Indeed, karaoke competitions have sprouted up everywhere in the last decade and there are now competitions on every level from the very local (say, inside a single bar) to the Karaoke World Championships, held since 2003 by the KWC Organization Ltd. based in Finland.\(^\text{15}\) A simple Google search for “Karaoke Competition” at the time of this writing produces well over 58,000 hits. Without the rise in popularity of karaoke and karaoke competitions, it is unlikely that shows like “American Idol” would ever have developed.

Most people I have talked to about their initial impression of karaoke describe thinking of it as hokey, silly, or just plain stupid. I remember my own first experience with karaoke at a junior high school dance in 1994 or 1995, at which a handful of girls sang a few songs and the rest of the time the DJ just played music because everyone else refused to sing. My friends and I sat on the bleachers at the edge of the gym where the dance was being held and made fun of anyone who attempted to sing. While this was the first time I had seen karaoke, I was already aware of it.

\(^\text{15}\) [http://www.kwc.fi/index.htm](http://www.kwc.fi/index.htm) accessed 11/23/06
Because of changes of ownership, bartenders, and DJs, no one can tell me exactly when Whiskey Dick’s (or Checkers as it would have been named) started having karaoke. Most of the regular patrons estimate three or four years ago, though some have said five or six years and a few have said two or three. It is now held on Sunday and Tuesday nights because these are traditionally the slowest nights of the week at the bar and karaoke helps to bring people in. Since it is on Sunday and Tuesday, karaoke has not had an effect on live music on weekends at Whiskey Dick’s. At other establishments, having karaoke has had a marked impact on scheduled entertainment programs, even within the city of Bowling Green itself.16

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16 As recently as the spring of 2006 Grumpy Dave’s Pub ceased having bands on Saturdays in order to have karaoke, claiming that the cover charge ($3.00) was driving customers away and that the karaoke was less of a hassle.
CHAPTER 3.
A NIGHT AT THE BAR

To gain a better understanding of Whiskey Dick’s, I will attempt to recreate a single night at the bar. Karaoke is held at Whiskey Dick’s on every Sunday and Tuesday evening beginning at 10:00 p.m. What follows is a present-tense account of the evening of September 12, 2006, from my arrival prior to the karaoke until its completion early the following morning.

I arrive at the bar around 9:45 p.m. and position myself where I will be able to see both the stage and one of the two monitors oriented to allow the audience to follow along. I am the only person in the bar positioned to watch the karaoke. When I initially enter, there are about thirty people in the bar. One man and two women, all in their late twenties or early thirties, are playing pool at the front table by the stage. At the shuffleboard table, a late middle-aged man is playing with a much younger man, probably around twenty years old. The back pool tables are occupied by 10-12 people, mostly women, some over twenty-one and some with their hands marked to signify that they are underage. Eight people sit at the bar being served by Nicole, the bartender. The DJ is turning on the televisions, setting up the two microphones, and preparing the DJ booth for the night of karaoke ahead.

At 9:55 the announcement is given that karaoke will start in ten minutes, and the songbooks and song request forms are placed out on tables. The jukebox is switched off at 10:00, and Toby Keith’s “I Love this Bar” begins to loudly play through the P.A. (public address) system. At 10:04 “Carrie, come on up” is called out to the audience and Carrie makes her way to the stage with her pink shirt, cut bangs, and lit cigarette to sing Gretchen Wilson’s “Redneck Woman.” Following Carrie’s performance, Erin is called to up to perform “How Far” by Martina
McBride. It is 10:14 and the DJ announces that singers are needed, so “please turn in some request forms.” He then switches from karaoke to recordings and plays “Holy Diver” by Dio, followed by Metallica’s rendition of the traditional Irish song, “Whiskey in the Jar.” Both songs are considerably “heavier” than the music that has been played so far, but no one seems to mind.

As “Whiskey in the Jar” finishes, it is 10:26 and Carrie is called back to the stage again. Instead of another upbeat tune like “Redneck Woman,” this time she chooses the Martina McBride ballad “Concrete Angel.” As Carrie finishes, Tasha is called to the stage and sings The Dixie Chicks’ “You Were Mine.” Tasha’s performance is very good and is met by considerable applause from the crowd - the first real reaction by the crowd to anything that has taken place on stage so far. Whether the crowd is reacting to the singer or to the song itself is a little unclear, and it appears to be a combination of both elements. The Dixie Chicks have remained a very popular group at Whiskey Dick’s (despite their politically based comments, which put them at odds with many in country music’s fan-base), and the combination of a favorite song and a good performance seems to be what engages the audience. After the applause dies down, a man going by the name “Dad-O” is called up to the stage.

“Dad-O” is a middle-aged white man who walks with a noticeable limp. Despite the fact that he is mostly bald, he still sports a short ponytail along with a goatee that is in excess of 6-7 inches long, and he is noticeably missing several teeth. He sings “Johnny B. Goode” and talks to the audience during every guitar solo between drinks from his bottle of Budweiser. His singing is actually quite good. At times he deviates from the original melody and sings what would be harmony parts, but he stays in tune and is well received by the audience.

The DJ calls Erin to the stage again, but is met with a shout of “she’s busy” from somewhere in the back of the bar. Moving right along, he calls for Kim to come to the stage, but
is met this time with shouts of “Kimmy’s gone.” In many (if not most) places where I have witnessed karaoke, if a singer does not show up to sing, then the request form is discarded and that person is not called up again. Whether it is because of the relatively few number of requests or the relaxed atmosphere of karaoke at Whiskey Dick’s, it is not uncommon to hear a name called several times between different songs until the singer can finally make it to the stage.

