ABSTRACT

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Both country music and the biographical film are genres that are evaluated by strict (yet constantly changing) standards of authenticity. However, “authenticity” means different things when applied to both genres; in country music, it refers to the artist’s respect for tradition and ability to relate to their audience, while in the biographical film, the term typically denotes factual accuracy and the filmmaker’s ability to emphasize the “correct” aspects of the subject’s life. Mining the Past: Performing Authenticity in the Country Music Biopic argues that when a biographical film about a country musician is made, it must negotiate standards of authenticity applicable to both country music and the biographical film. Further, it posits that when the subject of the film is female, the standard for living an “authentic” life and having an “authentic” career changes drastically and, for the artist, is a constant negotiation. Via analyses of four films chronicling the lives of female country musicians, this dissertation examines the ways in which the films (and their heroines) negotiate genre- and medium-specific standards of authenticity.

Using the 1980 film Coal Miner’s Daughter as a case study, Chapter I argues that country biopics must successfully negotiate authenticity relative to four models: the country model; the narrative model; the emphasis model; and the “time and space” model. Chapter II, in turn, argues that Sweet Dreams failed to achieve the acclaim of Coal Miner’s Daughter largely because the subject’s death made it impossible to authenticate the film’s emphasis. Chapter III contends that Walk the Line actress Reese Witherspoon was considered authentic due to her ability to negotiate, first, June Carter’s struggle between “home” and “the road,” and, second, her own star persona with that of the character’s. Finally, Chapter IV uses the documentary Shut Up
and Sing to examine how standards of authenticity change over time, as well as how authenticity is negotiated in a different film genre.

Ultimately, this project seeks to contribute to the fields of film studies, country music studies, and women’s studies, providing an analysis of authenticity in genres in which women’s roles have been largely overlooked by scholars.
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INTRODUCTION

A biographical film can seemingly simply be defined as a film that dramatizes the life of an individual. Even such a straightforward characterization, however, hints that the biographical film label might easily be applied to an extremely large number of films that are more different than they are alike. Indeed, the biographical film genre can be seen to encompass films about musicians, artists, scientists, political figures, writers, sports heroes, and serial killers (to name only a few); one might easily imagine that even two people who received notoriety for similar reasons might have lived incredibly divergent lives. Further, the biographical film genre can be seen to encompass films that take extremely different approaches to dramatizing lives; some biopics attempt to give a comprehensive view of the subject’s entire life, while others might dramatize only one significant period in the depicted person’s life.

With such a wide variety of films existing under the generic label of “biographical film,” it is perhaps unsurprising that only two scholars have attempted to write comprehensive works on the genre: Robert Milton Miller, whose *Star Myths: Show-Business Biographies on Film*, presents a history of the biographical film, and George F. Custen, whose *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* goes a step further by not only identifying the conventions of the studio era biopic, but also examining the role that such films played in shaping public history. Unsurprisingly, given the extremely wide range of films included under the “biographical film” banner, much of the scholarship on biographical films has been contextualized within studies of other genres, such as the historical film (of which biopics can inarguably be considered a part) and the movie musical (to which many musician biopics also belong).

The scattered nature of biopic scholarship speaks to the hybridity of the biopic genre and,
indeed, of many popular genres. As Derek Longhurst notes in *Gender, Genre, and Narrative Pleasure*, popular genres “are not rigidly self-contained categories” but “evolve interactively and in relation to specific historical formations” (5). Placing a film firmly in one specific genre can be difficult; as Barry Langford notes in *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*, “no individual genre film can ever embody the full range of attributes said to typify a genre; by the same token—as volumes of frustrated critical effort attest—no definition of genre, however flexible, can account equally well for every genre film” (vii). In *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film*, Marnie Hughes-Warrington introduces yet another problem with labeling a given film as part of a specific genre: such labels are often laden with value judgments, and can serve to imbue a film with a sense of importance or, alternatively, denigrate its perceived worth; as she wonders, “Is calling a work a ‘historical film’ an act of approval, or might it also be used perjoratively, as with ‘chick flick’ or ‘women’s weepie’” (37)? Defining films according to generic boundaries, then, can be problematic for reasons other than that a film might contain characteristics of several genres.

Even as categorizing according to genre becomes increasingly problematic, issues of genre remain crucial in shaping the expectations placed upon, and the subsequent reception of, popular films and popular music. Roberta Garrett acknowledges this in *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman’s Film*; as she notes,

While post-classical Hollywood is defined through its production of ‘metageneric’ blockbusters and the self-conscious postmodernist blending of prior cinematic codes…the widespread media circulation and availability of classic Hollywood and the expansion of a cineaste’s awareness of genre codes has also reinforced the cultural significance of genre distinctions as a means of understanding and categorizing filmic
Thus, while the practice of blending genres is common, genre distinctions continue to be important to media consumers. Literary scholar Mary Gerhart further notes that genre also continues to be an important concern for scholars. She argues in *Genre Choices, Gender Questions* that genre analysis enables us “to become aware of questions that would otherwise go unnoticed. How do generic predispositions set up expectations about the ways in which a text should be read? How do traditions provide both restraints and incentives to the development of new genres” (7)? Further, she asks, how does the recognition of genre “reduce the possibility of misinterpreting a text and at the same time invite maximum reinterpretation” (7)? Langford further notes the continuing importance of genre for both audiences and scholars, observing that “genre remains an essential critical tool for understanding the ways that films are produced and consumed, as well as their broader relations to culture and society” (vii). When one embarks on a study of the biographical film, he or she must do so with the knowledge that though the biographical film might be an increasingly hybrid genre, it is still a genre that filmmakers, viewers, and critics approach with specific expectations, and that the relative “success” of any given film will be partially based on how well that film adheres to, and produces innovation within, generic boundaries. Further, one must be aware that when a scholar studies a biographical film as, for example, a historical film, or as a musical, that scholar is contextualizing that film within a larger set of generic boundaries and conventions. Additionally, there is potential for that scholar to deemphasize the elements of the film that do not fit into the chosen genre he or she is examining.

Existing studies that contextualize the biopic within broader genres illustrate the hybridity of the genre and are undoubtedly important. It is important to acknowledge that
biopics are one way of presenting history; biopics absolutely should not be left out of larger studies on historical films, nor should they be excluded from studies on other genres that they are a part of. However, studies of this nature also give us a somewhat limited view of what the biopic is, does, and means, and to some extent ignore the fact that though the biopic is a hybrid genre, it is nonetheless a distinct genre with unique generic features. One illustration of this can be found in History in the Media: Film and Television, in which Robert Niemi contextualizes biographical films such as Prefontaine, The Doors, and Pollock within chapters on sports history, music history, and art history, respectively. Such an approach largely ignores the fact that such films have very different generic characteristics than other historical films, that, for example, a biographical film such as Prefontaine has very different goals, intentions, and generic features than does a sports history film like Miracle, which chronicles the 1980 United States Olympic hockey team’s victory over the Soviet Union. Though this is perhaps understandable due to the book’s focus on historicism, rather than narrative and genre, more problematic is the fact that the discussion of each film is limited to how “historically accurate” each film is; such approach presupposes that there is one “correct,” inarguable version of a historical event, or a historical figure’s life, and that it is possible to make such a film in a “right” or “wrong” way. Further, a work that simply points out what various historical films do or do not leave out, do or do not “get right,” subverts any potential for analysis of why specific events might have been left out, or who has the right to determine whether a specific film was made “correctly.” While it is, again, perhaps understandable that History in the Media, a book that attempts to give a comprehensive guide to a wide range of historical films would fail to go into such an analysis, this shortcoming hints at the insights that a work that handled a smaller, more narrowly defined group of films might provide.
It is important to note that not all historical criticism of biographical films is merely concerned with examining such films’ historical “accuracy.” In History on Film/Film on History, for example, Robert Rosenstone speculates about what the purpose of the biopic perhaps should be: “Is biography the story of great people (for most of history, men) we wish to emulate, or great villains we wish to condemn? Should it focus on public life or personal life? Should it show its subject as a creature of the times or someone who rises above history and helps to create the times, or somehow split the difference and have it both ways” (90)? He also demonstrates an informed knowledge of both the generic conventions of the biographical film and the written biography. Such work paves the way for scholars to question the intentions, motives, and consequences of the biographical film. Further, in “In Praise of the Biopic” (an article that draws on much of the same material), he goes a step further and takes on the fact that “nobody has ever had much good to say about the biographical film” (11). Examining the various films that have been made about revolutionary John Reed, he ultimately argues that while none of the films “could be called definitive,” each film “has much to tell us about the man and his personal struggles, and each suggests something about the larger issues of the times in which he lived”; he ultimately concludes, “What more can one ask of a biofilm—or, for that matter, of a biography” (28)? Such work is important in that it challenges Niemi’s notion that there is one “correct” way to film history, or biography, as well as the idea that any biographical film needs to be the “definitive” version of a person’s life. This is important in that it challenges viewers, critics, and scholars to begin looking beyond whether a given biopic offers the “whole story” of a person’s life, and instead to examine what it does have to offer. Implicitly, then, it makes an argument to move beyond critiquing biographical films only on their historical accuracy.

Scholarship that contextualizes the biopic within larger studies of the musical are largely
concerned with how the biopic fits into the film musical genre. For example, in *American Film Musical Themes and Forms*, Michael Dunne notes that musical biopics “immediately solve one intrinsic problem of the Hollywood musical—how to provide narrative justification for performance numbers in which people like Oklahoma cowboys or New York street punks burst into song and dance” (126). Jane Feuer, in turn, discusses the role of music in the narrative of such films; as she notes, “the biopic could use the writing of the numbers for its narrative with the performances of those same numbers as the spectacle” (96). This observation is an important one, as performance numbers in musical biopics rarely serve simply to showcase the song, but to move the film’s plot along. However, while, again, it is important that musical biopics not be excluded from studies on the musical, such an approach is somewhat limited. The limitations of such an approach illustrate the necessity for biopics to be studied as a unique genre with distinctive generic features.

Robert Milton Miller provides the first example of a work that studies the biopic as a unique genre in *Star Myths: Show-Business Biographies on Film*. While such a work is important in charting the history and generic features of the genre, there have been multiple additions to the biographical film genre since its 1983 publication date; even more problematic is the fact that the book is more concerned with simply identifying the genre’s features and does not offer much in the way of analysis. Though George F. Custen’s *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* goes further in the way of analysis, his study is limited to films produced from 1927-1960. While this limited scope is understandable given, in Rosenstone’s terms, “the size and the universality of the genre, and the difficulties of locating or viewing more than a tiny fraction of them,” it represents, as Rosenstone also notes, merely “the tip of a huge iceberg” (“In Praise of the Biopic” 15). While Custen’s observations are relevant, then, due to
the fact that many of the tropes identified in his work are still a mainstay of today’s biopic, there are significant gaps left by his work. Further, Custen’s claim that “the biopic seems, since the 1960s, to have faded away to a minor form” is faulty; while he is correct that the biopic is less prolific now than in the years that his study chronicles, such films have far from disappeared (2). Additionally, I disagree with his argument that “the contribution of these films to public culture and film culture alike can best be seen not through the analysis of individual works, but through the constitution of a large body that forms a kind of supertext” (3). Undoubtedly, it was necessary for Custen to view a large number of films in order to make generalizations about the features of the genre; however, as Rosenstone notes, due to the wide range of films in the genre, “generalizations must be tentative” (“In Praise of the Biopic” 15). Additionally, a lack of attention to individual works ignores the fact that each biopic can have a significant impact in shaping the legacy of the person depicted. For this reason, analyses of individual films are both useful and necessary.

Each primary approach to studying the biopic has largely ignored the question of gender. While Custen’s text does not exclude films focusing on the lives of women, he does not provide any analysis of the ways in which these texts differ from films focusing on the lives of men, or even acknowledge that these texts are different in any way; in fact, with the exception of a two-page section entitled, “The Home as a Site of Female Resistance,” the question of gender is wholly ignored. Feminist scholars doing work on written biography suggest that this exclusion (by both Custen and other scholars) is faulty due to the fact that, as Lois Rudnick notes in “The Male-Identified Woman and Other Anxieties,” “women’s lives have rarely fit the model of the normative biographical hero-type” (118). Sara Alpern, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Ingrid Winther Scobie support this claim; as they argue in The Challenge of Feminist Biography,
“women’s lives differ from men’s, often in profound ways...failing to consider this difference distorts, if not falsifies, any account of a woman’s life” (7). Thus, not only should biographical films about women be studied, but gender should be a primary consideration in any such analysis.

Feminist film criticism further emphasizes what can be gained from introducing gender into the analysis of biographical films. Though rarely concerned with the biopic (with the exception of noteworthy films such as the Tina Turner biopic What’s Love Got to Do With It? and Monster, the story of serial killer Aileen Wuornos), the questions asked by feminist film criticism dealing with other genres are extremely relevant to feminist film scholars hoping to examine the biographical film. “What happens...when a woman enters a man’s world?” Rikke Schubart wonders in Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema 1970-2006. “Is the female structure mapped onto the male genre? Does the figure of the hero change when ‘he’ becomes a ‘she’” (10)? While gender roles are perhaps not challenged as overtly in most biopics as they are in the action-centered films that Schubart describes, it is undoubtedly still worthwhile to ask how generic tropes and gender roles change in biographical films with female protagonists, as doing so promotes further understanding that women’s lives do differ considerably from men’s. In Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema, Yvonne Tasker further illustrates that generic tropes change in films with female protagonists; she observes that in female-centered films such as Beaches, Waiting to Exhale, Thelma and

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1 Schubart defines the difference between “male” and “female” genres, specifying that “the ‘heroic’ nature of the protagonist in male film genres is mythologically, psychologically, and culturally designed to function as a role model of masculinity. By this definition westerns, war movies, action movies, martial arts movies, spy movies, and road movies are male film genres. Romance, romantic comedy, and melodrama, on the other hand, are female genres with a female protagonist and a female audience” (9). While such a definition is perhaps somewhat essentialist, it is helpful in that it acknowledges that specific genres are gendered in certain ways, containing within them specific prescribed roles for men and women. It further points to the fact that certain genres are typically associated with certain genders, and intended for audience members of a specific gender.
Louise, and Baghdad Café, which “draw on feminist discourses about women and on a range of
generic sources including the women’s film, buddy movie and road movie,” generic features are
“to an extent reformulated” (144). Thus, examining female-centered films allows for the further
examination of generic formulas.

It is with both the weaknesses in the wide-ranging approaches of scholars such as Niemi
and Custen, as well as the necessity of bringing gender into the existing conversation on
biographical films in mind that in this study, I choose to focus on a very narrowly defined group
of films: biographical films that chronicle, or prominently feature, the lives of female country
musicians. This particular focus has been chosen for specific reasons. First of all, with the 2005
release of the Johnny Cash/June Carter biopic Walk the Line, country music biopics have
recently become a relevant topic in popular culture. Popular journalists indicate that this is not
the first time that this has happened. In Entertainment Weekly’s 2006 Oscar Preview issue, Steve
Wulf reflected that twenty-five years prior, “the country went Hollywood, and Hollywood went
country” (Wulf). As he noted, “In a year in which former Screen Actors Guild president Ronald
Reagan had been elected President of the United States, Coal Miner’s Daughter turned out to be
a commercial and artistic success.” At the 1981 Oscar ceremony, Coal Miner’s Daughter
(directed by Michael Apted) received seven nominations, and Sissy Spacek, who starred as
Loretta Lynn, took home the Best Actress award. Additionally, country singer-songwriters
Willie Nelson and Dolly Parton were both nominated in the Best Original Song category (for
“On the Road Again” and the theme to 9 to 5, respectively). The 2006 Oscar ceremony would
see history repeat itself; not only was Dolly Parton once again nominated in the Best Original
Song category (this time for “Travelin’ Thru, from Transamerica), but James Mangold’s Walk
the Line received five nominations, with Reese Witherspoon winning for her portrayal of June
That both Spacek and Witherspoon’s portrayals earned critical acclaim is perhaps unsurprising; as journalist Marc Weingarten noted upon *Walk the Line*’s release, there is a “long tradition of musical biopics being garlanded with Oscar accolades.” Musical biopics, he noted, “with their high premium on acting, singing, and personality adaptation,” as well as with their storylines, which typically allow audiences to watch an artist “triumph over adversity, wrestle with their demons, slide to the brink of ruination and then redeem themselves,” often allow actors to show a great deal of range. However, it is perhaps also unsurprising that in the twenty-five years that passed between *Coal Miner’s Daughter* and *Walk the Line*, only one mainstream theatrical musical biopic—*Sweet Dreams*, for which Jessica Lange earned an Oscar nomination for her portrayal of Patsy Cline—chronicled the life of a female country singer. Custen argues that one of the purposes of biographical films is to “cultivate the interests of their producers, presenting a world view that naturalizes certain lives and specific values over alternative ones” (4). Thus, it stands to reason that if country music, as Richard A. Peterson notes in *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, has long been considered by many as “the antithesis of their own aesthetic and worldview because it evoked the image of rural poverty and small-town morality that so many…were trying to escape,” then the lives of country musicians would not often be considered favorable material for biographical films (6). This reveals that subjects for films are often decided with class distinctions in mind, and certain class biases firmly in place.

I have also chosen this particular focus because both biographical films and country musicians are often judged on how well they meet seemingly indefinable standards of authenticity. As Niemi observes, “when members of a viewing audience see the familiar phrase, ‘based on a true story,’ flash on the screen during the opening credit sequence, they tend to
assume, rightly or wrongly, that the movie they are about to watch will deliver more significance than a pure fiction and will therefore require a heightened level of attentive engagement and respect” (xxi). Custen agrees with this assessment, though he views the trend as problematic; as he states, “Hollywood biography is to history what Caesar’s Palace is to architectural history: an enormous, engaging distortion, which after a time convinces us of its own kind of authenticity” (7). Similarly, country music scholar David Sanjek notes in the foreword to A Boy Named Sue: Gender in Country Music, “in the context of American popular music, one of the most traveled paths leads to the satisfaction of an insatiable appetite for authenticity” (vii). Reviews of Walk the Line, illustrate this concern with the authentic; though both Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon received very good reviews for their respective portrayals of Cash and Carter, Witherspoon was repeatedly cited as giving the stronger performance, in many cases because she was perceived as more “authentic” in the role. However, critics of the film rarely defined what they meant by “authentic,” which is somewhat problematic; authenticity means very different things in different contexts.

Indeed, it certainly means different things to both critics of country music and to critics of biographical film. When country music scholars talk about “authentic” country, for example, they typically mean things like respect for tradition, the notion that the singers have, in the words of Hank Williams, Jr., “lived out the songs that [they] wrote,” and the conformity of the performers of such music to preconceived standards of stereotyped rural identity. On the other hand, when biographical film scholars talk about authenticity, they are more likely to mean how well the film and performers in it captured the life of the person being depicted; this can mean anything from whether the screenwriters and directors emphasized the “right” aspects of the person’s life to how convincingly the actors played their roles. This is further complicated by
the fact that both country and biographical standards are constantly changing, as country
performers continue to redefine and renegotiate what it means to be “authentically” country and
biographical filmmakers experiment with different strategies and narrative techniques for telling
life stories.

It is with the conflicting and constantly changing standards of authenticity that are
consistently applied to both the biographical film and country music in mind that I embark on an
examination of authenticity in the country music biopic. I undertake this analysis for two
primary reasons: first, because definitions of authenticity continue to be applied even as they
continue to change, discussions of authenticity will undoubtedly remain a relevant area of
academic inquiry for years to come. Second, because biographical films about country
musicians are evaluated according to multiple standards of authenticity, they provide a
worthwhile site for analyzing how definitions of authenticity change based on context.

The idea that differing standards of authenticity are negotiated in country music biopics is
something that has largely been ignored by the few scholars that have discussed country music in
film. For example, in “Sounding the American Heart: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and
Contemporary American Film,” Barbara Ching acknowledges that “filmmakers assume that
country music bears a burden of a particularly American authenticity” (204). Ching uses Coal
Miner’s Daughter, Robert Altman’s Nashville, Bruce Beresford’s Tender Mercies, and
Christopher Cain’s Pure Country as illustrations of how filmmakers use country music to either
critique or reinforce American notions of authenticity. Because only one of the films she
discusses is biographical (Coal Miner’s Daughter), the issue of biographical authenticity does
not come into play in her analysis. Further, I am less concerned with how country music is used
to invoke or critique authenticity than with the idea that filmmakers must conform to, or
negotiate, varying preconceived notions of authenticity in order for their film to be considered a “real” representation of a performer’s life. It is also with these issues in mind that it becomes obvious why I have chosen to only examine fact-based films about country musicians; while films about fictional country musicians such as the aforementioned Pure Country and Tender Mercies undoubtedly grapple with issues of country authenticity, they do not bear the burden of having to be biographically or factually accurate, which is an extremely important part of my analysis.

I am also somewhat troubled by Ching’s claims that “Coal Miner’s Daughter doesn’t go that far toward authenticity; instead it gestures toward authenticity by having Sissy Spacek mimic Lynn so well that she sings Lynn’s songs for the soundtrack” and that “‘authentic’ country music has yet to be screened” in the same ways that I am troubled by Custen’s previously cited claim that biographical films are merely distortions that convince us of their authenticity (Ching 211, 221; Custen 7). I take issue with such claims not because I believe that such scholars are wrong; in fact, I wholeheartedly agree that such films are far from truly “authentic.” Indeed, it would perhaps be impossible to offer a representation of any musician’s life that was a wholly authentic representation due to the facts that certain details would always be left out; different people have different perspectives even on supposed “facts”; and memory can be faulty. In the context of my argument, however, claims such as Ching’s and Custen’s are a bit beside the point; I do not wish to argue whether the films I examine are or are not “truly authentic,” but rather to acknowledge that their perceived authenticity always plays a part in how successful critics and fans determine a film to be. In other words, a review of a film such as Walk the Line or Coal Miner’s Daughter is never only about how compelling the story is, how much range the actors show; reviewers repeatedly, and almost without exception, discuss how
well such films tell the life story of Johnny Cash or Loretta Lynn, how well Reese Witherspoon “captures” June Carter. Additionally, when a fan, family member, or friend of Johnny Cash or Loretta Lynn watches a film like *Walk the Line* or *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, they are unlikely to be fully supportive of the film if they feel that it gets the story “wrong,” if they feel that if provides an unsympathetic or inaccurate picture of who the person was. Regardless of a film’s actual authenticity, then, perceived authenticity is always a consideration when that film is reviewed and critiqued. Further, the quest for authenticity almost always drives filmmakers’ decisions on matters as varied as casting, filming locations, and even whether the actors in a musical biopic will sing the musicians’ songs themselves or lip sync to previously recorded material.

With that in mind, it is also important to note—though other scholars have largely ignored this, as well—that a film’s perceived authenticity is rarely determined by only what is present in the text of the film itself. Rather, fans and critics are also often concerned with what is left out—those things they know about the performer in question from reading outside the text, from viewing live or recorded performances or listening to CDs or watching televised interviews or reading written biographies that is ultimately not included in the film. Further, the perceived authenticity of a film can be affected by whether the musician depicted was directly involved in the making of the film; by the reputation of the actor playing the musician; and by promotional materials released in tandem with a film. Thus, while I spend a great deal of this dissertation analyzing the films that I have chosen, I also analyze how other factors can be seen as contributing to, or detracting from, each film’s perceived authenticity.

It is with the previously cited feminist film and country music scholars in mind that I further introduce gender into the analysis. Pamela Fox paves the way for such an analysis in her
article “Recycled ‘Trash’: Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography,” which examines the written autobiographies of country singers such as Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn, and Dolly Parton. While her discussion of how the definition of country authenticity changes when applied to women is central to my analysis, however, the medium-specific ways in which authenticity is constructed in such written biographies makes it clear that the rules for constructing authenticity change considerably when biography is put on film. For example, she notes how typical features of such written biographies such as the “photo album” (the practice of including a section of “real” photos of the performer) contribute to their perceived authenticity; such features are obviously not a part of filmed biographies. Additionally, aspects of female country singers’ lives that are often highlighted in such autobiographies, such as motherhood, often play a much smaller role in biographical films; this further suggests that there are medium-specific standards for what is considered authentic, or perhaps rather, what filmmakers assume viewers want to see.

With such scholars and issues in mind, I have chosen to locate my analysis of country music biopics specifically in four films: Coal Miner’s Daughter (1980), starring Sissy Spacek as Loretta Lynn; Sweet Dreams (1985), starring Jessica Lange as Patsy Cline; Walk the Line (2005), featuring Reese Witherspoon as June Carter; and Shut Up and Sing, the 2006 documentary chronicling the aftermath of Dixie Chicks’ lead singer Natalie Maines’ 2003 anti-Bush comment. I have chosen these particular films for specific reasons. First, and perhaps most obviously, they are the only four fact-based films about female country musicians ever to have been released theatrically. Though there has been the occasional made-for-TV movie made about a female country musician (with the Judds and Tammy Wynette providing two examples), and other forms of televisual biography such as the E! True Hollywood Story, VH1’s Behind the Music,
and A&E’s Biography have been produced about country singers such as Dolly Parton, Faith Hill, Shania Twain, and Martina McBride, the genre- and medium-specific features of such programs make them difficult to contextualize in a discussion about theatrical biographical films, which typically follow very similar narrative structures and are distributed, viewed, and critiqued according to very similar standards. Further, such televisual forms of biography play a very different role in constructing the legacy of a performer. While one can easily locate a DVD of any of the four films I am studying and watch it repeatedly, it is not unheard of for a made-for-TV movie to air once and never appear again, or to appear somewhat sporadically on cable channels many years later. Each episode of the E! True Hollywood Story is typically rerun often around the time of its release and then, again, appears only occasionally; such shows are rarely released on DVD. While such shows are undoubtedly worthy of studying for the techniques by which they construct life stories, then, they are too different from the biographical films that I am studying to have a place in this project. Though Shut Up and Sing is different from the other three films under examination in that it is a documentary and not a traditional biopic, it is included in this study specifically as a counterpoint to the other three—that is, as a way of examining how the techniques for telling a life story change when told in a different genre and how the conditions for female country authenticity have changed between the 1950s and 1960s (the time period primarily focused on in Coal Miner’s Daughter, Sweet Dreams, and Walk the Line) and today. Further, the inclusion of this text provides the opportunity to question the idea that the documentary is typically perceived to be more authentic than the biopic.

Because of the specific issues highlighted by each individual film, as well as because of the generic differences between films, I have chosen to organize my chapters by film, focusing on a specific film in each chapter. Chapter One, which analyzes Coal Miner’s Daughter, argues
that the film came to be known as the quintessential country biopic because it successfully negotiates authenticity relative to four specific models. Chapter Two examines *Sweet Dreams*, a film that failed to achieve the critical acclaim of *Coal Miner’s Daughter*; this provides the opportunity to examine what happens when the celebrity depicted is not alive to verify the film made about them as authentic, as well as what happens when one particular—and somewhat controversial—aspect of a singer’s life is emphasized to the exclusion of others. In Chapter Three, I investigate the “woman behind the man” role as personified by Reese Witherspoon as June Carter in *Walk the Line*; I also look at how interviews given by Witherspoon around the time of the film’s release contribute to the film’s perceived authenticity. Finally, Chapter Four uses *Shut Up and Sing* as an opportunity to examine how female country authenticity has changed in the last four decades, as well as to examine how life stories change when told in a different genre.

Though the women depicted in these films are different in many ways, a common thread runs through each film, and thus, each chapter: each film showcases a woman (or women) struggling with what it means to be “authentic,” and, along with that, the disparity between their lived reality and their imagined reality. Loretta Lynn and Patsy Cline are both depicted as women figuring out how to be country singers in a time when few women had played that role. Personally, Lynn is depicted as a woman struggling to figure out who she “really” is in a life that has been largely dictated by the circumstances she was born into and by other people’s choices. In *Sweet Dreams*, Cline speaks often of obtaining a reality and a life that she has never actually seen anyone live. *Walk the Line’s* June Carter vacillates between the life she secretly wants and the life she thinks she is supposed to have. And the Dixie Chicks struggle to be themselves, to be “real,” in an industry that doesn’t much like it when they reveal their “real” political opinions.
Thus, both the narratives of these films and the characters inhabiting these narratives provide opportunities for examining what it means to be “authentic”—in country music, and in life.
CHAPTER I.

COAL MINER’S DAUGHTER:

SETTING THE STANDARD FOR COUNTRY BIOPIC AUTHENTICITY

*Got some discount knowledge at the junior college,*
where we majored in beer and girls.
*It was all real funny ’til we ran out of money*
and they threw us out into the world.
*Yeah, the kids who thought they’d run this town*
ain’t runnin’ much of anything.
*Just lovin’ and laughin’ and bustin’ our asses*
and we call it all livin’ the dream.

*These are my people!*
*This is where I come from!*
*We’re givin’ this life everything we got,*
and then some.
*It ain’t always pretty,*
*but it’s real.*
*It’s the way we were made,*
*wouldn’t have it any other way—*
*These are my people.*

In the summer of 2007, Rodney Atkins’s “These Are My People” (quoted above) hit country radio, with an emphatic, if not triumphant, chorus. If the chorus might lead listeners to believe that they are listening to an uncritical celebration of the lifestyle that Atkins sings about, however, the verses tell a different story. In the first verse, Atkins describes childhood and high school years spent shooting BBs at old beer cans and singing along to the likes of Lynyrd Skynyrd; when, at the end of the verse, he concludes, “We were good, you know,” it is with more than a hint of self-deprecation, as if Atkins is poking good-natured fun at his younger self. Later verses take a similar tone. In the second, he describes being thrown out of college into a world that hasn’t quite lived up to his expectations; though he concludes that he and his friends say that they’re “livin’ the dream,” it is clear that he knows they are doing no such thing. While the verses display the singer’s awareness that life hasn’t turned out the way he had hoped, the
chorus is emphatic, expressing pride in a life that “ain’t always pretty” but is, at least, “real.” Further, and perhaps most importantly, Atkins never attempts to distance himself from the life and people he describes. In the song, he takes the position not of an outsider observing this lifestyle, but as an active part of it, discussing activities that “we” take part in and firmly declaring that “these are my people.” He expresses firsthand knowledge of the life he describes and thus, perhaps, earns the right to be somewhat critical of it.

“These Are My People” is hardly the first song in which a country singer declares kinship with his or her presumed audience; in fact, examples of this type of song are too numerous to count, with recent examples including Little Big Town’s 2006 hit “Boondocks,” which opens with the declaration, “I feel no shame, I’m proud of where I came from, I was born and raised in the boondocks,” and Faith Hill’s 2005 song “Mississippi Girl,” in which she assures her audience that “a Mississippi girl don’t change her ways just ’cause everybody knows her name.” The fact that such songs are so ubiquitous to the country genre is telling; as Jocelyn Neal notes in “The Voice Behind the Song: Faith Hill, Country Music, and Reflexive Identity,” Within the tradition of country music, artists are expected to connect with their fans through shared biographical experiences and the relevance of their personal backgrounds to a stereotyped country identity. These tokens of authenticity amplify the genre-identity of an artist’s output—Loretta Lynn’s coal mining roots, Merle Haggard’s time on the wrong side of the law, or Dolly Parton’s Smoky Mountain upbringing are all frequently invoked as synonymous with the content, meaning, and impact of their music. (111) In other words, in country music there is the expectation that singers have actually lived the experiences they sing about. In Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music, Philip Auslander notes that the performer of popular music is “defined by three layers:
the real person (the performer as human being), the performance persona (the performer’s self-presentation), and the character (a figure portrayed in a song text)”; in country music, it stands to reason that there is an expectation for all three layers to overlap rather closely, an expectation that when an artist steps onstage, they are simply presenting their “real” self, singing songs about experiences that “really” happened to them (4). Of course, everyone knows that this is not always the case; Johnny Cash didn’t really do time at Folsom Prison, the Dixie Chicks didn’t really kill Earl. Yet when a singer like Atkins sings about “his people”—working class people, people not unlike his intended audience—as if he were one of them, it stands to reason that the audience might expect that his life before becoming a singer was very similar to the life he sings about2. It is even possible that the audience might feel cheated or lied to if they learned that this was not the case.

Preserving the illusion that one’s offstage life is exactly like the life presented in song, however, can be difficult in an age where a fan need only visit CMT.com to learn that Atkins’s education does, in fact, extend past a brief stint at junior college; he was a psychology major at Tennessee Technical University and worked at a counseling center to fulfill his degree requirements. This is unlikely to matter much to fans due to the fact that other aspects of his

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2 This perceived notion of autobiography can become rather complicated in country music. First of all, it should be noted that even though, for example, Rodney Atkins did not actually write “These Are My People,” nor did Faith Hill write “Mississippi Girl,” it is likely, due to the first person point of view expressed in these songs, along with references that coincide with the singer’s actual autobiography, listeners will assume that the performer is singing about his or her own experiences. In country music, then, authorship is in a sense attributed to the performer whether or not they are the actual performer of the song. This is complicated, however, by the prevalence of clearly fictional “story songs” in country music; for example, in “The River and Me,” Tim McGraw sings, in the first person, about murdering his abusive stepfather, an event that never happened. The audience’s ability to discern the song as fictional, however—apart, of course, from the dark events in the song and the improbability that someone would confess to such actions via song lyrics—comes partly from their familiarity with McGraw’s biography. It is further important to note that even singers like McGraw, who write few of their own songs and, in interviews, often speak about the songs in a very similar manner to how an actor would speak about a role (using language like, “This song is about a character who…” as opposed to “This song is about an experience I had…” ) are held to certain standards of “authenticity” based on what the audience knows about their life. With that in mind, while it is acceptable for McGraw to sing a song about something that he has clearly never experienced, it would be less acceptable for him to, say, sing a love song as a duet with someone other than his wife, Faith Hill, due to the fact that a large part of both singers’ identities revolves around their marriage and family.
background do match what Neal calls a “stereotyped country identity”; his CMT.com profile further states that he was adopted at a young age by a mother from a coal mining family and a father who endured poverty and abuse as a child (“Rodney Atkins: Biography”). However, the fact remains that in this highly mediatized\(^3\) age, representations of country singers’ lives are available in multiple forms, from magazine articles to online features to songs to music videos to, in some cases, written biographies, biographical films, documentaries, and televisual forms of biography such as the *E! True Hollywood Story* and CMT’s *Diary*; thus, there are many opportunities for fans to “know” whether or not the songs that a country singer performs are actually “true.” With this in mind, it stands to reason that a country singer’s perceived authenticity might be threatened if these competing mediations contradict each other, or contradict the persona the singer is trying to project.

It is unsurprising, then, that these competing mediations are often closely scrutinized by fans and critics. Further, such mediations are often evaluated by standards of authenticity that are not identical to the standards of authenticity applied to country music. For example, when *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, the 1980 biopic chronicling the life of Loretta Lynn, was released, it was praised by many critics for being “authentic”; *The Washington Post*’s Gary Arnold called it “down-to-earth, modest, affectionate, [and] authentic,” while the *Christian Science Monitor*’s David Sterritt noted that the film’s smaller roles were “handled with grit and authenticity by a large and colorful cast” (C1, 17). The critics do not explain what “authenticity” means; as noted in the introduction, though authenticity is a concept that has been debated, defined, and redefined by country music scholars, when film critics and scholars use the term in relation to the biographical film, they rarely offer a definition. Arguably, the definition offered by country

\(^3\)Philip Auslander employs the term mediatized “to indicate that a particular cultural object is a product of the mass media or of media technology” (Auslander, *Liveness*, 5).
music scholar Richard A. Peterson in Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity—that authenticity “centers on being believable relative to a more or less explicit model, and at the same time being original, that is not being an imitation of the model”—could easily be applied to the biographical film (220). This is complicated, however, by the fact that a biographical film is evaluated relative not only to the “country” model of authenticity, but to models specific to the biographical film.