It’s 10:40 and the DJ switches from karaoke to recordings once again. Big and Rich’s “Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy” plays through the P.A., followed by AC/DC’s “Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap.” A group of four younger males (maybe twenty-one or twenty-two) have recently arrived at the bar and are noticeably rowdier than anyone currently in the bar. Following the AC/DC selection, Pink Floyd’s “Money” comes through the speakers and there are multiple shouts of “Money!” from people throughout the bar. About halfway through the song, two of the recently arrived men jump on stage and start screaming into the microphones along with Pink Floyd. Their other two friends, meanwhile, have started having a “peanut shell war” with husks of the free peanuts they give out at the bar. Standing in the middle of the dance floor, they throw them at each other as well as at the two who have commandeered the mics.

As “Money” concludes, the DJ sarcastically says “way to help out Pink Floyd on that one guys.” It’s 10:55 and the karaoke begins again. Tasha is called to the stage and sings Sugarland’s “Baby Girl.” Following Tasha’s performance, Crystal is called to the stage to sing Patsy Cline’s “Crazy.” As her performance is taking place, the same two men who grabbed the mic’s during “Money” grab the spare microphone and start singing (and I use the term “singing” loosely here) along with Crystal, who gets noticeably irritated and eventually grabs the microphone away from them, turns it off, and holds on to it for the rest of the song. Following the song, the DJ calls the two men over to the booth using their clothing to single them out (“red shirt and Detroit shirt,
come to the booth”) and presumably warns them about their behavior, which at this point is irritating almost everyone in the bar. Drunkenness is common at Whiskey Dick’s and this kind of behavior is usually met with a similar response. Very rarely would anyone be ejected from the bar or be refused alcohol. As confrontational and problematic as these men are being, they continue to be served alcohol until they eventually depart.

Once again Erin is called to the stage, and once again the DJ is met with a shout from the back of the bar, this time saying that Erin was playing pool and would go later. Michelle is called up and sings “What’s Goin’ On” by the Four Non-Blondes. Her performance is very good in terms of intonation and rhythmic accuracy and is met with enthusiastic yells from the audience, which by this point has grown to about forty-five people. The four rowdy men are next with a group rendition of “Bad Company,” possibly in response to having been talked to by the DJ.

Crystal comes forward upon being called and does a nice, heartfelt rendition of Deanna Carter’s “Strawberry Wine.” I can’t help but notice that one of the rowdy guys is now sitting in the corner with a sad look on his face, singing along through the entire song.

“Dan” is called and it turns out that Dan is one of the four. He launches into an entirely off-key, non-melodic rendition of “Country Boy Can Survive” by Hank Williams, Jr. Following his performance, it is time for Erin’s name to be called yet again. The response? “I think Erin left.” We move on to a duet by Crystal and Tasha on Allison Krauss’ “When You Say Nothing at All.” The DJ decides to give Erin one more chance at this point, and, amazingly, she finally makes it up to the stage.

As Erin sings Terri Clark’s “She Didn’t Have Time,” the same guy in the red shirt that the D.J. had previously spoken to gets on stage, grabs the extra microphone, and starts to howl along with Erin. Looking none to happy, Erin physically shoves the guy off of the stage and it
looks for a second as if a fight might break out. I’m thinking that if Erin was not a girl there would indeed be a fight right now. Following Erin’s performance are renditions by other singers of Travis Tritt’s “Best of Intentions,” Garth Brooks’s “The Thunder Rolls,” and “Family Tradition” by Hank Williams, Jr.

During “Family Tradition” the crowd gets particularly involved with the performance, despite the fact that the performance is less than average, even for karaoke night. Each time the chorus comes around, the crowd participates in a call and response with the singer. I have heard the same responses at other performances of this song in other places, so I am in no way implying that this is specific to Whiskey Dick’s, but it is an interesting way in which the crowd can interact with the singer. The interactive part at the chorus goes as follows:

Singer: “They say why do you drink?”
Crowd: “To get drunk!”
Singer: “And why do you roll smoke?”
Crowd: “To get stoned!”

At the end of the song the crowd cheers louder than at any other point in the evening, possibly influenced by their participation or maybe due to the lyrical content of the song, designed to get a drinking crowd worked up.

The run of country songs is broken up by Crystal’s performance of Evanescence’s “My Immortal,” one of the only new, non-country songs of the night. Tasha takes the stage to perform Miranda Lambert’s “Kerosene,” followed by Erin singing Faith Hill’s “Like We Never Loved at All.” Several new people enter the bar during the past few songs and one of them (I did not catch the name) gets up to sing “Broken” by Seether. He is wearing a t-shirt that reads: “I am the Man from Nantucket.”
As Jeremy begins to sing “Don’t Take the Girl,” some of the same four rowdy men that have been there all night proceed to get on stage with him and attempt to sing along. Jeremy is noticeably irritated and begins to push some of the kids off of the stage. For the second time of the night, I am thinking that a fight will break out at any minute. Amazingly, cooler heads prevail again and the evening proceeds.

A rendition of “The Rodeo” is sung, followed by “Paint Me a Birmingham.” During the latter, one of the same guys who was onstage during “Don’t Take the Girl” again ascends to the stage and attempts to put his arm around the singer and sing along. Matthew, the singer, physically pulls the guys arm off of his shoulder and proceeds to glare him off of the stage. Again, a possible fight is avoided.

Crystal and Dimitreo are called to the stage and perform Evanescence’s “Wake Me Up” as a duet, Dimitreo covering all of the rap-based verses and Crystal singing the melodic chorus. I was a little surprised to hear Evanescence twice in a single night, however, it is slightly less surprising since Crystal chose both of them. Up next is a guy going by the name “BK,” and who sings Lynrd Skynrd’s “Simple Kind of Man,” followed by the second performance of the night of “What’s Goin’ On,” this time by Tasha.

“Jenny” is called out over the P.A. system and a girl who appears to be in her early twenties standing at the bar shrieks and yells at her friends, who apparently submitted a request form with her name on it. After some argument from Jenny, she is pulled to the stage by her friends who help her sing through the Eagles’ “Hotel California.” Jeremy then sings “Live like You were Dying,” and Brandy sings Alanis Moristte’s “Uninvited.” There are no requests in at this time, so the DJ calls a break until he gets more. The time is 12:50 a.m.
As the DJ switches from karaoke over to recordings through the P.A., I am surprised by the music he chooses. The first song played is “This Love” by Pantera, which is followed by Buckcherry’s “Crazy Bitch.” People in the audience do not seem to mind the heavier music, but they also don’t seem to be into it. After just these two songs, the singing resumes with Matthew singing the comedic “I’ve Got a Brand New Girlfriend” by Steve Holy. BK takes the stage again to sing Bon Jovi’s “You Give Love a Bad Name.”

Tasha and Matt sing “The Picture,” by Kid Rock and Sheryl Crow, keeping to the original duet form. While lacking somewhat in musicianship, there is an honesty in the performance that seems to influence the audience, and at the songs’s completion they are met with a round of applause. Jeremy follows their performance with a rendition of Toby Keith’s “I Should’ve Been a Cowboy,” a perennial favorite at Whiskey Dick’s. Switching genres for at least one song, Brandy sings the song “Lady Marmalade” by All Saints. It is now 1:24 in the morning.

Although there are fewer people in the bar now, those that remain seem to be more actively engaged with the performers. Fueled in no small part by alcohol consumption, performances throughout the night tend to become more enthusiastic and heartfelt as the evening progresses. BK sings “Every Rose Has its Thorn,” Matty follows it with a performance of KT Tunstall’s “Black Horse and the Cherry Tree.” As Angie gets up and sings The Judds’ ballad “Grandpa (Tell Me about the Good Old Days)” two couples get up and proceed to dance for the duration of the song.

Alabama’s “Mountain Music,” performed by Chad, gets the crowd worked up again after the slow Judds’ tune, while still maintaining a feeling of sentimentality. It’s 1:48 in the morning and there are only a few songs left to go, as the bar closes at 2:00 am in accordance with Ohio
law. Pat Benatar’s “Shadows of the Night,” Sara Evans’ “Cheatin’,” Jewel’s “You Were Meant for Me,” and Meatloaf’s “I’d Do Anything For Love (But I won’t do that)” finish out the night of singing. Last call was announced at the beginning of the Meatloaf song, and as the singer finishes, there are only a handful of people left in the bar. The lights are turned on at the completion of the song and those who are left make their way outside.

FIGURE 5.
Songs with artist and genre:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>September 12, 2006</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gretchen Wilson</td>
<td>Redneck Woman</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martina McBride</td>
<td>How Far</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martina McBride</td>
<td>Concrete Angel</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dixie Chicks</td>
<td>You Were Mine</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chuck Berry</td>
<td>Johnny B. Goode</td>
<td>Oldie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sugarland</td>
<td>Baby Girl</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Patsy Cline</td>
<td>Crazy</td>
<td>Classic Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Four Non-Blondes</td>
<td>What's Goin' On</td>
<td>Pop</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bad Company</td>
<td>Bad Company</td>
<td>Classic Rock</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deanna Carter</td>
<td>Strawberry Wine</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hank Williams, Jr.</td>
<td>Country Boy Can Survive</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Allison Krauss</td>
<td>When You Say Nothing at All</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Terri Clark</td>
<td>She Didn't Have Time</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Travis Tritt</td>
<td>Best of Intentions</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Garth Brooks</td>
<td>The Thunder Rolls</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hank Williams, Jr.</td>
<td>Family Tradition</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evanescence</td>
<td>My Immortal</td>
<td>Modern Rock</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Miranda Lambert</td>
<td>Kerosene</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Faith Hill</td>
<td>Like We Never Loved at All</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Seether</td>
<td>Broken</td>
<td>Modern Rock</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tim McGraw</td>
<td>Don't Take the Girl</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Garth Brooks</td>
<td>The Rodeo</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tracy Lawrence</td>
<td>Paint Me a Birmingham</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evanescence</td>
<td>Wake Me Up</td>
<td>Modern Rock</td>
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<td>Lynrd Skynrd</td>
<td>Simple Kind of Man</td>
<td>Classic Rock</td>
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<td>Four Non-Blondes</td>
<td>What's Goin' On</td>
<td>Pop</td>
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<td>The Eagles</td>
<td>Hotel California</td>
<td>Classic Rock</td>
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<td>Tim McGraw</td>
<td>Live Like You Were Dying</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alanis Morisette</td>
<td>Uninvited</td>
<td>Modern Rock</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Song</td>
<td>Genre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steve Holy</td>
<td>I’ve Got a Brand New Girlfriend</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bon Jovi</td>
<td>You Give Love a Bad Name</td>
<td>80's Rock</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sheryl Crow and Kid Rock</td>
<td>The Picture</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toby Keith</td>
<td>I Should’ve Been a Cowboy</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>All Saints</td>
<td>Lady Marmalade</td>
<td>Pop</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poison</td>
<td>Every Rose Has It's Thorn</td>
<td>80's Rock</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>KT Tunstall</td>
<td>Black Horse and the Cherry Tree</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Judds</td>
<td>Grandpa (Tell me about the good old days)</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>Mountain Music</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pat Benatar</td>
<td>Shadows of the Night</td>
<td>80’s Rock</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sara Evans</td>
<td>Cheatin’</td>
<td>Recent Country</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewel</td>
<td>Your Were Meant for Me</td>
<td>Folk Rock</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meatloaf</td>
<td>I’d Do Anything For Love</td>
<td>80’s Rock</td>
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CHAPTER 4
WHY WE SING WHAT WE SING

While conducting the research for this paper I talked to dozens of people. Some I interviewed formally, some I just chatted with about their experiences with karaoke, others wanted to talk about anything and everything but karaoke; their kids, job, ex, broken car, Iraq, politics, taxes, etc. These conversations led to fresh insights that have allowed me to gain a clearer picture of not only a certain musical aesthetic but also of post-industrial Midwest working-class life.