More than twenty-five years after its release, Coal Miner’s Daughter remains the standard by which other biopics, country or otherwise, are judged. For example, when What’s Love Got to Do With It?, the biographical film chronicling the life of Tina Turner, was released in 1993, The Boston Globe touted it as “the best musical biopic since Coal Miner’s Daughter,” while in The Washington Post’s 2005 review of the Johnny Cash biopic Walk the Line, Ann Hornaday lamented that Coal Miner’s Daughter was “the last of the great examples of the genre” (C01). It has proven to have staying power even outside of the biopic genre, however; the film is often mentioned in reviews of work that Sissy Spacek has completed since its release, often cited as an example of her best work. For example, in Rolling Stone magazine’s review of the 2001 film In the Bedroom, for which she received an Academy Award nomination and won a Golden Globe, Peter Travers noted that “Spacek hasn’t had a role this substantial in years, and she cuts to the heart with the same blunt honesty she brought to Carrie, Badlands, and her Oscar-winning role in Coal Miner’s Daughter” (“In the Bedroom”). Loretta Lynn herself has even noted the popularity and staying power of the film, noting in an interview on the 25th Anniversary Edition of the DVD of the film that, “People’ll say, ‘I’ve watched your movie seventy-some times.’ This is no lie. Everybody that tells me this, it’s seventy-some or a hundred, I mean, it’s never three times” (“An Exclusive Interview…”). This indicates that the film is beloved among fans as well
as respected by critics; it is unlikely that fans would bother with repeat viewings if they disliked the film or thought that it defamed Lynn. Clearly, then, the film has had a tremendous impact: on the lives of those involved, on fans of Lynn, and on the way we critique biopics. The necessary question that must necessarily stand at the center of any analysis of *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, then, is *why*? Why has the film had such staying power, and why did it become the standard by which other biopics would be judged? Answering such questions is imperative because doing so helps us understand what tropes, narrative conventions, and even life events are considered “preferable” to audiences and critics, and allows us to consider why audiences and critics might respond to such elements while rejecting others. Further, when a film is considered “inauthentic” to critics and audiences (as *Sweet Dreams*, the second film that I examine in this dissertation, was), it stands to reason that it is because it failed to live up to preconceived standards; thus, it is important, before moving forward with this study, to examine what, precisely, those standards are. It is with these concerns in mind that in this chapter, I argue that *Coal Miner’s Daughter* was considered successful because it negotiates the concept of authenticity relative to four different models, which I have identified and defined after carefully examining existing scholarship on both country music and the biographical film: the country model; the narrative model; the emphasis model; and the “time and space” model.

In order to better understand what is meant by the “country” model of authenticity, it is useful to look back at the example cited at the beginning of this essay: Rodney Atkins’s “These Are My People.” As previously stated, “These Are My People” belongs to a very specific subgenre of country song, in which the artist declares kinship with his or her intended audience. It also contains several other elements commonly found in country songs, such as conflicted feelings toward a blue-collar lifestyle and a casual mention of Christianity (when he sings about
playing softball for the church league) juxtaposed with an account of drinking with friends. His conflicted feelings, along with the seemingly contradictory images of participating in a church activity and then going out drinking afterwards, are common to country music; as Joli Jensen explains in *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music*, “when critics talk about real country music, they speak of it also in relation to these deep contradictions: ‘real’ country music invokes unresolved tensions about urban life, blue collar work, and the injuries of class” (29). “These Are My People,” then, is, in Peterson’s terms, “believable relative to a more or less explicit model”—as is Atkins himself, with his blue-collar upbringing (220). However, the song, and Atkins, can also be seen as being original, not an imitation of the model; the song is of course not identical to similar ones that have come before it. Further, while Atkins fits many of the characteristics of the “stereotyped country identity,” he also strays from it in some ways—he does not, like many male country singers, wear a cowboy hat and Western shirt when he performs; instead, he almost always performs in a t-shirt, jeans, and baseball cap. While some would argue that this makes him less “authentic” than other singers, others would undoubtedly argue that it is more “authentic” of him to dress how he would normally dress rather than try to fit into a stereotyped standard. Thus, Atkins and “These Are My People” provide an illustration of how a singer might appear authentic by traditional country standards.

This is complicated when applied to *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, however, due to the fact that male and female artists are evaluated according to different standards of authenticity. Neal identifies these standards in her discussion of the ways in which repeated elements of Faith Hill’s biography work to place Hill in the country genre even though some of her music could arguably be characterized as pop. As she notes, interviews with the star often emphasize Hill’s “geographic association with the South, childhood musical efforts, the devotion and ties to her
family, and the influence of her love life on her musical productivity” (112). For female country musicians, then, family and love life are just as important to the traditional country identity as the class-related issues that characterize the country music and image of male country musicians; this is further illustrated by the aspects of Hill’s life that are excluded from her biography, such as her early marriage to, and divorce from, songwriter Dan Hill (Neal 113). In “Recycled Trash,” Pamela Fox further explains the ways in which notions of authenticity differ when applied to female country performers; as she notes, women in country music “embody ‘home’. From its inception in the late 1920s, traditional country mythology has made the family its centerpiece, envisioning distinctly gendered roles for that institution’s maintenance and protection” (244). Though she acknowledges that this construction has changed somewhat as women’s roles in society have changed, in the decades in which Lynn was building her career, “country ideology equated femininity squarely with the domestic sphere, especially motherhood” (244). Fox notes the complications inherent in this construction, noting that the very fact that country musicians spend a considerable amount of time out on the road touring takes them out of the domestic sphere; for this reason, for female country musicians success automatically renders them “distinctly gendered ‘failures’ of country authenticity: as working female celebrities, they forfeit not only their traditional pasts, but also their present maternal identities. By ‘choosing’ the tour bus over—or as the single means of maintaining—the glamorous mansion housing their children, they lose their claim to ‘home’ altogether” (244). Simply by being away from the home, then, a female country musician is not fulfilling the role she is “supposed” to fulfill, and thus, forfeits her claim to authenticity. With this in mind, then, it stands to reason that an “authentic” representation of a female country musician’s life will emphasize both her southern

4 Arguably, male country musicians similarly forfeit their claim to authenticity by not actually working in the blue collar professions that they often sing about.
working-class roots and the conflict she feels at being away from the home.

*Coal Miner’s Daughter* can be seen as doing precisely this. Early scenes emphasize Loretta Lynn’s poor rural upbringing, placing her firmly in Kentucky coal mining country; the very first scene in the film shows Spacek as Lynn riding a mule along a wooded hillside and cuts quickly to a group of men in a coal mine, one of whom we quickly learn is Loretta’s father. The first third of the film further works to emphasize the poverty that Loretta grew up in; for example, when Loretta’s father brings home a boxful of shoes from the Sears Roebuck catalog for Loretta and her siblings, it is depicted as a special day, and Loretta is shocked and delighted when she receives a dress in addition to shoes. In a later scene, when Loretta sits listening to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio, she is chastened to turn it off, not because it is too loud or because listening to such music is a waste of time, but because they don’t have money to replace the batteries. The filmic version of Loretta Lynn’s life, then, can be seen as reinforcing the identity that Lynn has already projected in song, and in the book on which the film was based; watching the recreation of her life is likely to make Lynn seem even more “authentic” to fans of her music.

The film further emphasizes the gender-specific elements of her identity crucial to country authenticity by highlighting the anxieties she feels, and the problems that arise, as the result of her leaving the domestic sphere. Though Loretta’s husband, Doolittle (Tommy Lee Jones), plays a large role in jump-starting her career, he begins to feel emasculated after she begins to make it big and there is little left for him to do. After a volatile argument that erupts because she is wearing makeup against his wishes and ends with Loretta, her friend Patsy Cline (Beverly D’Angelo), and Patsy’s husband Charlie Dick driving off and leaving Doolittle in a parking lot, Doolittle comes home and they talk calmly, with him telling her that he thinks that he’s going to get a job as a mechanic or a truck driver: “something I’m good at.” When she
insists that he’s good at managing her, and that she wouldn’t be where she is if not for him, he tells her that “getting here’s one thing, being here’s another.” She tells him seriously that if her career is going to break them up, she’ll quit. He tells her that successful people don’t quit. Thus, the scene highlights that Lynn’s life “on the road” and the fact that she has become the primary breadwinner in her household are causing major problems in her marriage, to the extent that Loretta believes that she might have to quit in order to save it. Though the scene ends happily—with him finally giving her the wedding ring that he couldn’t afford when they first got married—the headache that she admits to having in the scene only foreshadows troubles to come. Scenes of her on the road are juxtaposed with scenes of Doolittle interacting with their children: giving them rides in his Jeep, giving baths, and, in the most pointed illustration of the fact that she isn’t home with her family (where, it is implied, she should be, and wants to be), watching Loretta sing on television. The montage of her on the road intercut with the scenes of Doolittle and her children interacting clearly emphasizes what she is missing by being away from home; a particularly lonely image of her eating dinner alone on her hotel bed indicates that she is very aware of what she is missing. The film again, then, repeatedly emphasizes the tension between life at home and life on the road.

The scenes also highlight the physical and emotional toll that being on the road has for Loretta. In an image shown near the end of the montage, she is shown popping pills; when she returns home after the tour, she again complains about headaches, and when Doolittle asks if she has been taking the pills the doctor prescribed, she rattles the bottle to indicate that yes, she has been. Though she convinces him to go back out on the road with her this time, it is clear that she is not in any state to be touring; she begins forgetting words to songs in concert and, ultimately, has an onstage breakdown that highlights the fact that being out on the road so much is simply
too much for her: “Things is moving to fast,” she announces. “Always have. I mean, one day I was this little girl, the next I was married, the next I was havin’ babies, and next day I was out here singin’ for y’all. Patsy [Cline] always used to say, ‘Little gal, you got to run your own life. But my life’s runnin’ me.’” She breaks down crying and stumbles offstage and collapses into Doolittle’s arms. The audience sees, then, that being out on the road has serious physical and emotional consequences.

The final scenes of the film work to reassure the viewer of Lynn’s successful return to the domestic sphere. Her onstage collapse marks the climax of the film, and from then, she returns home to Doolittle who, fittingly enough, drives her out to the site where he plans to build a new house for them and their family. He excitedly begins explaining the plans for the house; when he starts describing placing the bedroom at the front of the house, she frustratedly interrupts, “Dadgum it, Doo, you never asked me nothin’ about no new house.” When he says that he just wanted to surprise her, and that he thought that she would want a new house, for privacy, she shouts, “I ain’t said I don’t want no new house! I just said you ain’t asked me nothin’ about it! You never do, you just say, ‘Hey, baby, here’s the deal, take it or leave it! Well, it’s drivin’ me crazy, Doo!’” His response is, “Well, hell, let’s go to the house, let’s call the lawyers and get a divorce, I’m tired of this bullshit.” This gives her pause for roughly half a second before she responds, “I don’t want no divorce, I just want the dadgum bedroom in the back of the house!”

The audience is reassured that their relationship is secure, and though she does return to the stage in the film’s final scene, when she does, it is to sing “Coal Miner’s Daughter”:

Well, I was born a coal miner’s daughter
In a cabin on a hill in Butcher Holler
We were poor, but we had love
That’s the one thing my daddy made sure of
He shoveled coal to make a poor man’s dollar
Thus, in the film’s very last scene, the audience is assured that though Loretta may continue to tour, she remembers her roots and, as they are reminded by frequent shots of Doolittle watching proudly—no longer home with the kids, but back at her side—she does so with the support of her husband. The final scene resolves the tension between the road and home by bringing both together, largely through the lyrics of “Coal Miner’s Daughter.”

The scene is not the first in the film, of course, in which lyrics serve as an illustration of events in the film, in which the audience is assured that Loretta really did live the experiences she wrote about; earlier in the film, in fact, events are shown as directly influencing her songwriting process. For example, in one scene, Loretta finishes a performance to find Doolittle fooling around with another woman in the backseat of a car. She confronts them, warning, “Woman, if you want to keep that arm, you’d better get it off my husband”; as she all but drags Doolittle back to the tour bus, she tells him, “I’m warning you, Doo, I’d better not ever catch you with trash like that again. I mean it!” In the very next scene, she is shown on the tour bus, playing “You’re Not Woman Enough (To Take My Man)” for Patsy Cline, who she is touring with at the time; when Doolittle asks, “Loretta, where’d you get the idea for that?,” she retorts, “Where’d you think?” It is clearly spelled out for the audience that Loretta’s experiences were a direct influence on her songs.

The scenes set in Butcher Holler, the scenes focusing on the tension between Loretta’s home life and life on the road, and the scenes showcasing Loretta’s songwriting process authenticate the film relative to the country model. However, as a film firmly situated in the biographical film genre, it must also prove authentic relative to the narrative model—that is, it must adhere to the expected narrative conventions of the biographical film genre while at the same time being, in Peterson’s terms, “original, not an imitation of the model” (220). In
Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History, George F. Custen explains that “the producers of biopics articulated the strategy of greatness as a paradox: to find a way to declare that each life—and each film of a life—was unique within the confines of a production system that made certain all products, and lives, resembled one another” (148). As he notes, “In order to accomplish this difficult task, the biopic developed distinctive narrative strategies which, with few exceptions, offered particular ideologies of fame based on a limited menu of discourses and situations: romance, the role played by family and friends, and of the idea of fame as a kind of community judgment” (148-149). Thus, the biopic genre began to rely on a series of tropes that would continue to be repeated for decades. As an example of a biopic with a typical narrative structure, Custen offers The Lady with Red Hair, which chronicled the life of actress Caroline Carter, noting that, like most biopics,

The film opens in media res…Second, there is no mention of the leading figure’s family or background. Mrs. Carter thus creates her own identity as an actress…Third, heterosexual romance humanizes the character, and Mrs. Carter must choose, like many biopic figures, between love and career. Along this road, she labors to be accepted into the community of her chosen profession; initially ignored, then tolerated, she is ultimately triumphant. Finally, the main focus of this film…is encapsulated in a dual act of judgment: the society of Chicago judges the divorced Mrs. Carter as a moral being, and the communities (of the audience in the film), try her as an actress. (150)

He goes on to note that “professions as different as nurse…, artist…, inventor…, and athlete all contain some variation of the four elements above that fit disparate professions into a Hollywood imitation of life” (150). It stands to reason, then, that for Coal Miner’s Daughter to be considered authentic according to the narrative model, it must contain such elements while, in
the interest of being “original” as opposed to imitative, also provide some divergence from the model.

*Coal Miner’s Daughter* does, in fact, both adhere to the generic conventions Custen identifies and deviate from them. There is, in contrast to the model Custen describes, much emphasis on Lynn’s family and background; this is unsurprising, as Lynn herself always emphasized that her family and background played a big part in who she was. It is further unsurprising that Lynn’s background is emphasized in a film about a country singer, as Lynn’s background has the characteristics of what Neal calls a “stereotyped country identity.” However, the individual members of Lynn’s family are only characterized to the extent that they had a role in influencing her, in making her who she was. Her brothers and sisters, for example, are given very little individual characterization—more important than individual character traits is the sheer number of siblings that she had, which undoubtedly contributed to the family’s poverty. Likewise, her mother is not a particularly well-rounded character; she seems to exist as the model for what Loretta’s future would have in store for her, were she to stay in Butcher Holler: married to a coal miner, raising several children. Her father is given the most extensive characterization; he is depicted as the family member closest to Loretta, as well as the character that illustrates the difficulty of the coal miner’s life: he is shown down in the coal mine and frequently complains of headaches. Further, he is the character who begs Loretta not to “throw all them young years away” when, at age thirteen, she tells him that Doolittle Lynn, a grown man, wants to marry her. It seems, then, that members of a biopic hero’s family only figure into the story to the extent that they were influential on the hero. This is further illustrated by more contemporary biopics; in *Walk the Line*, for example, Johnny Cash’s family is a strong focus in the first third of the film, due largely to the fact that his brother’s accidental death was known to
have had a profound effect on Cash.

Loretta’s father, however, is also important to *Coal Miner’s Daughter* as a contrast to Doolittle, the man that Loretta does, in fact, marry at age thirteen. If Ted Webb and, to a lesser extent, his wife, Clary, are emblematic of Kentucky coal mining country and the life that Loretta seems destined for, Doolittle Lynn, from his very first scene in the film, represents life outside of it. In the first scene in which the audience, as well as Ted, Loretta, and one of her younger brothers, see him, a store owner informs Ted that he has “just come back from the Army actin’ like a wild heathen”; Ted predicts that “he’ll calm down as soon as they slap a coal shovel in his hand.” We quickly learn that this is not what Doolittle has in mind for himself; as he tells Loretta as he walks her home from a community gathering, there’s a “whole big world out there,” and he’s not going to spend his life buried in a coal mine. He repeats this later, after they are married, when he tells her that he wants them to move to Washington: “There ain’t nothing for me in Kentucky, Loretta, except a chest full of coal dust and bein’ an old man by the time I’m forty! Just ask your daddy!” She reminds him that he’d promised her father, upon asking his permission to marry her, that he wouldn’t take her far away from home. He responds that it is time for her to decide whether she is “his daughter or my wife.” The choice is clear: either remain in Butcher Holler, or go off into an unpredictable future.

Though Doolittle plays a symbolic role in the story, he also plays a traditional one in the typical biopic narrative: that of romantic interest. Custen notes that in the traditional biopic, “famous people...need heterosexual partners as a kind of gyroscope to balance them in the world” (175). Doolittle, however, is not simply Loretta’s romantic interest; he is the impetus for nearly every important thing that happens to her, from prompting her to leave Butcher Holler to jump-starting her music career. He buys her a guitar for an anniversary present, which she
teaches herself to play; he then gets her her first gig in a nearby honkytonk, helps her to make a record, and takes her on a road trip shopping the record around to radio stations. The film also does not shy away from showing some of the uglier aspects of their relationship. As previously noted, the couple marries when she is only thirteen; their first sexual encounter, which takes place on their wedding night, could arguably be considered rape⁵; and, as also previously noted, she occasionally catches him with other women. The two also struggle as, after she gains musical success, she becomes more independent.

This independence is prompted by her introduction to Patsy Cline, who plays another role that Custen notes is important in the traditional biopic—that of Loretta’s best friend. As Custen observes, “if the family is a site of resistance for the famous person, and romance is both a demand of all films and a stabilizing influence in most biopics, the role of the friend is more complicated, more problematic” (162-163). The friend, he notes, typically serves the dual function of “chronicler of the great deeds of the hero” and “that of the conscience” (163). Patsy Cline serves a slightly different role in Coal Miner’s Daughter. From even before Loretta really has a career, Patsy serves as her role model; Loretta listens to her on the radio and gushes that she could never be as good as her. They meet when, after hearing that she is in the hospital, Loretta sings one of Patsy’s songs at a performance at Ernest Tubb’s record store in Nashville that is being broadcast over the radio. After the show, Patsy’s husband, Charlie Dick, finds

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⁵ I use the word “arguably” because there is something of a disconnect between how viewers might characterize the encounter and how Loretta and Doolittle (as depicted in the scene) understand the occurrence. The scene depicts Lynn as frightened and uncomfortable climbing into bed with Doolittle, initially wearing her clothes under her nightgown. When he begins having sex with her, she is horrified and shouts at him to stop; he does not, assuring her that they’re supposed to have sex on their wedding night, and that it only hurts because it is the first time. The next morning she is both furious at him and too ashamed to leave their motel room, assuming that anyone they run into will be able to tell what they have been doing, and will be horrified. He again assures her that what they have done is a normal part of married life, and nothing that other people haven’t done before. Thus, while the contemporary viewer of the film might understand the encounter to be rape, this is complicated somewhat by the fact that the encounter is shown through the eyes of two people who do not understand the occurrence as such; Loretta, at age thirteen, barely understands what sex is, and while she clearly does not like what happened, she presumably would not have the language to call it rape.
Loretta and invites her to come meet Patsy at the hospital.

Right away, Patsy provides a marked contrast to Loretta; while we never see Loretta have a drink during the course of the film, Charlie sneaks a beer for Patsy into the hospital, which Patsy asks for as soon as he and Loretta walk in the door. Loretta stands to the side shyly, awkwardly; Patsy asks, “What’s the matter with you? Ain’t you never seen no glamorous star before?” By this time, Loretta is becoming a star in her own right; she has performed on the Grand Ole Opry seventeen times straight. Patsy informs her that “People wanna know who you’ve been sleepin’ with that you’ve been on so many times.” Loretta’s eyes widen, and she worriedly asks, “Who’s been sayin’ that?” Patsy responds with a grin, “Gals that’ve been sleepin’ with everybody and still ain’t been on yet.” Patsy is as bold and confident as Loretta is shy and eager to please, and, unlike Loretta, who up to this point has basically followed Doolittle’s lead, is clearly in charge in her own romantic relationship; later, as the two couples sit together talking, Patsy teases that she has to remind Charlie that “he ain’t nothin’ but a damn tax deduction.” Loretta, tickled, immediately turns to Doolittle and says, “That goes for you, too, Doolittle Lynn, and don’t you forget it.” Patsy, then, is shown as having an almost immediate influence on Loretta, an influence that continues as Loretta, with Patsy’s encouragement, begins wearing makeup, something that Doolittle has expressly forbidden her to do. While in some respects fulfilling the traditional “friend” role, then, Patsy also has considerably more influence than the “friend” in a traditional biopic typically has.

_Coal Miner’s Daughter_, then, achieves a type of narrative authenticity by adhering to many of the genre conventions of the traditional biopic and including many of the traditional characters commonly featured in the biopic. However, it also complicates this by allowing the secondary characters to be better-rounded. Regardless, a biographical film about a country
musician must not only meet the standards of country authenticity and narrative authenticity—it must also emphasize the elements that made the artist who they were. Robert A. Rosenstone highlights this in *History on Film/Film on History*. Though he addresses the commonly held belief that people go to biographical films to simply learn the facts about a person’s life, he argues that, “Interesting as they may be, facts could be delivered with chronicles and lists of data. If facts were the aim, we would have no need of the literary form of the biography as it has developed for over two millenia” (90). Further, in his analysis of biographical films *Rosa Luxmburg, Korczak,* and *Frida*, he notes that while all three films have been criticized for the way they depicted their subjects, the criticisms the films have faced have “had more to do with emphasis than with invention” (94). In other words, while critics did not claim that the films fabricated facts, they instead have voiced objections “to the intrusion of Luxemburg’s stormy love relationships into the intensely political world of the German leftist leader; to what has been called an apparently upbeat ending that has Dr. Korczak leading his students off the boxcar bound for Auschwitz…and to the downplaying of Kahlo’s activities as a committed member of the Mexican Communist Party” (94). The narrative model and emphasis model can sometimes be at odds, then—undoubtedly, in the cases Rosenstone lists, particular emphases were chosen because they best fit the traditional biopic formula, only for some critics to argue that they did not accurately capture what was most important about those depicted.

Fortunately, this was not the case in *Coal Miner’s Daughter*; by placing the primary emphasis on Loretta’s roots in Kentucky coal mining country, her relationship with Doolittle Lynn, and her friendship with Patsy Cline, the filmmakers chose emphases that both captured who she “really” was and fit the traditional narrative framework of a biographical film. Further, all three emphases work to negotiate authenticity relative to the fourth model I identify: the “time
and space” model. As Walter Benjamin notes in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (50). In other words, a biographical film could never be truly authentic because the events cannot be recreated and reproduced in the exact time and space in which they originally occurred.

Rosenstone supports this claim; in “JFK: Historical Fact/Historical Film,” he argues,

Like a history book, a historical film—despite Hollywood’s desire for “realism”—is not a window onto the past but a construction of a past; like a history book, a film handles evidence from the past within a certain framework of possibilities and tradition of practice. For neither the writer of history nor the director of a film is historical literalism a possibility. No matter how literal-minded a director might be, film cannot do more than point to the events of the past; at best, film can approximate historic moments, the things that were once said and done, but it cannot replicate them. (337)

It would be impossible, then, for *Coal Miner’s Daughter* to accurately replicate the “time and space” in which the events depicted happened. However, I argue that a large part of the perceived authenticity of the film can be credited to the filmmakers’ efforts to do so, to firmly anchor the events in a very specific “time and space.”

Each of the three primary emphases of the film can be seen as working to do this. The early scenes in Kentucky coal mining country, for example, clearly place Loretta in a very specific location with a very specific set of options available to her. While the emphases in these early scenes are her relationship with her family and her then-budding romance with Doolittle Lynn, we are repeatedly reminded of the very specific problems facing Kentucky coal miners. Loretta’s father suffers from headaches because of the coal dust, and when a minor character
reminds Doolittle Lynn that the only three options available to men born in Butcher Holler are “coal mine, moonshine, and movin’ on down the line,” it is not simply to foreshadow Doolittle and Loretta’s eventual “move on down the line”—it is to remind the audience of the extremely limited options available to those living in this region.

Loretta’s life with Doolittle further places the characters in the context of a very specific time and space, and further reinforces Loretta’s previously mentioned gendered country identity. In the very first scene in which we see the two after their move to Washington, we see that years have passed; Loretta is now surrounded by four children, and when Doolittle comes home and asks her what she did that day, she responds with a list of household tasks—making seventeen quarts of apple butter, fixing the stopped up sink—all the while continually interrupting herself to tell this child to stop kicking his brother, that child that she can’t leave the table until she cleans her plate. She concludes her list with, “And then I cooked supper. And I’m about ready to die.” Her life, in other words, is quite typical of a working-class housewife; it only changes because of her talent as a singer. She is not removed from the world of her audience, then, but placed firmly in it. Further, she is once again placed in the traditional “country” discourse of the home.

Loretta’s friendship with Patsy Cline also firmly places her in a specific “time and space,” as do the appearance of the actual Minnie Pearl and Ernest Tubb; Loretta is firmly positioned alongside other performers of the era, so that even the viewer of the film who happens to be unfamiliar with Lynn can be clear about the time period in which she is performing. Further, “time and space” are further established by the presence of iconic Nashville landmarks. At the conclusion of Doolittle and Loretta’s initial trip visiting country radio stations throughout the South in an effort to get her first single played, Loretta wakes up in the backseat of their car
and realizes that she is alone. Initially, she calls out for Doolittle; when she looks out the window, however, her mouth falls open. The camera moves to follow her gaze, and the audience, along with her, instantly realizes that she is in front of the Ryman Auditorium. Merely the presence of this landmark serves to situate the film in “time and space”; the Ryman is an instantly recognizable building that is recognizable to most country music fans as the original site of the Grand Ole Opry. Its presence both instantly indicates to the viewer that the movie has actually been filmed in Nashville and communicates a sense of history; many viewers might, upon seeing the building, share Loretta’s visible awe at the sight of a place in which so many noteworthy country musicians have performed. Other noteworthy Nashville landmarks (such as Legends Bar, which Doolittle visits during Loretta’s first appearance on the Grand Ole Opry, and Ernest Tubb’s record store) perform a similar function. Though some of these landmarks—Legends Bar, for example—are not even named in the film, they are instantly recognizable to anyone who has been in Nashville, either in the past or in the present. Their presence works to convince the viewer that the actors are really in Nashville, that even though the events depicted in the film are being recreated years after they initially happened, they are occurring in the place at which they actually occurred. Sissy Spacek stands and performs on the same Opry stage that Loretta Lynn once actually stood and performed on (in fact, Spacek and Lynn were known to appear on the Grand Ole Opry together during the development of the film); Tommy Lee Jones has a beer at the very same bar that Doolittle Lynn had a beer at. Thus, a kind of authenticity is achieved that would not be there had the same events been recreated on soundstages in Hollywood; the fact that the closing credits of the film declare that the film was “filmed entirely on location in Kentucky and Tennessee” indicate that the filmmakers are firmly aware of the importance of this. These iconic places, then, help to situate the events of the film in a specific
place, while performers like Cline, Tubb, and Pearl, situate the film in a specific time\textsuperscript{6}.

Benjamin further states that “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity”; with this in mind, it is important to note that on the 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary edition of the \textit{Coal Miner’s Daughter} DVD, Loretta Lynn is literally present in an interview with director Michael Apted, and that this perhaps goes further than anything in establishing the film’s authenticity. In the interview, Lynn’s answers to Apted’s questions can be seen as authenticating the film; she insists, first, on her own authenticity, stating firmly that she has never changed, and that “If I had to change to be a singer, I wouldn’t have been a singer”; when Apted asks her to confirm that she never lost touch with her roots, she readily does so. She discusses her own extensive involvement with the film, stating that she, herself, handpicked Sissy Spacek to play her; Spacek then spent a year with her, off and on, learning to sing and talk like her—so successfully, in fact, that Lynn states that at one point, her own daughters told her to “stop talking like Sissy Spacek.” She talks about how her husband taught Tommy Lee Jones to drive the bulldozer that he had to drive in one part of the film, praising Jones’s performance and lamenting the fact that he didn’t win any awards for it. Ultimately, she confesses that she can’t even watch the film, because “there’s too much real in it.” The film, then, is authentic simply because she says it is; with this in mind, it stands to reason that the \textit{biographical film itself} must not only be authentic relative to multiple models. It must also be endorsed by the person portrayed in order to be considered “real.” This opens up questions about what happens when

\textsuperscript{6} Non-biographical country-themed movies take similar measures to establish authenticity. In the 1993 film \textit{The Thing Called Love}, which chronicles fictional Miranda Presley’s quest to become a songwriter in Nashville, the Ryman Auditorium is also featured prominently; she also performs and waits tables at the Bluebird Café, a venue known for showcasing up-and-coming songwriters. Popular country singers of the time also appear in the film; for example, in a scene in which Miranda and a fellow songwriter are arrested after trying to sneak a demo tape into country singer Trisha Yearwood’s car, Trisha Yearwood actually appears at the jail to confront the two. Undoubtedly, the presence of such landmarks and performers helps to create the illusion that Miranda is actually a songwriter living in Nashville in the early 1990s.
the artist is not around to authenticate the film, or when the artist’s family refuses to authenticate it, which will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

Of course, it should further be noted that whether or not it is even the aim of the biographical film to be truly authentic has often been a subject of debate. In “The Act You’ve Known All These Years: Telling the Tale of the Beatles,” Ian Inglis speculates as to the purpose of biographical films, wondering, “Is it to accurately relate historical events in order to present a ‘mechanical reproduction of reality’? Is it to manipulate reality by presenting ‘specific materials combined together to fabricate a history’? Or is it to fashion a commercially attractive product in which ‘reality matters less than spectacle’”? In his view, then, authenticity is only one of several possible purposes of the biopic; other possible purposes might be to project a desired history or to simply make a commercially viable product. Michael Dunne, author of *American Film Musical Themes and Forms*, denies that any sort of authenticity is a primary goal of the biographical film, arguing that “biographical accuracy is not really what these films are about. The songs…are their real subjects as well as the shows mounted…to showcase such songs” (146). Regardless, when one looks at a film like *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, which strives so hard for authenticity, it is hard to deny that authenticity is often an important aim of the biographical film; further, as Inglis states, “although not intended as historical records, these films—with their inconsistencies, contradictions, and uncertainties—have the capacity to become histories” (81). Custen agrees, stating that, “Hollywood biographies are not real because they are believable. Rather, one must treat them as real because, despite the obvious distortions ranging from the minor to the outright camp, Hollywood films are believed to be real by many viewers” (7). Thus, whether or not a given biopic is factually accurate, whether or not it even aims to be authentic, such films are viewed by many as “real,” and in turn, must be treated as such.
With this in mind, when a film is considered authentic by as many different critics and audiences as *Coal Miner’s Daughter* was, it can provide us with a useful example with which to understand how other biopics achieve, or fail to achieve, the perception of authenticity. This is important in that authenticity continues to be the main standard by which both the biographical film and country music are evaluated by. Thus, when a film is almost universally determined to be authentic by *all* standards, we must ask why—and then, in turn, ask if there is anything problematic about such standards of authenticity.

One potential problem is that *Coal Miner’s Daughter* simply enacts the standards of authenticity without being critical of them. We are not supposed to, for example, question whether it really is problematic for Loretta to be out on the road while her husband is home with the children—we are simply to observe the negative effects that her doing so has on her life. While *Coal Miner’s Daughter* is in many ways a traditional rags-to-riches story, and Loretta Lynn an example that anyone from any background can achieve great success, the price that she pays for that success could lead the film to read as a cautionary tale.

Additionally, there is the possibility that because the film follows the contours of the biographical film so closely—and was considered successful doing so—that other filmmakers will choose to simply repeat the formula without the film’s attention to nuance and variation. Indeed, there is evidence that this has in fact happened; many of the musician biopics that have been produced in the more than twenty-five years since *Coal Miner’s Daughter* have been very formulaic, highlighting the performer’s rise from obscurity, struggles with relationship and substance abuse problems, and ultimate return to the stage.

Finally, one has to consider what happens when a film is determined to have gotten it completely “right,” when it has been determined to be *the* definitive account of a performer’s
life. Arguably, when such a thing occurs little room is left for alternate accounts of that person’s
life to emerge. Viewers are also potentially less inclined to read beyond the text, to seek out
other information about the performer’s life; after all, if they have been assured that they have
just seen the “real” story, then why should they?

Coal Miner’s Daughter is useful, however, in that it provides us with a model to proceed
from, a way of understanding what singers, tropes, and filmmaking modes are considered
“authentic” by critics and fans. With it in mind, then, we can proceed to examining what
happens when a film is deemed inauthentic by fans and critics; how authenticity is negotiated in
a changed media landscape; and how authenticity is negotiated in different genres.
CHAPTER II.

“I JUST WANT TO MAKE IT RIGHT”: SWEET DREAMS, EMPHASIS, AND CAPTURING THE “REAL” PATSY CLINE

In “Patsy Cline’s Crossovers: Celebrity, Reputation, and Feminine Identity,” Joli Jensen, who has written multiple academic articles on the star, reflects on the time in her career when she first became interested in writing about the singer. Upon discovering in the late 1970s that the performer had been largely untouched by country music scholarship, Jensen decided to write the star’s biography and conducted a series of interviews with people Cline had known. However, she notes that a series of incidents kept her from writing the biography, incidents that, as she states, “showed me that the Patsy I had created for myself was significantly different from the Patsy I was finding, in ways that meant that I couldn’t really understand her life” (129). One experience that discouraged her from the project was meeting Cline’s second husband, Charlie Dick; as she writes, “During my first summer of research he was courteous to me and told me his collection of Patsy Cline stories, but I knew, after talking to him, that if she loved this man, then I could not ever understand her well enough to write a good biography” (130). The incident highlights the fact that our preconceived ideas of reality often have little to do with reality itself; the image Jensen had created of Cline had little to do with who Cline really was. Further, Jensen was somewhat bothered by the fact that her expectations were shattered even though those expectations were largely based on fiction.

An inability to understand Cline’s relationship with Dick did not stop future biographers. In fact, when a biographical film was made of Cline’s life in 1985 (Karel Reisz’s Sweet Dreams, starring Jessica Lange) it was framed as the love story of Patsy Cline and Charlie Dick; as the theatrical trailer for the film proclaimed, “They fought harder, loved more, and went further than
most people ever dream.” In other words, the very aspect of Cline’s life that Jensen absolutely could not understand, that didn’t fit with the image of the woman she believed Cline to be, was the very frame viewers were given to make sense of the singer. Though the choice of emphasis is perhaps surprising given Jensen’s experiences, however, it is not surprising given the typical contours of the musician biopic; as noted in the previous chapter, romance is often a central focus of such films. Further, as anyone who has seen even two or three musical biopics knows, a biographical film is often about the obstacles the singer had to overcome to achieve greatness, whether those obstacles arrive in the form of poverty, physical handicap, racism, family trauma, domestic abuse, drug addiction, or a combination of the above. Thus, since Cline’s relationship with Dick was tumultuous and featured episodes of abuse, it provides a seemingly logical focus around which to center a narrative of her life.