Joe the DJ

The one person who experiences karaoke at Whiskey Dick’s every single Tuesday and Sunday is the DJ, Joe. An electrician by day, Joe started working at Whiskey Dick’s in the spring of 2006 in order to make a little additional income. He has no real prior experience working as a DJ and all of the equipment belongs to the bar itself. He confesses that he doesn’t particularly care for country music and that he usually listens to modern rock himself. This, of course, helps explain the musical selections played when there are no singers and during lulls between singers.

When asked to describe the clientele at Whiskey Dick’s he responds with “pretty much all lower class.” While at first I interpret his use of “lower class” to be synonymous with “working-class” or “blue-collar,” it soon becomes clear that he does indeed mean it in qualitative manner. In discussing the people at the bar, there is an edge of disdain in his voice and, though he put on a smile for a girl as she approached the DJ booth to hand him a request, as soon as she

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17 Joe (DJ at Whiskey Dick’s) interviewed at Whiskey Dick’s, October, 2006.
left he turned back to me and rolled his eyes. As an electrician, he is most likely much better off financially than most of the clientele, and he tends to dress more stylishly and thus stands out from the patrons.

He asserts that the type of music sung is “Country. Mostly country. With some older and newer rockers and every now and then rap.” His choice of words here is interesting. With country and rap he is clearly referring to genre, but “rockers” applies both to the songs and the people singing them. In Whiskey Dick’s the people who sing rock songs instead of country tend to be more flamboyant on stage: playing air guitar, making pained faces as they try to belt out the lyrics, making lots of hand and arm motions, and giving general impersonations of stereotypical “rocker” dance moves. Joe’s use of the word “rockers” instead of “rock,” and the tone of voice in which he said it, should be read as a subtle mockery of the people themselves.

Joe says that he essentially sees the same people every karaoke night and knows most of them by name. There are some patrons that attend every Sunday, some that come out every Tuesday, and a handful that manage to come out both nights every week. Some of the singers have regular songs that they sing and Joe says that the biggest problem he faces is when one singer sings a song considered by another singer to be “their song.” He says that in these cases singers often look to him to settle the dispute, but he is uncertain what he’s supposed to do about it. His official position is that anyone can sing any song, and that in first come, first served fashion he plays the songs in the order that he receives the request. I had expected that drunk people badgering the singers, getting on stage, and otherwise being belligerent during the singing would have been Joe’s biggest problem with patrons, but he apparently just considers that normal behavior for Whiskey Dick’s and finds the perceived “song stealing” to be his biggest headache.
What song to sing?

When asked why they picked a certain song, far and away the most common answer I received from informants was that they “sound good on that one” or that “it fits my voice.” When asked to describe what “fits my voice” means, the answers usually have to do with range issues. I imagine part of the reason that Toby Keith and Gretchen Wilson are sung so much has to do with the fact that both have ranges that can be sung by a wide variety of people. So, range may be the most conscious part of the decision-making process but it is also one of the final decisions, made after a number of unconscious decisions and actions have already influenced the singer.

It may seem a little obvious, but singers rarely, if ever, sing songs that they are unfamiliar with. This raises the question: how do we become familiar with music? In the global age of technology it is safe to say that we all have access to a plethora of different musical styles, tastes and expressions. But, what we choose to listen to (and therefore become familiar with) has a large part to do with our friends, family, co-workers, and the others we are around, in other words, our own personal culture, defined by the type of music we listen to.

Consider punk, goth, hip-hop, rock, rockabilly, jazz, classical, bluegrass, and country, for example. Each musical style has associations that go beyond music itself. Each corresponds to a manner of dress, hairstyle, makeup, foot-ware, attitude, and language that reflects the genre and identifies members of the community to both each other and to outsiders. Upon first walking in to Whiskey Dick’s, I immediately recognized that I was in a working-class bar and knew that country would be the predominant music. Everywhere were T-shirts emblazoned with logos from landscape companies, contractors, painters, NASCAR teams and trucking firms; hats
branded by John Deere, DeKalb, Harley-Davidson, and Budweiser; jeans and jackets made by Carhartt, Dickey’s, and Wrangler; and work boots on the men, sneakers on the women. Each article of clothing adds to the collective sense of identity that it is a working-class bar.

So when I asked Tasha how she picks her songs, she replied “Well, you know, I like to pick songs that I sound good on.” She already had an assumption about genre that she doesn’t verbalize until the next question - What type of music does she usually sing? - to which she answered “Country, I mean everyone sings country music here, it’s like a country music bar.”

Tasha showed an assumption about both the bar and the people in it. Nowhere does Whiskey Dick’s advertise itself as a country bar but Tasha (one of the regular Sunday and Tuesday singers) considers it one. When I pointed out to Tasha that one of the singers had just sung an Eminem song (“Without Me”), she disregarded it by saying that that was Justin and he always sang different songs. In other words, if people sing anything other than country it is regarded as a personal quirk on the part of the singer, and not representative of the bar or the clientele as a whole.

Performers at Whiskey Dick’s vary in opinion as to how important lyrics are in making their decision to sing a particular song. Gretchen Wilson’s “Redneck Woman,” which DJ Joe says is sung every single karaoke night without fail, is a song that women empathize with the lyrics and sing for this reason. When I ask women why they like this song, I get responses ranging from “Gretchen Wilson’s such a badass, and she’s so strong. It makes me proud to be a redneck” to “It’s like she overcame so many things that I face in my life, it’s almost like I could be like her.” Other comments from informal conversations with woman have included things

18 Tasha, interviewed at Whiskey Dick’s, August 22, 2006.
19 Crystal interviewed at Whiskey Dick’s October 10, 2006.
20 Tasha, interviewed at Whiskey Dick’s September 26, 2006.
such as, “My friend had a kid in high school,” “I live in a trailer park,” and “I love Wal-Mart, I mean, who doesn’t?” All of these comments suggest that the women at Whiskey Dick’s empathize deeply with the lyrical content of the song, which sometimes is sung as many as three or four times a night by different singers. No matter how many times it is sung in a night, the crowd never seems to lose its enthusiasm for this song and when the chorus says “Let me get a big ‘Hell Yeah’ from the redneck girls like me,” the women in the crowd always respond with an enthusiastic shout of “Hell Yeah.”