Both Jensen’s scholarship and other sources, such as Margaret Jones’s 1994 biography of the singer point at other, more complex reasons for the chosen emphasis. Such sources indicate that Cline’s life was a complex one, and that Cline herself was a difficult woman to understand; many aspects of her life, career, and personality, in fact, seemed almost contradictory. She was a woman who fiercely insisted on being a country singer in an industry that strongly encouraged her to “go pop”; a singer who was often dismissed as “not country enough” in her own lifetime only to be redefined as the personification of “authentic” country years after her death; a performer who was often reviled for wearing makeup and sexy costumes onstage but who was considered by many contemporaries to be “just one of the guys.” She constructed her onstage persona in a way that was intentionally different from the other popular female country singers of the time yet was helpful and friendly to performers like Loretta Lynn and June Carter. After her death, such friends would be unable or unwilling to explain the more controversial aspects of
her life (such as the fact that she had had affairs with married men and strayed in both of her own marriages) yet would be similarly unwilling to condemn her for such actions; as Jensen notes in “Posthumous Patsy Clines: Constructions of Identity in Hillbilly Heaven,” “my early interviews with those who worked with her gave me a series of stories that tried, awkwardly, to construct a rowdy Saint Patsy—rough but with a heart of gold, always generous and giving” (134). Jensen cites a 1996 New York Times Magazine article by Rosanne Cash in which Cash recounts hitting a brick wall when asking her stepmother, June Carter, about “the disjuncture between the voice and the body and Patsy’s ‘roughness’”; when asked whether she was disappointed when she met Cline, Carter had responded, “I wouldn’t want that to be said—she was ahead of her time, that’s all” (qtd. in Jensen, “Posthumous Patsy Clines” 130).

As Jensen notes, “‘ahead of her time’ has complex meaning in relation to Patsy. Those in the Nashville community can use it to describe the style of her singing, but they also used it, in interviews with me, as a coded way to say that she slept around” (“Posthumous Patsy Clines” 127). It is with the complexity of Cline’s life and personality, as well as with the unwillingness of those close to her to see her “smeared,” in mind that it becomes clear why choosing an emphasis for a filmed biography of Cline’s life would be difficult—and why any filmed biography that did emerge would be almost sure to disappoint some, if not most. Indeed, Sweet Dreams failed to garner either the acclaim or the fan support that Coal Miner’s Daughter had earned five years earlier; though the performances in the film (by Jessica Lange, who received an Academy Award nomination for her portrayal of Cline; Ed Harris, who played Charlie Dick; and Ann Wedgworth, who played Cline’s mother, Hilda Hensley) were almost universally lauded, reviews of the film were largely mixed (with Chicago Sun-Times critic Roger Ebert determining it “silly” that the film had even been made), and, as Jensen notes, “for many, the ‘real’ Patsy
Cline has not been captured by the movies and books that have been written about her” (“Patsy Cline’s Crossovers” 120).

Jensen herself acknowledges the capturing the “real” Patsy Cline would be difficult, if not impossible. “Is there a real Patsy Cline?” she wonders in “Posthumous Patsy Cline,” noting that her own interviews with those who had known Cline had “offered an only partly narrativized Patsy Cline, a semi-formed story of a rough, rowdy woman with a beautiful voice and a heart of gold”: “The ‘real’ Patsy,” she determined, “is also, always, revisionist” (130). Thus, attempting to capture the “real” Patsy Cline would seemingly be an exercise in futility. Other sources point to the fact that any film made about Patsy Cline would be at a distinct disadvantage in terms of obtaining credibility due to the fact that such a film would not be based on Cline’s own words, on her own story of herself. In Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation, Leigh Gilmore notes that “autobiography provokes fantasies of the real” (16). Though her use of the word “fantasies,” along with her later assertion that “this seeming real is, in no small part, fantasy,” indicates that an autobiographical text may be no more objectively truthful than a biographical text or even fiction, viewers and readers undoubtedly believe that a text written or produced by the person that it is about provides a more credible construction than would a text produced by someone else.

One need only to look to Coal Miner’s Daughter for evidence that this is true. While, in the previous chapter, I demonstrated that Coal Miner’s Daughter was constructed as authentic through its use of traditional “country” tropes; through its narrative structure; through its chosen emphases; and through its contextualization of the events depicted within a specific “time and space,” I also acknowledged that it was automatically granted a certain degree of authenticity due to a number of other factors. It gained authenticity because the film was based on Loretta
Lynn’s autobiography; because Lynn herself handpicked Sissy Spacek to star in the film; and because Lynn taught Spacek to sing and speak like her. One might reasonably argue, then, that Cline’s inability to be involved with the film made about her, along with the fact that Cline never wrote an autobiography in her tragically short life, would immediately render any film made about her more susceptible to criticism than a film like *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, which was made with the full support and cooperation of the person depicted.

It is for these reasons that some might dismiss *Sweet Dreams* without even looking at the film itself, that some might argue that little analysis is necessary to determine why *Sweet Dreams* failed to become as beloved among fans and critics as *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, why *Sweet Dreams* was branded inauthentic while *Coal Miner’s Daughter* has left a lasting impression not only on fans of Lynn, but on the musical biopic genre. However, I argue that to ignore the text of *Sweet Dreams* itself is to waste a valuable opportunity to examine several important questions and issues, including why a romantic emphasis might be chosen when other aspects of a singer’s life would arguably make a more compelling narrative; why a romantic emphasis is sometimes inappropriate even though it is an enduring trope of the musical biopic genre; what gets lost when a filmmaker privileges one aspect of a performer’s life and career over others; and finally, the consequences of releasing a film about a performer that leaves many viewers unsatisfied.

Before embarking on such an examination, however, it is important to acknowledge that much, if not most, of *Sweet Dreams* cannot be definitively labeled as factually inaccurate. While undoubtedly, the filmmakers took some liberties with certain events and with the particulars of private conversations (as all filmmakers must) much of what is present in the film—Patsy’s feisty, outspoken personality; her boredom in her first marriage to Gerald Cline; her close friendship with her mother; her volatile relationship with Charlie Dick; and even small details
like how and where she and Dick first met are verifiable in other sources. While the veracity of some of the events depicted in the film have been contested—Dick, for example, has denied that he was abusive towards Cline—they have not been proven to be certifiably untrue. One can conclude, then, that *Sweet Dreams* was not deemed “inauthentic” because of inaccuracies, but rather, because the chosen emphasis did not correspond with many viewers’ perception of who Cline was as a performer, did not give viewers a picture of what made her who she was. This supports the previously cited Robert Rosenstone claim that objections to biographical films typically have more to do “with emphasis than invention” (94).

With that in mind, it is necessary to turn our attention to the primary emphasis of *Sweet Dreams*: Cline’s relationship with Charlie Dick. We are introduced to Charlie in the film’s very first scene, even, in fact, before we are introduced to Patsy. We see him squealing into a parking lot at night with a woman in the passenger seat, squealing for him to slow down; he ultimately pulls into a parking spot so tight that he and his date have to climb out awkwardly, and when she complains, he laughs it off. From the beginning, then, Charlie is established as something of a “wild man.”

Patsy Cline is the singer at the dance that Charlie and his date attend, and Charlie is captivated by her (to the point that eventually, his date dances by with another man, offering a sarcastic, “Thanks for bringing me, Charlie.”) A friend fills Charlie in on who Patsy is, along with two very important details: that you “don’t dare Patsy if you don’t want it done,” and that

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7 In “Posthumous Patsy Clines,” Jensen includes a quote from Charlie Dick in which he states, “Sure, we argued, we were fightin’ all the time, we had a passionate relationship. But we didn’t do knock-down, drag-out fighting’. Not once” (130). Jones’s biography, however, includes quotes from contemporaries of Patsy’s about the abuse—some saw evidence of it; some say Patsy spoke to them about it; and others suspected it based on what they did see of Patsy and Charlie’s relationship. The fact that there is any controversy at all over the matter illustrates the issues that arise when a person is not alive to verify an incident; because the abuse would have happened behind closed doors, Charlie and Patsy are the only two people who can definitively “know” what happened. Thus, when others say that they saw evidence of the abuse or that Patsy told them about it, there is potential for those claims to be dismissed as untrue.
Patsy is married. The first seems to only increase Charlie’s interest in her, and the second
doesn’t deter him; in fact, he approaches her later that night and makes his intentions clear: “I
want to take you out. I want to drive you someplace for a drink. I want to dance with you
awhile, and then I want to get to know you a lot better.” She isn’t impressed: “Well, people in
Hell want ice water. That don’t mean they get it.”

It soon becomes clear, however, that it isn’t her marriage that keeps her from accepting
his offer. Though Charlie is the first character that we are introduced to in *Sweet Dreams*, it is
Patsy who we follow at the end of the night. Her mother, Hilda Hensley, picks her up after the
dance (Patsy rather gleefully tells her about the encounter with Charlie, and her mother shares
stories of her own experiences with men when she was younger, with Patsy interrupting now and
then to laugh or to make an enthusiastic, approving comment), and takes her home to her
husband, who is home building a model ship. He asks her how the show went, and she begins
enthusiastically telling him about a song she’d sung that had gotten a particularly positive
reaction from the crowd. He responds pleasantly, but without much interest, which
understandably frustrates and irritates her; from his tone, demeanor, and the fact that he never
really looks up from his model, one can easily suspect that there are very few things she could
say to him that would provoke much of a reaction. She scolds him for not taking more of an
interest and attempts, unsuccessfully, to engage him in conversation; he is more interested in his
model, though, and when she becomes angry, he frustratedly asks why she’s “always pushing at
[him] so hard.” She exclaims that she doesn’t know—she’s just looking for a fight or a laugh, or
something. “I don’t want to fight with you!” he exclaims. “I’m not mad!” The next day she
complains to her mother about the marriage; when her mother asks, “Is he mean to you?,” she
somewhat sulkily replies, “No.” When her mother asks whether he drinks, gambles, or chases
women, Patsy responds “no” to all of the above, reflecting that she has basically a good life—so why does she have to force herself to get up in the morning?

Though that isn’t immediately clear to the audience, either, as the film continues, Patsy is consistently established as positive, enthusiastic, and driven, a woman with clear goals and a clear vision of what she wants from life—in an early conversation with Charlie Dick, she tells him that she has had her life planned out from the time she was eleven or twelve, and that she wants to be a singer; to buy a house with yellow roses all around; and to have children and raise them right. It later becomes clear that she isn’t exaggerating when she says she has wanted these things since she was young. In a scene in which she tries to convince her mother to pretend to be her agent so that she can sing on a televised talent show, she urges her to “please help [her] get [her] house with the yellow roses”; the fact that Hilda doesn’t ask what she means clearly indicates that this is something that Patsy has talked about before. This is further reinforced in another scene in which Patsy lists all of the things she wants, and Hilda teases, “You forgot the yellow roses.” Patsy developed goals from an early age, then, and started working to make them happen for herself; throughout the film she will consistently seem almost puzzled when things don’t work out the way she planned, or when things happen exactly as she hoped they would, but she doesn’t feel the way she expected to. She will consistently express a need to “make it right” and express confusion and frustration at her inability to do so. If there is one theme that is consistently repeated throughout Sweet Dreams, then, it is Patsy’s disappointment at the disparity between her dreams for her own life and the reality. Her dissatisfaction with her marriage to Gerald can be seen as one of many examples of something in her life not turning out the way she thought it would.

Her relationship with Charlie Dick would ultimately become another example of
someone or something failing to meet her expectations, though initially he will seem to be everything that Gerald Cline is not, everything that is missing from her marriage. They meet again when he comes to see her sing at a bar, and though she initially blows him off, he catches her attention when, this time, he reacts angrily: “Now that I get a good look at Patsy Cline, she don’t look so hot to me, anyway. And I don’t care if you have sung on some half-assed TV program, you don’t sing that good. You ever listen to a Kitty Wells record real close? You’d go home and slit your goddamn throat!” Rather than become angry or offended, she watches him walk away with interest. After her next set, she asks him to buy her a drink, and after he (rather crudely) dismisses her assumption that he’s just trying to get laid (he angrily says that she must think that “that thing between [her] legs is lined with gold”), the two end up dancing, talking, and having sex in the backseat of his car. She leaves Gerald Cline the very next morning, appearing on her mother’s doorstep in the same clothes that she’d worn the night before, whooping about how good she feels, and denying it when her mother suspects that she is doing this because of a man.

I opened this chapter with Jensen’s dismay at meeting Charlie Dick, with her realization that she could never understand Patsy Cline if she had loved this man. Jones’s biography indicates that several of Cline’s friends were similarly confused by and dismayed at the relationship; a friend named Patsy Lillis is quoted as saying that, “He wasn’t my pick of the litter, and I didn’t see how he’d be hers,” while another, Pat Smallwood, states that, “A lot of people didn’t like him. He drank a lot. I didn’t care for him. He was crude, very crude” (113). While their dismay and confusion is understandable given the Charlie Dick we meet in Sweet Dreams—from the beginning, he is portrayed as inconsiderate, arrogant, and, yes, crude—the film takes pains to establish that Patsy does love him, as well as to establish the reasons that
Charlie and Patsy are attracted to each other. She seems to enjoy his nerve; each time he makes a crude comment, she seems amused, rather than offended. To her, his crudeness seems to indicate that he is being “real” with her; she seems to appreciate that he doesn’t censor himself around her, that he talks to her the way that he would talk to anyone else. Charlie, on the other hand, proves that what he was told about Patsy at the dance where he first laid eyes on her—don’t dare her if you don’t want it done—was actually a major selling point. In an early scene, the two of them take a boat ride; as they row, Charlie teases her, telling her that there are snakes in the water. When she barely reacts, saying that she isn’t afraid, he dares her to jump in the water, asking how much he would have to pay her. Without missing a beat, she says that she would do it for $300. He seems surprised: “Damn, you’d really do it?”

“You got the cash?” She counters.

“I love it!” He marvels. “Oh, man, I wish I had $300!”

It is obvious even from these early scenes, however, that while Patsy enjoys the fact that Charlie is willing to challenge her, to argue with her, he doesn’t like this part of their relationship as much as she does. When the two of them banter and trade barbs, she is almost always seen smiling and laughing; it is obvious that he is almost never having as much fun, that he is much quicker to anger. This becomes terribly obvious on a day long after their wedding, after he has been drafted into the Army and she has become pregnant and put her music career on hold to join him on the Army base. He comes home one day in a bad mood, complaining that he hates the Army and the apartment that they are living in.

“Well, I’ve been places I like better, too,” she says, clearly fed up with the complaining but not really mad. “I could still be making records if I stayed home.” He says irritably that no one had asked her to come there. She laughs at this: “The hell you didn’t! You begged me!” He
says that he didn’t mean it. She exasperatedly tells him not to fuss: “I’m making chili for dinner, you like that. Let’s just be nice.” His tone immediately turns mocking: “Ohhhh, my! I’m makin’ chili and I try to be nice, but my husband’s just so rude and nasty!” She tells him to shut up; when he doesn’t, she repeats, “Why don’t you just shut your mouth?” He suggests that she try and make him. She warns him not to push her; he responds with what he knows are magic words, for her: “I dare you.” She slaps him in the face, and he slaps her back, hard enough to make her gasp, wide-eyed, and take a step back. This is not the first time an argument has become volatile; in an earlier scene, they had had an argument that had ended with him knocking over the kitchen table. It is, however, the first time that he has struck her, and she seems to realize instantly that a line has been crossed. She is not afraid of him, however, and slaps him back; when he slaps her a second time, it is with such force that she falls down. He is instantly sorry, but his apologies aren’t good enough for her. She returns to her mother’s house, where she is welcomed with open arms. The experience seems to renew Patsy’s desire to make something of herself: she tells her mother that she plans to start singing again after the baby is born, and that she knows she can make it—all it takes is one good song. She repeats the plan that she had told Charlie on their first night together, and that she has been presumably been repeating since she was eleven years old: that when she has made enough, she’ll retire and raise the baby. “I just want to make it right,” she says. It is one of the many times she will repeat the same statement throughout the film. It is here that her mother teasingly tells her that she forgot the yellow roses.

Her separation from Charlie does not last, however. She reluctantly takes him back after the baby is born, and for a time—years, even—they seem to be happy (though her mother warns her that if a man hits you once, he’ll do it again, leaving Patsy—and the audience—to wait for
the other shoe to inevitably drop). She had meant what she said when she told her mother that she was going to start singing again, however, and as her success rises, her marriage begins once again to deteriorate. She buys a house without asking Charlie, which he is resentful of. His work friends tease him for not being the primary breadwinner in his home. Everything comes to a head on a night at which she sings at a carnival that he and his friends also attend; when she finishes a set and catches him riding a carnival ride with another woman, she retaliates by dancing with another man. When she takes a break to head for the restroom, he follows her to demand what the hell she’s doing. “Same question back to you,” she responds. He says that he was just talking to the other woman; she says that that’s all she was doing, too. The argument grows consistently more heated, even though part of it takes place with him yelling at her through a bathroom door (at a particularly heated moment, she bursts out of the bathroom, pulling up her pants as she comes). He warns her to come back and sit down at his table; she tells him not to warn her, and that if he’s going to “spend the whole goddamn evening rubbin’ up against some trash with a boil on her neck, I’ll do whatever I damn please.” She ends up leaving the fair with another man (after she threatens to do so and Charlie says that he’d “like to see her try,” which of course is tantamount to a dare), and when she comes home, they have the worst—and last—fight of their relationship. The argument quickly becomes about more than just her leaving the fair with another man, and he doesn’t back down when he yells at her for not being there when “your kids want their oatmeal in the mornin’” and “when Julie pukes in bed at night.” He tries to make the argument about her not fulfilling her “proper” role in the home; she, however, won’t stand for this.

“Oh, you just lie!” she shouts. “You’ve never changed a shitty diaper in your life…That’s right, I’m not here! I’m out singin’ in every shithole between here and Kansas City
so that you can wear $30 silk shirts!” His response is to immediately rip off the silk shirt he is wearing; when, after he demands to know whether she slept with the man who had brought her home and she tells him yes, she did (though the audience knows this isn’t true), he beats her, only stopping when their daughter wanders into the room. When we see him next, he is being hauled away by the police; when we see her next, she has black eyes, and she is telling her manager that she feels like everything’s falling down around her.

“I keep saying to myself, ‘I don’t have to lead that trashy dog’s life that my daddy led my mama. I can make things different. I can make it right,’” she tells him. “And look at me! Here I am, my face all busted up, callin’ the cops in the middle of the night, and my kid saw it all.” She once again expresses dismay at being unable to “make it right,” seemingly no matter what she does. When Charlie ultimately does come to her to apologize, he will use the same language to try to get her to take him back: “Can’t we try and make it right again?” It doesn’t work—she tearfully tells him that she loves him, but she doesn’t know if she can live with him anymore. They don’t reconcile before she dies in a plane crash, and the film comes to a rather abrupt end, with scenes featuring Patsy’s funeral; Patsy’s mother telling Charlie that she thinks it best if she raises his and Patsy’s children; and Charlie, sitting alone and drinking as Patsy’s music plays in the background. The very last image that the audience is left with is of Patsy and Charlie in flashback, dancing together under a starry sky. The film’s emphasis is thus cemented: it began with Charlie and Patsy’s first meeting and ends with an image of the two of them dancing. The audience can be assured that they have just watched the love story of Patsy Cline and Charlie Dick.

With the information that neither fans nor critics were wholly satisfied with Sweet Dreams in mind, it is necessary to ask why framing the story as the “romance” of Patsy Cline
and Charlie Dick was problematic. There is, of course, the obvious—the film is clearly not a love story, but, as Jensen has noted, the story of a woman “fighting for honor and integrity in a troubled, violent marriage” (“Posthumous Patsy Clines” 124). Yet, despite the fact that the film ends with an image of Patsy and Charlie happy together, it is clear that the filmmakers don’t exactly think of this as a conventional love story, either: the audience is clearly supposed to view this as a troubled relationship, to sympathize with Patsy, and to feel relieved when she leaves him. While framing and advertising the film as a love story is misleading, then, it is unlikely that any viewer watching the film would actually view it that way; they would almost certainly view it, instead, in Jensen’s terms: as the story of a woman struggling to establish and maintain a career in the midst of an abusive marriage.

Is the film’s emphasis still problematic if viewed in that way, then? Possibly. Jensen has noted that some besides Dick have raised objections to the domestic abuse featured in the film—some that knew her refuse to believe that the Patsy they knew would have put up with such abuse. Indeed, even the viewer of Sweet Dreams who did not know Patsy might find it curious that she would refuse to leave her marriage after the first instance of abuse. In films such as What’s Love Got to Do With It?—another musician biopic in which domestic abuse plays a primary role—the victim’s reasons for staying with the abuser are made clear; in that particular film, Ike Turner is depicted as completely in control of Tina Turner’s finances and career, making it obvious to the viewer from the beginning that should she leave him, she would be starting over from scratch. Sweet Dreams establishes very early that Patsy is not financially dependent on Charlie Dick, and that he has absolutely nothing to do with either her career or her other goals for her life; though she cites, from the beginning, wanting to have children, that is a dream that she has had since she was eleven or twelve, a dream that is not tied to any specific
man. Further, Patsy is shown as having emotional support outside of her marriage to Charlie; her mother readily welcomes her into her home after Charlie hits her the first time, and often helps her with her children after Patsy returns to Charlie. In other words, Patsy doesn’t “need” Charlie in any tangible way, nor does she express, or behave in a way that indicates, that she is afraid of him; she is no less likely to challenge him or argue with him after they reconcile, and she never mentions any fear that he will come after her and hurt her or the children if she leaves. The narrative of the film makes it clear—and Lange works to depict—that Patsy stays with him only because she loves him: that she struggles with that love, that she sometimes doesn’t understand that love and even wishes that she doesn’t love him, but that she loves him. This perhaps is difficult for the viewer to understand, and potentially disturbing; if, after all, domestic violence can happen to a woman who is as strong and independent as Patsy Cline is depicted to be, than it could potentially happen to anyone. Yet Jensen argues that this aspect of Cline’s personality is one contributing factor to the 1980s “Patsy Cline revival” in the first place; as she states, “until the early 1980s, Patsy Cline was publicly invisible…in the summer of 1979 there were no readily available books or articles about her” (“Posthumous Patsy Clines” 122). A “revival” began when Beverly D’Angelo played her in Coal Miner’s Daughter, and “it is difficult, now, to find anyone conversant in American culture who hasn’t heard of Patsy Cline” (“Posthumous Patsy Clines” 123). Though she cites multiple reasons for the revival, one that she lists is that in the 1980s, “spousal abuse was becoming a prominent social issue, and the Patsy Cline story offered an ambiguous version of being a triumphant battered wife” (“Posthumous Patsy Clines” 125). The nature of her story, then, was one of the very things that made her appealing, that made people interested in her.

No, if Sweet Dreams’s emphasis on the abusive relationship between Cline and Dick
contributed to the film’s perceived lack of authenticity—and I argue that it does—it is because it was emphasized to the exclusion of other elements of her life. You will have noted that in my description of the plot of the film, I focused far more on her relationship with Dick than on the trajectory of her career; this is because the film does the same. We see her winning a TV talent contest; we hear that “Walking After Midnight” has reached #16 on the country charts; we see her appearing on the Grand Ole Opry. We see her style of dress change from cowgirlish (with her onstage costumes often featuring a cowboy hat, a shirt with fringe, a skirt, and cowboy boots) to less stereotypically country; we watch her argue with her manager over the recording of certain songs, such as “Crazy”—it doesn’t mean anything to her, and she doesn’t feel that she can sing it the same way that the song’s writer, Willie Nelson, sings it on the demo. But all of this happens in the margins of her relationship to Charlie, as if it is secondary, or only there to move her and Charlie’s “love story” along—the phone rings with the news of her #16 song seemingly to interrupt an uncomfortable conversation between Patsy and Charlie; her appearance on the Grand Ole Opry seems to happen to prompt a tender conversation between the two of them in the car afterward.

It is important to establish that this is quite a departure from the role romantic relationships play in the typical musician biopic. While romantic relationships are often a significant part of the biographical film, it is rare for romance to provide the frame for the film; musician biopics are typically about the musician’s rise, fall, and subsequent return to greatness. Further, when romance is prominently featured, it is often because the star’s romantic partner factored heavily into their career in some way. For example, in Coal Miner’s Daughter, Doolittle Lynn features prominently in the story because he was also a prominent figure in the start of Loretta’s music career—he prompted her to leave Butcher Holler, bought her her first
guitar, got her her first gig at a honky tonk, and took her on a cross-country road trip promoting her first single at radio stations. *What’s Love Got to Do With It?* prominently features Tina’s relationship with husband Ike for similar reasons; it is Ike who discovers her, Ike who was her duet partner for many years. Additionally, while both women’s husbands figure into the narratives of their lives significantly, both films end, like most musician biopics, with the heroine’s triumphant return to the stage after a time away from it (Lynn, because she struggled with addiction to prescription drugs, and Turner, because she had to rebuild her career after divorcing Ike and losing the rights to the songs they had performed together); *Sweet Dreams*, as previously noted, ends with a flashback of Charlie and Patsy dancing under a starry sky. Clearly, then, while *Coal Miner’s Daughter* and *What’s Love Got to Do With It?* can be defined as narratives about lives and careers in which romantic partners played a crucial role, *Sweet Dreams* can be defined as a romance; it just so happened that one of the partners in said romance was struggling to start, and then maintain, a music career. With this in mind, if part of *Sweet Dreams*’s perceived lack of authenticity can be attributed to its chosen emphasis, the film can also be seen as “violating” the typical narrative model of the musician biopic, and may have been seen as unpalatable for that reason, as well.

The film also obscures one of the major tensions in Cline’s career: her desire to stay country in a business that thought she was more suited to being a pop singer. As Jensen states in “Patsy Cline, Musical Negotiation, and the Nashville Sound,”

Patsy Cline defined herself as a country singer, and her Nashville career was shaped by her unwillingness to adopt a pop sound and image. The continuing irony of her career was that her pop styled material was what made her wildly successful, while her country material had appeal mainly on the Opry and live shows. Patsy desperately wanted
success, and yet she balked at achieving it by crossing over into the pop record market.

(41)

She further explains in her book, *The Nashville Sound*, that Cline initially hated her first big hit, “Walkin’ After Midnight,” saying, “But that’s nothing but a little ole pop song”; the song’s writer, Donn Hecht, countered with, “And you’re nothing but a little ole pop singer that lives in the country” (100). *Sweet Dreams* does not highlight this tension; in fact, it all but claims the opposite was true, as illustrated in a scene in which Patsy and Charlie drive home after a concert and she tells him that one of her songs is #9 on the pop charts: “I’m a crossover!,” she tells him delightedly. This is misleading, especially when one learns of what country music meant to Cline, and of the importance she placed on being considered country. As Jones explains, Patsy’s style was initially heavily influenced by Patsy Montana, “the first female country soloist to dress in full cowgirl regalia, complete with fringe, boots, hat and, in one publicity still, a six-shooter” (15). Jones goes on to note that there are very good reasons that Cline would have wanted to imitate Montana’s style; as she states,

…while the female lead in most cowboy movies added up to little more than occasionally saying, “He went thataway,” Montana’s popularity remained high throughout the forties, when she was a fixture on radio barn dances. As a cowgirl, she presented an alternative to the long-suffering wife, dutiful daughter and rube comedienne, the stock female characters of country. She was sassy and independent, on an equal footing with the cowboy who was her buddy, whether a friend or a lover. (16)

Thus, in country music Cline found a female role model unlike those she found in other genres of music. For this reason, it was very important to her to identify as a country musician.

Jones highlights other reasons, among them her desire to join the Grand Ole Opry. As
Jones notes, “the Opry’s cast of wild characters made her feel that being different was something you could be proud of” (17). Further, the singers on the Opry “could present the extremes of emotion, hope, sorrow, pleasure, sex, violence, adventure. They were bigger than life” (17). Once again, then, in country music she found people to identify with and aspire to that she found few other places. Thus, her desire to be a country singer was a large part of who Cline was; in Sweet Dreams, then, the relegation of Cline’s singing career to something that happened “in the margins” of her relationship with Dick obscures this tension.

Another possible reason for this tension’s exclusion, however, lies in the fact that this tension has become somewhat unimportant in the legacy Cline has left country music, due to the changing ways in which “country authenticity” has been defined over the years. As Jensen notes, while it is difficult for contemporary country fans to understand why Cline was not always defined as “really” country, “the country music sound that is associated with Patsy, and with the Nashville Sound, was dismissed, in the late 1970s, as a dilution, a homogenization, a commercialization of country music. Those on Music Row were accused of having ‘sold out’ country music” (124). However, she further notes that “the Nashville Sound has been redefined as an age of authenticity. The heritage of the Nashville Sound is still with us, except now it is used to criticize today’s hat acts” (128). Once we understand this, then, it becomes easier to understand why the tension inherent in Cline’s career, the struggle Cline went through to remain “authentically” country, may have been erased from her story: it isn’t considered important anymore. It was an important part of Cline’s life, but not of her legacy, and thus, has been erased from the filmic version of her life.

Additionally, other details about Cline’s career suggest that she was an entirely different type of country singer than was Loretta Lynn, and that this difference alone may account for why
capturing her life on film might have been difficult. As Jocelyn Neal notes, while “within the canonical body of country music, there are many performers who emerge as author and voice though their entire repertoire,” there are also “artists whose ability to interpret a song as masterful performers provides them with their role within the genre” (113). However, while she notes that while artists in the second group—of which Patsy Cline is a part—are “regarded as master storytellers…craftspeople of the highest ability as singers…they lack the same overt presence of a reflexive identity or autobiographical connection that consumes the work of other singers” (113). Thus, since Patsy Cline, while known for her abilities as a singer and a performer, was not a songwriter, and did not perform autobiographical songs, her biography was less available to listeners than was Loretta Lynn’s even in life.

In fact, some have written that the songs Cline sang were almost contradictory to the persona she projected in song. As Mary Harron has observed, “Patsy’s true mode is existential loneliness: an isolation so complete that it comes as a surprise to hear that she had a husband and children” (qtd. in Jensen, “Patsy Cline’s Crossovers,” 123). She further notes that Cline’s songs didn’t provide the type of detail that characterized the music of singers like Tammy Wynette and Loretta Lynn; as she observes, in Cline’s music, “There’s no Tennessee mountain home, no trailer park, no runny-nosed kids or dishes in the sink” (qtd in Jensen, “Patsy Cline’s Crossovers,” 123). Her music, then, was of a style that didn’t paint a clear picture of the life she led; as Jensen notes, “the semiotic Patsy…has been constructed in ways that suppress or eliminate the particular life…Instead, she offers a ‘promising bundle’ of signifiers that can be detached from their origins in an actual life, while gaining significance from the hints of that life—abuse, misery, loneliness—and beliefs about triumph over it” (124). If the “real” Patsy was difficult to capture onscreen, then, it might partly because her music was absent of the concrete
details that let listeners know who she “really” was. This is in no way a condemnation of her music; rather, it suggests that some types of singers are easier to “know,” and thus recreate, than others.

The film does make one aspect of Patsy Cline’s identity as a country music singer clear: her unwillingness to be lumped in with the current model for female country singers. Though the other sources I have cited indicate that she was generous and encouraging of the female country singers that emerged slightly after her on the music scene, she was not eager to be placed in the same category with Kitty Wells, “one of the few other [female] country music options of the time” (112). Though during a previously described conversation with Charlie, Charlie suggests that Patsy would “slit her goddamned throat” if she listened to Kitty Wells closely, scenes elsewhere in the film suggest otherwise. In one, Patsy is shown ironing while Kitty Wells plays in the background, Patsy mutters, “Bitch, you don’t sing, you whine.” Further, when Patsy meets with a Nashville music executive who assumes that she wants to be the next Kitty Wells, Patsy is quick to respond, “Hell no, I want to be Hank Williams.” Clearly, Patsy both had problems with Kitty Wells’s music and saw the limitations of being shuttled into the “girl singer” role; as Jensen notes, “in the public country music world of the 1950s, girl singer meant modest or demure” (“Patsy Cline’s Crossovers” 112). Patsy certainly didn’t fit the model, as both the film and Jensen demonstrate: she “was sexually frank, swore, drank, and held her own in male company” (“Patsy Cline’s Crossovers” 112). If Patsy’s life doesn’t exactly fit easily into generic film formulas, then, it is perhaps because Patsy herself didn’t fit easily into either country music or gender formulas, herself.

Despite Cline’s disdain for Kitty Wells, many sources emphasize Cline’s friendships and willingness to help out other female country singers. Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann,
for example, open the Patsy Cline chapter in *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music* with a story from Brenda Lee, who once toured with Patsy Cline:

> I was about eleven or twelve, and it was one of those dates where the promoter took the money; and my mother and I were left stranded in Texas. We had no money, and we had nobody to send us any money. We had no way to get back home. Patsy was traveling in a big Cadillac limousine. She just took us under her wing—put us in the car, fed us, gave us money, and took care of us for a week or so until we could work a few more dates and get enough money to get home. (240)

The chapter is peppered with similar tales from other contemporaries of Cline. The forewords to Jones’s Cline biography and Ellis Nassour’s *Honky Tonk Angel: The Intimate Story of Patsy Cline* paint a similar picture. In *Patsy*, Loretta Lynn writes that,

> Patsy was my closest girlfriend in life. But she wasn’t just my girlfriend. She was my protector. She looked out for me. She taught me how to dress. She taught me how to get on and off the stage, how to wear makeup, how to start a show and how to leave people wanting more at the end. She made sure I had clothes to wear and many times when she bought an outfit for herself, she’d buy one for me just like it. She bought curtains for my house because I was too broke to buy ‘em. (vii)

Similarly, in *Honky Tonk Angel*, Dottie West speaks of the star as both a mentor and as a generous person who was willing to help out during trying times; as she writes,

> More than anything, I watched her. And I learned from her. It was unbelievable the way I looked up to her. Patsy not only put feeling into her music but also her entire self. Until I studied Patsy onstage, I just sang songs. I knew I’d never be able to duplicate Patsy, and I became determined to try…Like everyone, she had ego, but what amazed
me was how she wasn’t afraid of competition. She knew how good she was and encouraged all of us. Patsy had a heart of gold offstage. She was always giving to all of us just starting out. The stories are endless—she gave advice, food, clothes, costumes, furniture. (x)

The narrative told by Patsy Cline’s contemporaries, then, is that of a generous woman who was confident in her own abilities and worked to help her peers become better at what they did; this is also the Patsy Cline played by Beverly D’Angelo in Coal Miner’s Daughter, with Cline serving as a role model and best friend to Loretta Lynn. In Sweet Dreams, however, Patsy is never seen interacting with her contemporaries; in the world set up in the film, Patsy’s world is limited to Charlie, her mother and sister, her manager, and her bandmates. As noted in the previous chapter, in order to appear truly authentic, a biographical film must firmly place its subject in the “time and space” in which their life occurred; though Sweet Dreams does take pains to recreate details such as the clothing and cars of the period in which the film takes place (the 1950s and early 1960s), it fails, for the most part, to place her in context with her contemporaries, something that Coal Miner’s Daughter—with the inclusion of performers such as Cline, Ernest Tubb, and Minnie Pearl in the narrative—does work hard to do. Thus, a viewer watching Sweet Dreams who is unfamiliar with Cline would not, if not for the film’s passing references to Hank Williams and Kitty Wells, have a musical context to place Cline in. Failing to place Cline in context with her contemporaries, then, both leaves out a significant part of who she was to many people and takes her outside of the musical context in which she performed. This makes it clear, then, that the film’s romantic emphasis also obscured Patsy’s role in the “time and space” in which she was located.