While lyrics seem to be important in song selection, what the lyrics are actually saying can sometimes be overlooked. The most prominent examples of this are in the two most common duets sung at Whiskey Dick’s: Brad Paisley and Allison Kraus’ “Whiskey Lullaby” and Sheryl Crow and Kid Rock’s “The Picture.” Ashley and Justin, who regularly perform “The Picture,” informed me that they just loved the song because it was so beautiful and Ashley thought that it was one of the greatest love songs she had ever heard. The words, however, portray a picture of a musician on the road cheating on his wife/girlfriend while doing large amounts of drugs and drinking heavily. Meanwhile, the woman is back at home praying and trying to get over the man. Indeed, at the end of the song they do pine for each other and the song could be read as a metaphor for a couple who are in love but have a large number of relationship issues, yet it strikes me as very odd song to be “our song” as Ashley and Justin describe it, considering there is no hint of problems with their relationship.

“Whiskey Lullaby” was an especially popular song during the spring of 2006 when it was receiving a large amount of national country radio airplay. Several different couples would sing this song, and I was able to chat briefly with two of the couples. One couple seemed to be very conscious of the lyrics. The other did not. When asked about the song, the first couple, Tom and
a woman whose name I did not catch, talked about what a sad story it described and just thought it was a beautiful song. The second couple, Brandi and Mike, described it as a love song and were staring lovingly at each other while singing. The lyrics describe a man who goes to war and comes home to find his girl married to another man; he subsequently drinks himself to death. His ex-girlfriend is so guilt ridden that she then drinks herself to death. This is hardly what I would describe as a tender love song. Still, no matter how they interpret the lyrics, the fact remains that many of the song’s themes (soldiering, drinking, going to church) could be interpreted as working-class. The popularity of this song and its message on country radio further advances this idea to the singers.

**The Ethnomusicologist’s Influence**

One of the most interesting phenomena that I encountered while doing my research was that it was nearly impossible to interview someone about their song selection process without influencing that same process. As Gourlay pointed out, the mere presence of researcher can fundamentally change the very field one examines.²¹ For the most part it seemed as though people gave such little conscious thought to their selections that even a question such as “How do you pick what song to sing?” would elicit a quizzical look and some form of “I never really thought about it.” Several times people came up to me after I talked to them and joked that it was a lot harder for them to pick songs just because of the questions I had asked them, even though they were relatively unaware of why I was asking them (the interview disclaimer they signed simply said that I was interested in the song selection process for singing karaoke).

In one conversation with a patron, Mike (October 10th), we were chatting about issues unrelated to karaoke when he asked me what it was exactly that I was finding out or trying to say about karaoke. I explained to him that I felt people picked songs that represent themselves, whether it be their job, class, religion, morals, love life, or lack of any of these. I explained my idea that people would not pick songs that they did not agree with (lyrically or musically) and that the songs people did pick promoted their own sense of identity. Mike was fascinated by this and we chatted about it for five or ten minutes.

The following week Mike approached me grinning and telling me that I had totally changed the way he saw karaoke. Whereas before he could just pick a song he liked and sing it without asking why, he said it now took him forever to pick a song because he didn’t want to sing something that wasn’t “like” him. He attested that watching other people was much the same, and that while he had never thought about it before he could now see how each singer’s personality (many of whom he has known for years) showed itself in the songs that they sang.

This episode touched off an internal dilemma for me as a researcher. On one level, it confirmed much of what I had observed and believed to be going on in terms of self-representation with singers’ song selection. On another level I realized just how much I, as a researcher, could affect my informants. Mike had sung karaoke at various times for years and enjoyed it thoroughly. After our one ten-minute conversation it was unlikely that he would ever view it the same way again. So, was this a good or a bad thing? As a researcher I knew that if I explained my goals or findings to many more people, then my results for this entire project would be tainted. As an educator, however, it made me extremely happy to see someone examining what was going on with critical thought and insight: exactly the skills that I strive to instill in my students.
In the end I decided not to reveal my findings to any more informants, at least not until all of my research was complete, so that I would not further affect the information I was getting. It was only after this instance, though, that I began to realize that even simply by asking “How do you pick your song?,” I was affecting the way my informant thinks about their own musical expressions.
Since its beginnings in the rural south, country music has been strongly associated with working-class culture. This association is applied not only by those outside of country music, but from inside as well. Many artists have recorded songs or established images that commodify their music for working-class audiences.

Loretta Lynn is a prime example of an artist whose persona as “the coal miners daughter” made her attractive and marketable to a specific demographic of rural, white, poor, blue-collar Americans. I mean in no way to imply that Lynn was “inauthentic” or that her persona was created for the sake of marketing, rather, that her status as a child of working-class parents in rural Kentucky led working-class listeners to associate and to empathize with both her and her songs, and to dream of her success. Tennessee Ernie Ford’s “Sixteen Tons” is a great example of a specific song that represents a certain segment of the working-class population. The song specifically mentions coal-miners, but factory workers, farmers in debt, and any other low-level workers may also empathize with the struggle to get ahead.

Contemporary country performers continue to record and perform songs that are marketed to the working-class demographic of society. Cultural and class values concerning lifestyle choice, politics, and religion are routinely brought up in the majority of songs receiving top 40 radio airplay on country radio stations. Country artists, and male country artists in particular, continue to employ a style of dress that represents the Southern and Western working-

class: boots, jeans, belt-buckles, and of course that venerable symbol of American-ness and
toughness, the cowboy hat.

At Whiskey Dick’s there are certain songs that are sung with incredible regularity. By
examining the lyrics of a handful of the most popular songs, I hope to demonstrate how the lyrics
alone can be brimming with class representations and assertions of identity that the singers and
audience are frequently not cognizant of.