While it has been necessary for me to look outside of the text of Sweet Dreams in order to
determine what aspects of Cline’s life the film’s “romantic” emphasis obscures, it is important to note that the film itself hints at, but does not explore, other aspects of Cline’s life that may have given more insight as to who the woman was. In a scene in which Patsy and Charlie talk while Charlie takes a bath, a comment that Charlie makes reminds her of something that her father used to say, and Patsy, with bitterness in her voice, says that she hopes that her father rots in hell. When Charlie asks her what she means, she says that her father “tried some stuff with [her] one time”; Charlie, alarmed, tries to press the subject further, but Patsy quickly dismisses the subject, and when the phone rings, the conversation abruptly ends. The two never discuss the subject again, though Patsy once again makes vague references to it when, after Charlie beats her, she speaks to her manager of the “trashy dog’s life” her mother lived with her father, and dismayed of her own inability to keep from repeating the same mistakes. There is also, of course, Patsy’s repeated insistence that she wants to “make it right.” She never says what “it” is, but it is clear that there is something in her past that she is trying to fix, or make up for. Jones provides further insight into this. As she reports,

As an adult, Patsy broadly alluded to an incestuous relationship with Sam [her father] to a handful of friends with whom she felt safe in unloading the secret burden of guilt and shame she bore. Several girlfriends from Winchester [Virginia, where she grew up], Loretta Lynn, June Carter, songwriters Donn (“Walkin’ After Midnight”) Hecht and Mae Boren Axton, were among those in whom she confided. Understandably, many of her friends remained guarded discussing the details of a taboo subject that caused Patsy so much pain and confusion, and for which she would extract promises, as she did with Loretta, to “take this to your grave.” (10)

Jones also notes that this aspect of Cline’s life was initially supposed to explored with more
depth in the film; as she notes, Cline’s mother believed that it was integral to understanding who Cline was. Jones speaks of Hensley’s conversations with film producer Schwartz in which Hensley spoke openly about the abusive relationship and emphasized its importance; Schwartz, in turn, “promised to depict the relationship...with discretion” (12). Indeed, Jones reports that in the original screenplay, the abuse was “alluded to in several key scenes”; scenes were even shot. In the end, however, the scenes ended up on the cutting room floor because, as screenwriter Robert Getchell said, they “didn’t turn out well” (Jones 12). There was speculation, however, that “the movie’s director was out of his league in handling a dicey subject like incest” (12). This speaks to a very real reason that some details of a person’s life might be left out of a biographical film; while some might be obscured because they don’t fit the narrative the director is trying to tell about the person’s life, others might be left out because they are too difficult to deal with, or deal with well, in the space of an hour-and-a-half to two-hour film that must also deal with other events and issues.

Indeed, it is hard to picture a film that could deal with it all: Patsy’s relationship with Charlie Dick, which was inarguably important to her as a person, whether or not it figured significantly into her career; her troubled childhood; her friendships with other female performers; and her impact on country music. One must ask, then, whether it might be okay if one film cannot “do it all,” cannot handle every aspect of a complex life and personality. Today some viewers might go into a biographical film expecting that they are going to get the “whole, real” story of a performer’s life. As Rosenstone has suggested, maybe they shouldn’t. Maybe they should accept that any given film is only going to be one possible story about that life, and expect that they may have to go elsewhere—to books, to albums, to newspaper and magazine articles, to television specials—to learn more.
Some scholars would heavily argue in favor of this, argue, in fact, that having one agreed-upon narrative about a performer’s life is extremely limiting. In “Karen: The Hagiographic Impulse in the Public Memory of a Pop Star,” Peggy J. Bowers and Stephanie Houston Grey, discuss the ways in which the Carpenter family has tried to control Karen Carpenter’s memory since the singer’s 1983 death, and the ways in which the alternative narratives that have emerged have actually created a much more complex, more “real” portrait of who the singer was. As they argue, “after her death, the Carpenter family attempted to maintain Karen’s marketability by reinforcing images of Karen’s virginal sainthood…, thus unconsciously promoting both anorexic stereotypes and the myth of her martyrdom”; it has been only through challenges to the primary narrative told about her, such as Todd Haynes’s film Superstar, that Carpenter’s narrative has been “reread…in such a way that the sources of her pathology are accurately portrayed and a more complex analysis of feminine identity rendered” (102, 115-116). In other words, both Carpenter herself and the nature of anorexia have become better understood because of the alternative narratives about her that have emerged. Thus, Carpenter’s example indicates that it is dangerous to ever accept one perspective, or one narrative, on a person as “complete”; to even begin to understand someone, we must examine multiple narratives and perspectives.

Even Bowers and Grey note that this can be extremely problematic, however, as there are inevitably people close to a celebrity who are very insistent that a specific narrative of the person’s life be told; the Carpenters, for example, have gone so far as to threaten lawsuits against Haynes and suppress distribution of his film for his representation of Karen’s anorexia as “a sort of self-destructive bid for control over her own life in response to her overbearing family” (111). The result, Bowers and Grey note, is a “history war,” with different sides arguing for what
version of history will be offered to the public (111). In “Better Off Dead: Or, Making it the Hard Way,” Steve Jones speaks to why such “history wars” occur; as he states, “death makes anything but remembrance, memory, impossible” (6). In other words, when a person dies, they are no longer able to alter public perception of them on their own; all that is there to represent them are the mediated forms featuring or depicting them. It makes sense, then, why family, friends, and even fans would care a great deal about how a person’s memory is treated, how a person’s life is represented on page and screen after their death.

And it is this that illustrates why it is important to examine such mediated forms as *Sweet Dreams*, and not just to dismiss them with the claim that of course they are going to be imperfect representations of a celebrity’s life, of course they are going to leave certain details out. How a person is represented is important—and we can learn a great deal from what is left out. In this chapter, I have noted that *Sweet Dreams* obscures the major tensions in Cline’s career, that it ignores the close female friendships she maintained with Loretta Lynn, June Carter, and other female country performers, that filmmakers deliberately left scenes depicting Cline’s childhood sexual abuse on the cutting room floor. Each of these exclusions can be explained in one way or another—they didn’t fit the narrative, you can’t include everything, certain topics are extremely difficult to deal with on film. Perhaps more telling, however, is the fact that the film also obscures the fact that Cline was unfaithful to both Gerald Cline and Charlie Dick (as they were to her), that though much of Cline’s strong personality does come through in the film, details that might have rendered her less sympathetic have been excluded. It is with these types of exclusions that we learn that certain types of behaviors are unacceptable by women in musical biopics—or at least, by women that we are supposed to root for, sympathize with, and look up to as heroes.
It is with these types of exclusions that we realize that what is left out tells us everything.
In a key scene in *Walk the Line*, the 2005 biopic chronicling the life of Johnny Cash, June Carter (Reese Witherspoon) enters a theater on a day on which she, along with fellow performers such as Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash (Joaquin Phoenix) will perform a two o’clock matinee. She walks in and is dismayed to find the men she is on tour with sitting around the stage drinking; she surmises correctly that they haven’t been to bed yet. When they urge her to sit down and have a beer with them, she refuses without a second thought and, with barely contained disgust, informs them that she will be going home that night after the show: “I’m not here to look after y’all.”

“You’re not?” Johnny Cash asks, laconically throwing his empty beer bottle to the side. It lands with a crash.

“You got somebody to do that for you, John,” June responds. “You got a wife somewhere, you remember that?” John answers with a challenge: “What if I didn’t?” She dismissively informs him that there are too many “ifs” in that sentence and starts to storm away; he calls after her that there is only one, actually, and laughs about it with his friends. With that, she’s had it, and she hurls beer bottles at the group before storming away, for good this time, angrily telling them that they’re going to blow the tour: “I am NOT gonna be the little Dutch boy with my finger in the dam no more!” Never one to let her get the last word, Johnny shouts after her, “You’re lyin’ to yourself if you think this is about a tour, honey! This isn’t about a tour! This isn’t about a song!”

He’s right. It is, of course, about him, and them, and their seemingly impossible
relationship. But it is not the first or only time in the film that June will relegate any discussion of their relationship to the realm of work, of performance: real life is what you live when you leave the stage, when you go home from the tour, and what they have…isn’t real. Online film critic Alan Dale would identify this belief as the key to understanding June Carter as a person, and the fact that actress Reese Witherspoon understood this as the key to her performance, stating,

The one thing Walk the Line does absolutely right is to show how different June’s approach to performing is from Johnny’s—she thinks of herself as a purveyor of conventional entertainment and no more. She’s not reaching for anything onstage because she knows real life is lived before and after the show. This is great for Reese Witherspoon as June because it calls for some authoritatively fast, comic shifts at the margin between backstage and onstage. The complementary excitement in Witherspoon’s performance comes from seeing June’s professional manner flicker on and off; the more genuine emotion she feels, the less expressive she becomes in public.

That Carter would feel such a way presents something of a conundrum. As Phillip Auslander notes, the performer of popular music is “defined by three layers: the real person (the performer as human being), the performance persona (the performer’s self-presentation), and the character (a figure portrayed in a song text)” (4); given that in Chapter One, I noted that in country music, there is the expectation for all three layers to overlap rather closely, it might seem curious that June would draw such a line between her onstage and backstage lives. However, in the same chapter I also noted Pamela Fox’s observation that female country singers are supposed to “embody ‘home,’” and that “by ‘choosing’ the tour bus…they lose their claim to ‘home’ altogether” (244). How, then, can a female country musician act as if all three layers overlap
when they don’t, when your day-to-day reality doesn’t overlap with the image you’re supposed
to portray—and when your fans wouldn’t approve of the details of your real day-to-day reality,
anyway? As Reese Witherspoon noted of June Carter in an interview with Interview magazine,
“She was living in a world where it was completely unacceptable for her to be doing what she
was doing. She lived in the shadow of everyone’s judgment…I try to think what it was like for a
woman to tour around with a bunch of men back then and to have people look at you, like, ‘I’m a
good Christian, who the hell are you’” (qtd. in Brown 129)? For a female country musician,
then, authenticity is a negotiation.

As is playing a real person on film, particularly in a mediated landscape in which films
are advertised rather aggressively across multiple mediums. In the days and weeks preceding
Walk the Line’s release, previews were prominent in movie theaters and on television, and
specials about both the film and Johnny Cash’s life—including a concert given at San Quentin
Prison and a 60 Minutes interview—ran on a steady rotation on Country Music Television
(CMT). Thus, images of the “real” June Carter were likely fresh in filmgoers’ minds as they
walked into theaters to see Walk the Line. They were also likely already familiar with
Witherspoon from other roles, and even, potentially, with details about her personal life, in ways
that they might not have been similarly familiar with the lives of Sissy Spacek and Jessica Lange
prior to seeing Coal Miner’s Daughter and Sweet Dreams. As Graeme Turner explains in
“Celebrity, the Tabloid, and the Democratic Public Sphere,” “the influence of celebrity has
become especially pronounced on certain kinds of media product” (487). In addition to the wide
range of celebrity gossip sites available on the Internet, which did not exist in its current form
when Coal Miner’s Daughter and Sweet Dreams were released in 1980 and 1985, respectively,
“in television, it [celebrity culture] has become an increasingly significant component of news
and current affairs programming”; additionally, since the late 1980s, mass market women’s magazines “have revised their editorial mixes in response to falling circulation and the competition from the new local celebrity weeklies and the international glossy monthlies. While still retaining their traditional interest in fashion, domestic advice, and ‘beauty,’ the mass market women’s magazines have progressively increased their focus on ‘celebrity culture’” (487). Thus, Walk the Line premiered in a drastically different media landscape than did Coal Miner’s Daughter and Sweet Dreams, and was subject to very different conditions for reception than were the previous two films.

For one thing, a skepticism about making country biopics had emerged, as is evidenced by the twenty-year gap between Sweet Dreams and Walk the Line. As Walk the Line producer Cathy Konrad noted, when she and director James Mangold initially approached studios about making Walk the Line, they were turned away: “A lot of people in Hollywood view John as ‘country,’ and then ask, ‘Does country sell?’” (qtd. in Willman, “Cash Up Front”). Thus, while the film did foreground some of the more “country” aspects of his life, it also emphasized his appeal across genres, highlighting his early tours with rock musicians Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, and Jerry Lee Lewis, and noting in titles that appear at the film’s end that his album “At Folsom Prison” became “one of the most popular recordings of all time, outselling even the Beatles.” Second, the narrative tropes of musician biopics had become so identifiable that following them closely could no longer be seen as an asset. Though the film received largely positive reviews, it was often called out by critics for adhering too closely to the biopic formula; the previously cited Anderson, for example, complained that Mangold “stretches and dilutes the core story until it resembles less a great man's life than a TV movie of the week.” Indeed, films that were released in the two years following Walk the Line’s release indicated that directors
were beginning to throw out the formula, or perhaps should. Todd Haynes’s 2007 Bob Dylan biopic *I’m Not There* used six actors/characters to depict different aspects of the performer’s life and music, while the 2007 faux-biopic *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* poked fun at the musician biopic, with several scenes and characters obviously directly inspired by *Walk the Line*; the former indicated that different approaches to the musician biopic were becoming acceptable, while the latter suggested that adhering too closely to the biopic formula was an offense worthy of mocking. Thus, adhering to neither the country model nor the narrative model could no longer guarantee that a film would be deemed “authentic” by either critics or fans.

Regardless, *Walk the Line* was embraced by the country music community, as is evidenced by the rash of *Walk the Line* and Johnny Cash-related programming that appeared on CMT in tandem with the film’s release⁸. Joaquin Phoenix was praised for his lead role as Johnny Cash and ultimately received an Oscar nomination; however, in many reviews, Reese Witherspoon was cited as giving the stronger performance, in many cases because she was perceived as more “authentic” in the role; for example, the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*’s Phoebe Flowers called Witherspoon “an actress so fiercely talented she manages to pry the attention from her costar even when she’s not onscreen” (E6). Review after review praised Witherspoon, and even though, as online critic Devin Faraci noted, “June could have been just a supporting female character,” she walked home with a Best Actress Oscar for the film. In this chapter, I argue that Witherspoon was able to attain the perception of authenticity, first, because she was able to successfully portray Carter’s negotiation of female country authenticity, and second, because, in interviews given in tandem with the film’s release, she was able to successfully negotiate her own star persona with Carter’s.

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⁸ Many such programs included endorsements of the film from people such as John and June’s son, John Carter Cash, and fellow country musicians Kris Kristofferson and Willie Nelson.
Before analyzing Witherspoon’s performance in the film, however, it is important to note the ways in which the scope of her role differs from the scope of the roles played by Spacek or Lange; after all, you might be wondering, if the two of them received similar acclaim for playing Loretta Lynn and Patsy Cline, respectively, then why is Witherspoon’s performance worthy of such specific attention? The reason is that Witherspoon was playing quite a different role in her respective narrative—that of the “woman behind the man,” a role which is typically thankless in male-centered musician biopics. Often, the “woman behind the man” is a site of pity—the woman who faithfully stays home taking care of the children while her husband is out on tour abusing alcohol or drugs and sleeping with other women (Ray Charles’s wife, Bea (Kerry Washington), fills this role in *Ray*). Other times, she seems almost to be a victim of her husband’s success, or perhaps rather, of the sacrifices she must make so that her husband can be successful; in *Beyond the Sea*, for example, Bobby Darin’s wife Sandra Dee (Kate Bosworth) puts her acting career on hold to accompany her husband on tour and ultimately develops a serious drinking problem, seemingly out of frustration and boredom. Though such women are not always completely portrayed as victims without agency—they sometimes stand up to their husbands and even leave them and start their own lives—they are almost never portrayed as being particularly instrumental to the life and career of the man; the man creates his own success, and there is rarely a question that he would have been successful whether the woman in his life were with him or not.

This rarely, if ever, works the same way when the gender roles are reversed—that is, when the starring performer is female, and the man in her life takes on the “man behind the woman” role. The “man behind the woman” is often depicted as instrumental in the woman’s success and formation of identity; this is the case in *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, in which Doolittle
Lynn is instrumental in helping Loretta start her music career. Similarly, in *What’s Love Got To Do With It?*, Ike Turner is depicted as both discovering Tina and helping her develop her look and sound. In films in which the man is not depicted as particularly involved in the woman’s career, he often serves as a significant obstacle to the woman’s success; as *Sweet Dreams* tells the story, for example, Patsy Cline was able to achieve success in spite of enduring domestic violence at the hand of Charlie Dick. Though June Carter can (thankfully) not be seen to have much in common with these men in terms of personality or temperament, she is depicted as having a similarly large impact on Johnny Cash’s life. As a child, he listens to her sing on the radio; her voice provides inspiration and comfort to him in a life plagued by guilt over his brother’s death. Additionally, she is depicted as instrumental in helping him get over the drug addiction he eventually develops. Thus, the June Carter role in *Walk the Line* can be seen as more similar to the Doolittle Lynn role in *Coal Miner’s Daughter* than to either the Loretta Lynn role or to the typical “woman behind the man” role in the male-centered country biopic.