We Love Whiskey Dick’s

The first song I would to look at is the one from which this thesis derives its name: Toby
Keith’s “I Love This Bar,” written by Keith and songwriting partner Scott Emerick and released
on the 2005 Toby Keith album Shock’n Y’all. Aaron Fox has discussed the relationship between
working-class culture and the military, and this association has shown itself dramatically in post-
9/11 American country music. America’s newfound sense of patriotism has been exploited by a
number of country artists, possibly none more successfully and on so many occasions than Toby
Keith.

Toby Keith – “I Love This Bar”
“Shock’n Y’all” 2005

We got winners, we got losers
Chain smokers and boozers
And we got yuppies, we got bikers
We got thirsty hitchhikers
And the girls next door dress up like movie stars

Hmm, hmm, hmm I love this bar

We got cowboys, we got truckers
Broken-hearted fools and suckers
And we got hustlers, we got fighters
Early birds and all-nighters

23 Fox, Aaron. Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture. Durham, North
And the veterans talk about their battle scars

Hmm, hmm, hmm I love this bar

CHORUS
I love this bar
It's my kind of place
Just walkin' through the front door
Puts a big smile on my face
It ain't too far, come as you are
Hmm, hmm, hmm I love this bar

I've seen short skirts, we got high-techs
Blue-collar boys and rednecks
And we got lovers, lots of lookers
And I've even seen dancing girls and hookers
And we like to drink our beer from a mason jar

Hmm, hmm, hmm I love this bar
Yes I do

BRIDGE
I like my truck (I like my truck)
I like my girlfriend (I like my girlfriend)
I like to take her out to dinner
I like a movie now and then

CHORUS
But I love this bar
It's my kind of place
Just trollin' around the dance floor
Puts a big smile on my face
No cover charge, come as you are
Hmm, hmm, hmm I love this bar
Hmm, hmm, hmm I love this bar

We got divorcees and a big bouncer man
An old jukebox and a real bad band
We got waitresses and we got barflies
A dumb-ass and a wise-guy
If you get too drunk just sleep out in your car

Reason number 672 why

Hmm, hmm, hmm I love this bar
Play it on out boys
Beer-thirty's over
Got to take it on home

Hmm, hmm, hmm I love this bar
I just love it

http://www.lyricsdomain.com/20/toby_keith/i_love_this_bar.html Accessed 11/7/06
The title of the album, is a clear reference to America’s military strategy of “shock and awe” employed during the initial invasion of Iraq. While “I Love This Bar” does not employ patriotism as rhetoric, two of the other songs on the album, “American Soldier” and “The Taliban Song,” do so extensively.

“I Love This Bar” begins with the ingenious inclusion of both winners and losers: no matter how a listener feels on a given day they are included. In fact I believe that one of the reasons why this song has become so popular is that by either specific or generic inclusion, almost anybody could find him/herself in the cast of characters described, and any listener can identify characters they might find in any bar, anywhere.

The inclusion of all of these different characters has another implication: that there are not really any other bars to go to. To have girls dressing up “like movie stars” in the same bar that you should “come as you are” might seem odd to someone who grew up in a town with more than one or two bars. But in rural areas it is not uncommon to have high-techs, rednecks, blue-collar boys, bikers, hustlers and all of the rest in a single location. Sitting in a bar listening to this song, one tends to grab a hold of the lyrics that fit and let the others go. Perhaps, while listening one notices the characters in one’s presence that are described in the song. Meanwhile, each character described that isn’t in the bar quickly goes by as the lyrics have already moved on to new characters.

The prominent mention of his truck in the bridge is indicative of the role of the pickup truck in working-class American identity. To prove the link between class-culture and the pickup truck, we need to look no further than the latest series of advertisements employed by the two biggest American truck companies, General Motors and Ford. The latest 2006 series of commercials for General Motors’ trucks (both Chevy and GMC) uses the John Mellencamp song
(and Mellencamp himself), “This is Our Country,” amid a constant stream of images either patriotic or Norman Rockwell-esque. All of the characters portrayed represent working-class professions: farmers, construction workers, oil drillers, etc. Meanwhile, Toby Keith himself is the official spokesman for Ford trucks. Ford trucks have been featured prominently in several Keith videos, most notably “Who’s Your Daddy?” Before Keith took the job as Ford spokesman it was held for a number of years by Allan Jackson, who memorably changed the lyrics to his hit song “Mercury” from “I’m gonna’ buy me a Mercury” to “I’m gonna’ buy me a Ford truck.”

**Redneck Women**

One of the most prominent artists to openly express class values and beliefs in the last few years is singer Gretchen Wilson who was raised in rural Illinois and has only an eighth grade education. Wilson’s debut single, “Redneck Woman,” vaulted her to fame and the song became a staple at Whiskey Dick’s, sung, according to the DJ, every single karaoke night.

Gretchen Wilson – “Redneck Woman”
“Here For the Party” 2004

Well I ain't never
Been the barbie doll type
No I can't swig that sweet champagne
I'd rather drink beer all night
In a tavern or in a honky tonk
Or on a 4 wheel drive tailgate
I've got posters on my wall of Skynard, Kid and Strait
Some people look down on me
But I don't give a rip
I'll stand barefooted in my own front yard with a baby on my hip

CHORUS
Cause I'm a redneck woman
And I ain't no high class broad
I'm just a product of my raisin'
And I say ”hey y'all” and "Yee Haw"

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26 Joe (DJ at Whiskey Dick’s) interviewed at Whiskey Dick’s, October, 2006.
And I keep my Christmas lights on, on my front porch all year long
And I know all the words to every Charlie Daniels song
So here's to all my sisters out there keepin' it country
Let me get a big "Hell Yeah" from the redneck girls like me
Hell Yeah
Hell Yeah

Victoria's Secret
Well their stuff's real nice
Oh but I can buy the same damn thing on a Wal-Mart shelf half price
And still look sexy
Just as sexy
As those models on TV
No I don't need no designer tag to make my man want me
You might think I'm trashy
A little too hard core
But get in my neck of the woods
I'm just the girl next door

Hey I'm redneck woman
And I ain't no high class broad
I'm just a product of my raisin'
And I say "hey y'all" and "Yee Haw"
And I keep my Christmas lights on, on my front porch all year long
And I know all the words to every Tanya Tucker song
So here's to all my sisters out there keeping it country
Let me get a big "Hell Yeah" from the redneck girls like me
Hell Yeah
Hell Yeah

I'm redneck woman
And I ain't no high class broad
I'm just a product of my raisin'
And I say "hey y'all" and "Yee Haw"
And I keep my Christmas lights on, on my front porch all year long
And I know all the words to every Ol' Bocephus song
So here's to all my sisters out there keeping it country
Let me get a big "Hell Yeah" from the redneck girls like me
Hell Yeah
Hell Yeah

Hell Yeah
Hell Yeah
Hell Yeah
Hell Yeah

I Said Hell Yeah

What we see in the lyrics to this song is an affirmation of a certain working-class lifestyle in opposition to what is perceived as “high” or “elite.” It takes the word “redneck,” perceived by

much of society as a negative, and turns it into a positive, much the way that queer theorists
reclaimed the word “queer.” It constructs an identity that sets the singer apart from mainstream
society and makes her and those like her unique. The redneck identity ends up being
empowering. As such, it no longer means that one shops at Wal-Mart because they poor; it
means they shop at Wal-Mart because they are smarter than rich people who throw their money
away on higher-priced versions of similar products. This is a particularly ironic argument since it
is organizations like Wal-Mart, with their extensive purchasing of foreign goods, that has
contributed so greatly to the decline of manufacturing in the United States, and thus have
negatively impacted the job market for unskilled laborers.

From the first verse, every line puts the singer in opposition to other elements in society,
hereby creating identity for the singer. There is a constant and persistent demeaning of the “high”
and embracing of the “low.” “Ain’t never been the Barbie doll type” can refer to physical build,
perceived personality, choice of men (most women at Whiskey Dick’s are NOT married to a
Ken) or upper class status. Champagne represents the high, beer the low. Taverns or Honky-
tonks are the place to go, not “nightclubs” or a “pub.” A truck tailgate stands in opposition to a
limousine, Wal-Mart in opposition to Victoria’s Secret or clothing designers.

All of the other artists mentioned in the song represent many of the same values, and with
the exception of George Strait, the same embrace of redneck status: Lynrd Skynrd, Kid Rock,
Charlie Daniels, Tanya Tucker, and Hank Williams, Jr., here referred to by his nickname,
Bocephus. Wilson’s lyrics empower poor, working-class women, who eat her rhetoric up. The
irony of this song is not in the lyrics themselves, which seem to be honest, heartfelt, and written
from personal experience, but rather how Wilson has been marketed and presented. She may not
have the “soft” Barbie-doll type personality, but she is an attractive woman who has been
marketed with just as much sex-appeal as Faith Hill, Carrie Underwood, or any of the other popular female vocalists. Her success as a “bad-ass woman” singer has led to a wave of imitators in the year or two since she emerged, most recently Miranda Lambert, whose single “Kerosene” has been getting some performances at Whiskey Dick’s.

An Old(er) Ballad

Since its 1994 release, Tim McGraw’s single “Don’t Take the Girl” has continued to get regular airplay on country radio and has remained a popular number at Whiskey Dick’s. A surprising number of ballads are sung each week at Whiskey Dick’s, and many draw some of the most attention of any songs sung. Most of the slow ballads are centered around the themes of love, family, religion, or the conservative notion of “the good old days,” and “Don’t Take the Girl” is certainly no exception.

Tim McGraw – “Don’t Take the Girl”
“Not a Moment to Soon” 1994

Johnny’s daddy was taking him fishin’
When he was eight years old
A little girl came through the front gate holdin’ a fishing pole
His dad looked down and smiled, said we cant leave her behind
Son I know you dont want her to go but someday youll change your mind
And Johnny said take Jimmy Johnson, take Tommy Thompson, take my best friend Bo
Take anybody that you want as long as she don’t go
Take any boy in the world
Daddy please don’t take the girl

Same old boy
Same sweet girl
Ten years down the road
He held her tight and kissed her lips
In front of the picture show
Stranger came and pulled a gun
Grabbed her by the arm said if you do what I tell you to, there wont be any harm
And Johnny said take my money, take my wallet, take my credit cards
Here’s the watch that my grandpa gave me
Here’s the key to my car
Mister give it a whirl
But please don’t take the girl
Same old boy
Same sweet girl
Five years down the road
There’s going to be a little one and she says its time to go
Doctor says the baby’s fine but you’ll have to leave
cause his momma’s fading fast and Johnny hit his knees and there he prayed
Take the very breath you gave me
Take the heart from my chest
I’ll gladly take her place if you’ll let me
Make this my last request
Take me out of this world
God, please don’t take the girl

Johnny’s daddy
Was taking him fishin’
When he was eight years old

In this “it was meant to be” tale of love and life there are few overt references to class, culture, or lifestyle, but there are several more subtle things to consider. The first is that while the setting is never fully described, it’s hard to imagine this happening anywhere other than in a small rural town. The boy and girl know each other their entire lives, fishing is a common childhood pastime, and the names (Johnny, Jimmy Johnson, Tommy Thompson, and Bo) do not reflect any particular ethnicity. Johnny’s prayers show him to be a religious man. It is hard to imagine a song with this much overbearing sentimentality being popular in any genre other than country (with the possible exception of Christian), yet this sung is still being sung twelve years after its release.

**Revenge: That’s What Friends are For**

One of the more interesting phenomena of karaoke singing at Whiskey Dick’s is what I like to term “group songs.” These are songs that are most often sung (as the name implies) by groups of singers. Some of the most common group songs are “I’m Here for the Party” by

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28 [http://www.lyricsfreak.com/t/tim+mcgraw/dont+take+the+girl_20137360.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/t/tim+mcgraw/dont+take+the+girl_20137360.html) Accessed 11/7/06.
Gretchen Wilson, Garth Brook’s “Friends in Low Places,” and “Boot Scootin’ Boogie” by Brooks and Dunn. By far the most common song to be performed by a group, however, is The Dixie Chicks’ 2000 single “Goodbye Earl.”

Filled with rural and working class imagery, the setting of two longtime female friends as the protagonists lends itself particularly well to group singing by women.

The Dixie Chicks - “Goodbye Earl”
“Fly” - 1999

Mary Anne and Wanda were the best of friends
All through their high school days
Both members of the 4-H club
Both active in the FFA
After graduation Mary Anne went out lookin
For a bright new world
Wanda looked all around this town
And all she found was earl

Well it wasn’t two weeks
After she got married that
Wanda started gettin abused
She put on dark glasses and long sleeved blouses
And make-up to cover a bruise
Well she finally got the nerve to file for divorce
She let the law take it from there
But Earl walked right through that restraining order
And put her in intensive care

Right away Mary Anne flew in from Atlanta
On a red eye midnight flight
She held Wanda’s hand as they
Worked out a plan
And it didn’t take long to decided

That Earl had to die
Goodbye Earl
Those black-eyed peas
They tasted all right to me Earl
Youre feeling weak
Why dont you lay down
And sleep Earl
Aint it dark
Wrapped up in that tarp Earl

The cops came to bring Earl in
They searched the house
High and low
Then they tipped their hats
And said thank you ladies
If you hear from him let us know

Well the weeks went by and
Spring turned to summer
And summer faded into fall
And it turns out he was a missing person
Who nobody missed at all

So the girls bought some land
And a roadside stand
Out on highway 109
They sell Tennessee ham
And strawberry jam
And they don’t
Lose any sleep at night cause

Earl had to die
Goodbye Earl
We need a break
Lets go out to the lake Earl
Well pack a lunch
And stuff you in the trunk Earl
Well is that all right
Good lets go for a ride
Earl hey\textsuperscript{29}

What is particularly striking about this song is the open declaration of how gender roles are applied to women in working-class culture, and how the women in the song overcome those gender roles.

The first verse is very subtly mocks one organization that reinforces gender stereotypes of American women, the 4-H club, and another decidedly rural based organization, the Future Farmers of America. Wanda’s inability to leave town after high school reinforces a sentiment that I have heard from many working-class people in both Whiskey Dick’s and elsewhere: fear of getting “stuck” in one’s hometown with no way out.

Many working-class women at Whiskey Dick’s most likely empathize with Wanda’s abusive relationship since abuse rates have been directly tied to income levels.\textsuperscript{30} Open discontent

\textsuperscript{29} http://www.lyricsfreak.com/d/dixie+chicks/goodbye+earl_20040999.html Accessed 11/20/06.
\textsuperscript{30} http://www.abanet.org/publiced/practical/books/family/chapter_13.pdf. According to the
with the legal system and its processes of dealing with domestic violence is expressed as the women in the song are forced to seek vigilante justice by killing Earl with poisoned black-eyed peas (a decidedly rural and Southern way to kill someone). In the end, the two women are empowered as they become small business-women and landowners. It is easy to see why this song is appealing to groups of working-class women with its emphasis on long-term hometown friendship and female empowerment, meanwhile the killing of the antagonist fits the sense of working-class “eye for an eye” justice.

American Bar Association “women with family income under $7,500 experienced the highest rates of violence (22 per 1000); women with family income over $75,000 had the lowest rates of violence (2.5 per 1000).”
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS

Whether “country music is an authentic working-class art of enormous value to its blue-collar constituency,”¹ or merely music that has been created by the music industry and marketed to that same constituency is debatable. That it has meaning and value to its listeners is clear. What we see in karaoke singing is the advent of a technology that allows non-musicians to participate in meaningful musical expression by choosing a song that they are familiar with and performing it in front of friends and strangers. In the case of Whiskey Dick’s this expression is a direct reflection of the working-class clientele through their choices of songs.

To demonstrate that these karaoke nights are meaningful to those involved, one has only to look at how dedicated the singers are. The same people come week after week on nights that there is nothing else going on at the bar, many having a core repertoire of songs that they consider “theirs.” The fact that disputed “ownership” of the songs can cause tension underlines how important each song is to the singers. Yet, in all my conversations and interviews it was difficult to elicit a verbal response from my informants to reinforce this. Perhaps some of this stems from reluctance to discuss emotions with a researcher, though my informants never seemed to shield anything from me. A better explanation might simply be that it is incredibly difficult to talk about music.

Even as scholars, we often struggle with the confines of language to describe how music makes us feel, affects us, or moves us. Trying to understand why we empathize with some songs but not with others, how we identify with certain genres based on our own lifestyles, or why a

certain song sends shivers down our spine can be difficult to do for even the most educated ethnomusicologist who deals with such analysis daily. So it is not surprising that a group of people who lack higher education or musical training find it difficult to verbalize what it is they do and why. But this does not mean that the musical experience of choosing and performing a song is any less meaningful than that of live musicians choosing and performing a song, who may give the choice equally little thought.

People relate to music based on their own life experiences and background. When given a book with several thousand songs in it, singers pick the one or two songs that best represent who they are, how they feel, and what songs they know through their past experiences with music and taste in genre. At Whiskey Dick’s, a working-class bar, the songs sung end up reflecting the working-class culture of the singers.
POSTLUDE

For musicians I think it is easy to overlook the positive aspects of karaoke. It is tempting to jump to conclusions about the quality or pitch of the singer’s voice, his/her inability to play an instrument, or the nature of the song itself. In addition, karaoke may be perceived as a threat to working musicians, who fear that karaoke will take over and further push live music out of bars and nightclubs. I would suggest that we should instead be reassured that people do still care about live music, that people are still moved enough by songs to get up and sing, that music making among the general population is not dead, and that instead technology has changed the nature of that music. Karaoke is an accessible way for people of all walks of life to express their values, morals, beliefs, and emotions publicly in a meaningful way.
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