It is further important to establish that *Walk the Line*, much like *Sweet Dreams* and even moreso than *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, is told primarily through the lens of a love story. While the romantic story does not occlude other details of Cash’s life and career in the way that Patsy Cline’s romance with Charlie Dick occludes other aspects of Cline’s life in *Sweet Dreams*, the film’s primary emphasis is on Cash and Carter’s relationship, with the climax of the film coming when Carter accepts Cash’s marriage proposal. In fact, it can be seen to fit the contours of preexisting romantic formulas even more closely than does *Sweet Dreams*. In *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Janice A. Radway identifies the thirteen steps of the “ideal romance,” in which (in step one) “the heroine’s social identity is destroyed”; in step seven, “the heroine and hero are physically and/or emotionally separated”; in eight, “the
hero treats the heroine tenderly”; ultimately, in the final two steps, “the heroine responds sexually and emotionally” to the hero and “the heroine’s identity is restored” (134). This is somewhat complicated when one tries to apply it to *Walk the Line* by the fact that Radway’s formula describes romances with female main characters; however, as *Entertainment Weekly* journalist Christine Spines notes, romances, “once solidly female turf, have lately migrated to the guy’s point of view” (28). When that happens, there is often a role reversal; that is, it is the hero’s “social identity” that is destroyed prior to meeting the heroine, the hero’s identity that is restored at the end of the romance. Thus, *Walk the Line* can be seen as a reworking of the formula, with Cash’s identity being destroyed when his brother dies; Carter and Cash being both emotionally and physically separated after his drug addiction forces them to have to cancel the concert tour both are a part of; Carter treating him tenderly, helping him recover from his addiction; and, finally, his identity being restored after she accepts his marriage proposal.

Because *Walk the Line* is a male-centered country biopic, however, the idea of the “authentic country woman” being constructed in relation to the home is complicated somewhat. For Johnny Cash, the home is a site of sadness and oppression; as a child, there is no happiness at home after his brother dies. The only happiness comes from listening to the radio, to dreams that he may some day leave home. This theme continues throughout his life (as depicted in *Walk the Line*); home is where his wife discourages from pursuing a career in music, where his wife forbids him from talking about life on the road. If Vivian is the embodiment of that oppressive life at home, then, for Cash, June is the embodiment of all of the possibility that lies out on the road; in fact, his first meeting with June takes place on his very first performance on his very first tour—her appearance in the film literally signals the shift from the narrative’s focus from Cash’s life at home to life on the road. In this narrative, then, the woman at home is vilified,
while the woman out on the road holds the promise of “real” love, of a relationship in which the
man is allowed to be himself. It important to note, however, that while neither Cash nor the
narrative of *Walk the Line* expect or want June Carter to live up to the traditional country ideal of
“home,” June herself does not feel freed from these pressures; it is clear that she herself feels
guilty about her two failed marriages and about leaving her children at home, and that unlike
Cash, she wishes to draw a clear line between her home life and her life on the road.

We first see her shame and guilt, along with June’s (and, concurrently, Reese
Witherspoon’s) ability to shift back and forth between her “backstage” and “onstage” personas,
in a scene in which she has an encounter with a fan in a Wheeling, West Virginia store. She is
approached by a woman working in the store, who, after asking Carter is she needs help finding
anything, adds, “You know, your ma and pa are good Christians in a world gone to pot.”
Carter’s face lights up in a smile, and she warmly tells the woman that she’ll pass along the
compliment. Quite abruptly, the woman shifts gears, telling her, “I’m surprised they still speak
to you, after that stunt with Carl Smith. Divorce is an abomination. Marriage is for life.” The
camera stays on June’s face, not the woman’s, as she speaks; we see a range of emotions quickly
play about her face in the space of only a few seconds, as her expression changes from confusion
to shock to what appears to be genuine hurt. By the time the woman has finished speaking,
however, June’s expression has shifted to neutral passivity, and she responds with a calm, “I’m
sorry I let you down, ma’am.” When she approaches Johnny Cash in an aisle of the same store
only a few moments later, there is no sign that the encounter has even bothered her. We see,
then, that even offstage, Carter has her “game face” on at all times; it would obviously be
unthinkable for her to break down crying in front of a fan, or to yell at a fan. Rather, she keeps
her emotions to herself, playing the part of the performer any time she is in public. Witherspoon,
in turn, must be aware of this, and be able to negotiate this shift.

The second example of this comes very quickly in the narrative, on the same night of June’s encounter with the woman in the store. That night, she stands backstage drinking a soda watching Johnny Cash play his set; she is shocked when Johnny suggests to the crowd that she join him onstage to sing with him and emphatically shakes her head no. At this point in the film, she and John have connected on a couple of occasions as friends, with him confiding in her about his brother’s death and her comforting him about life on the road, which she has lived since she was a child and he has just started. He has also expressed romantic interest in her, which she has rebuffed, citing the fact that she has a “world of judgment” on her following her divorce and that he seems to have a nice family. Never have they appeared onstage together, however, something that will quickly change; he gets the crowd to join him in chanting her name, and it becomes clear that she won’t be able to refuse without making a scene. Though from backstage she shoots him a look that indicates that she would like to kill him, the minute she steps onstage, she is all smiles, and cheerfully greets the crowd. He suggests that they sing “Time’s A-Wastin,” a duet she recorded with her ex-husband, Carl Smith; she quickly deflects the suggestion, suggesting that they sing his song “Big River,” instead. When he insists on “Time’s A-Wastin’,” she covers the microphone with her hand and hisses that it would be inappropriate for her to sing a song that she recorded with her ex-husband. When the music starts, however, she begins singing, and even seems to be enjoying herself—that is, until she catches sight of the woman who had earlier reproached her for her divorce sitting in the crowd, looking on judgmentally, and until Johnny kisses her on the cheek. With an angry, “Don’t do that,” she runs offstage and locks herself in her dressing room, tearfully yelling at Johnny to leave her be when he chases after her. Clearly, then, both the intrusion of her offstage life—the reminder of her divorce, and the fact
that some are judging her quite harshly for it—and Johnny’s attempt to turn an onstage
performance into an opportunity to get closer to her personally are too much for her, and she
leaves the stage before her public and private lives can become any more intertwined.

Ultimately, of course, they will; as director James Mangold noted in an interview given in
tandem with the film’s release, “for the ten years that these two really couldn’t be together…the
only place they were together was in front of thousands of people. Being a stage duo gave them
permission to have their greatest intimacy there” (Willman, “Cash Up Front”). This becomes
evident the second time we see Johnny and June onstage together. At this point in the film, Cash
and Carter have spent a considerable amount of time apart; she has married another (stock car
driver Ralph Nix), and he has fallen further into dependence on drugs and alcohol. The two run
into each other at a country music awards ceremony and he asks her to come back on tour with
him; though it is obvious, from the intimate way that he leans toward her as he convinces her to
join him, that he is really asking her something else, one can imagine that she is able to justify
accepting his offer because of her ability to separate stage life from offstage life—going on tour
together, after all, doesn’t necessarily have to mean anything but just that. When we see them
onstage together, however, it is obvious that something else is going on; anyone watching the
two of them can easily see the chemistry between them. Indeed, when Johnny makes eye contact
with his wife Vivian, who is sitting in the front row watching the performance, the expression on
his face mirrors that of someone that has been “caught in the act”; the intimacy between John
and June is so palpable that Vivian might as well have caught them in bed together. She reacts
almost as if she has; when, after the show, John introduces June to his parents and his young
daughters, and June greets the girls warmly, Vivian, firmly, clearly, tells her to “stay clear of my
children.” June tries to protest that she was just saying hello; Vivian simply responds, “You
heard me.” On the surface, the reaction seems somewhat harsh; however, in that moment, Vivian is the only one opening acknowledging that onstage and offstage life are one and the same, and refusing to let anyone pretend differently.

It is perhaps for that reason that throughout the film, Vivian can repeatedly be seen as trying to draw a firm line between home and the road. I have noted previously the fact that Vivian has, earlier in the film, told John that he is not allowed to talk about the tour at home, that when he comes home, they need to get right down to “talking about regular things.” I have further noted that June, too, has been seen to draw firm lines between home and the road, between onstage and offstage; Vivian can be seen as doing much the same thing. Both can be seen as doing so because they believe that both things should be separate; however, Vivian seems to always be aware that they are not. This becomes most clear in the one of the last scenes in which she appears in the film; she catches John hanging pictures of “his band,” meaning, essentially, pictures of him and June onstage. She asks him not to hang them; he insists that they are just pictures of his band, and she repeats, firmly and deliberately, “Don’t. Hang these.” When he continues to insist on hanging them, she takes one of June and storms away; when he catches up to her, she smashes it on the linoleum floor. The scene quickly escalates into the most volatile argument between the two of them in the film, with him pinning her to the floor as she hysterically sobs, “She’ll find out, you liar!” Ultimately, she takes the girls and leaves. It is this actual intrusion of the road, the stage, into Vivian’s home, then, that is finally the straw that breaks the camel’s back. Just as the introduction of June into the narrative Walk the Line signaled the introduction to John’s life of the road, the introduction of her into his home—albeit in photograph form—marks the end of his life at home. Vivian is never seen again in the film, and though there continue to be scenes featuring Johnny Cash “at home,” it is never again home
in the “traditional” sense—that is, home with a wife and children. “Home,” from then on, becomes an apartment he lives in with a roommate, a tour bus, a house he buys primarily to prove to June that he is getting his life together. But Vivian’s exit from the film marks the end of “home” as Johnny Cash has previously known it—as a somewhat oppressive environment where his life on the road is not welcome.

Vivian’s exit from the film, however, does not mark the end of June’s negotiation between home and the road, onstage and offstage. However, we would be remiss if we did not note that one important instance of negotiation has taken place in the time between Vivian’s order for June to “stay clear of [her] children” (in other words, stay out of her home) and the moment in which Vivian leaves John. On the night of a concert in Las Vegas, June finally allows the line between home and the road, between onstage and offstage, to be crossed, and she and John make love for the first time. The morning after, the two lie in bed together, flirting, kissing, and having fun—until, that is, the phone rings, and it is June’s daughter, crying over a fight she has had with her younger sister. As June sits comforting her, her eyes drift to John, who is popping pills; almost immediately, it is obvious that she is redrawing the line in her head. John whispers to her that he is going to leave her alone, and she nods distractedly; later, when he calls her and tries to come back to her room, she refuses to talk to him or see him. Just as the intrusion of “the road” into Vivian’s home life was the last straw for Vivian, the reminder of “home,” for June, reminds her that she can’t get too caught up in life on the road.

That June would feel so conflicted about life on the road is unsurprising when, again, one looks at the options available to female country singers at the time. In *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music*, Joli Jensen notes that in country music, “home is always portrayed as rural—green, welcoming, often with mother or girlfriend waiting”
(29). In this construction, she explains, women play one of two roles: “they are either angels (waiting at home, patient and loving) or fallen angels (sitting in honky-tonks with tinted hair and painted lips). They succumb to the glamour of city night life even though their men beg them to stay home” (30). Though I have established that neither the filmmakers of *Walk the Line* nor Johnny Cash share this perspective—in the world of *Walk the Line*, home is oppressive, while the road is where the hero can actually be himself—this, once again, does not mean that June Carter was unaware of or unaffected by this perceived dichotomy. It is clear throughout the narrative of the film that she views her two failed marriages—and, by extension, her attraction to Johnny Cash—as failures. She does not want to be one of the “fallen angels sitting in honky-tonks with tinted hair and painted lips,” and from her perspective, that is the only alternative to being the patient, loving wife at home. The family she was born into determined that the road would be her home; however, it is unsurprising that she would long for a more traditional home, and that she would regard the fact that she has not established and maintained a traditional home as a great failure. With this in mind, it is also unsurprising that she would repeatedly draw a line between home and the road, between onstage and offstage, between the life she actually has (which involves being in love with a married man with a drug problem) and the life she thinks she is supposed to have.

Despite her repeated drawing and redrawing of these lines, however, the road and the stage are quickly becoming the only places where June can be truly honest about what she really wants, what she really feels, which becomes obvious in her next scenes in the film. After John collapses onstage due to his escalating drug addiction, June checks on him in his room; he demands, “Tell me you don’t love me.” Almost without skipping a beat, she responds, “I don’t love you.” He tells her that she’s a liar, to which she responds with a flip, “Well, then I guess
you ain’t got no problems, do you?” When she goes home, however, she sits down at the kitchen table and begins writing the song “Ring of Fire,” which includes lines like, “love is a burnin’ thing” and “I fell for you like a child.” One suspects that this is the safe way for her to express her feelings—if she writes them in a song, she can always say that it is, in fact, just a song, and that it has no bearing on how she really feels. For June, then, performance and song are places where she can hide, places that she can pretend are separate from her real life. This is in direct conflict with the idea that country singer’s onstage personas closely mirror their offstage lives; however, it is, again, unsurprising, given the limited options June felt she had available to her in her offstage life.

With this in mind, it is also perhaps unsurprising that the film’s climax will come during the scene in which June finally accepts that her onstage and offstage lives have become intertwined, that the road, so to speak, will be her home, and that the distinction between onstage and offstage will disappear. She helps John recover from drug addiction and once again accompanies him on tour; though to some extent, she seems to have acknowledged that the two of them are more than singing partners, she refuses marriage proposals from him on more than one occasion. The most serious of these marriage proposals happens, perhaps fittingly, on a tour bus; he wakes her in the middle of the night and informs her that he has decided that it’s time for them to get married. She, in no uncertain terms, tells him that it is not the right time, citing several concerns that the two of them face in their offstage lives: “Where are we gonna live? What about my girls? What about your girls? What about your parents, John? Your daddy won’t even look at me.” He dismissively says that “that stuff’ll just work itself out,” she informs him that no, it does not work itself out; people work it out for him, and he thinks it works itself out. He accuses her of being scared: of being in love, of losing control, and of living in his big
fat shadow. This makes her furious, and the next night, she tells him that he is not allowed to speak to her: “The only place you’re allowed to speak to me is onstage, do you understand?” This is in keeping with what we know about her; she is not one who would ever refuse to go onstage just because she is angry with him, and she is capable of acting one way onstage and another way off.

We see this when the two take the stage together; after introducing her as the writer of “Ring of Fire,” he asks her if she will come sing a song with him. Playfully, she responds, “I’ll sing with you, Mr. Cash, are you sure that’s what you want?” They begin singing “Jackson”; however, early in the song, he stops singing, and announces to the audience that he has to ask June a question before they finish singing the song. It is here that we witness June’s final negotiation between onstage and offstage, home and the road. “What’s that, John?,” she asks. Her smile is forced, and she speaks in a tone that is meant to convey to the audience that this is all just part of the show. When he asks if she will marry him, she gives him a look of warning: “Why don’t we just sing the song, John?”

“No, darlin’,” he says, finality in his voice. Her smile becomes almost comically large, and her tone even more forced, even perkier: “Come on, finish the song. People want to hear us sing.” Since she is playing to the audience, he, too, turns his attention to the audience, saying that he’s sorry, but that he “just can’t do this song anymore unless she’s gonna marry me. It’d just be like we’re lyin’.” June begins to both look and sound panicked at this point: “You got these people all revved up now, John, let’s sing ‘Jackson’ for ‘em.” Once again, the huge smile comes out; she tries, one final time, to relegate this to the realm of performance. He won’t allow that to happen; he responds firmly, “You’ve got me all revved up. Now I’ve asked you forty different ways, and it’s time you come up with a fresh answer.” She is speechless, at this point;
finally, quietly, she says, “Please sing.” He responds, “I’m asking you. To marry me.” She looks away and makes eye contact with a band member, who looks at her almost sympathetically. And as he continues talking, a range of emotions play across her face that is comparable to the range that played across it as the woman in the store in Wheeling, West Virginia chastised her; the camera, once again, stays almost completely on her as she responds to his declarations of love, his promises that he will never hurt her again, that he “will NOT leave you like that little Dutch boy with your finger in the dam.” She looks down, crying, and shakes her head; when he asks her again to marry him, she looks at him with an unreadable expression. Then, finally, she smiles slightly and, her voice barely audible, says, “Okay.” He asks, “Yeah?,” and she nods. They kiss, and the audience cheers; flashbulbs go off, making it clear that the audience is recording this, this incredibly intimate moment that is taking place in public, onstage. And in that moment, she is forced to acknowledge that onstage and offstage life are the same thing, that what happens onstage is what’s real.

It could perhaps be argued that *Walk the Line* is many things. It is the story of Johnny Cash’s life; it is the romance between Johnny Cash and June Carter. However, it is also quite clearly the story of June Carter’s negotiation between offstage and onstage, between home and the road, and the final acknowledgment that both are the same thing. With that in mind, it is in many ways the story of how June Carter *becomes* authentic; that is, acknowledges that she is, in fact, the same person on and offstage. Any knowledge of the options available to women at this point in time leads one to realize that making this choice was no small accomplishment; to admit that was to revoke home, to revoke the expectations that society placed on her, that she, for years, had placed on herself. If *Walk the Line* makes any statement about authenticity, then, it is that personal authenticity is more important than preconceived notions of country authenticity.
Interestingly, in interviews given in tandem with the film’s release, actress Witherspoon can be seen as equating her own personal authenticity with country authenticity, frequently emphasizing her similarities to June Carter. For example, in an interview with The New York Times, the Nashville native stated that, “I understand June Carter and her family…the South is a spiritual place, a place where God is very important in people’s lives. It’s about the ritual of family and togetherness and singing and storytelling. It’s about giving back to the community, investing in other people’s lives, caring about people” (88). Similarly, she told Australian Magazine that “I think I understand the history of country music because I grew up in Nashville. I related to June because she was a southerner like me, you know; we’re nice people…I think there are similarities between us. June was a woman trying to have a career and children, like me” (Lipworth 18). Director James Mangold backed up these claims; he told The Washington Post that Witherspoon shares “more than you know with June. There’s another side to Reese. She’s incredibly sharp, incredibly well-read. She’s a mother of two, a wife, so many things that an actress in her twenties in L.A. is rarely” (Booth N01). Thus, both Witherspoon and Mangold can be seen as trying to establish Witherspoon’s authenticity in the role by emphasizing that she relates to Carter, that she has things in common with Carter, and that her heritage and life experiences make her particularly capable of understanding Carter.

It should be noted that this technique—that of insisting that one’s personal life is very similar to the character they are portraying—is much more common among country singers than among actors. As P. David Marshall notes in Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture, “there are two realities of film stars proffered in the public sphere: their representations in films, where the heroes they portray are fixed images, and thus relatively fixed conceptions of their identity can be made; and, in contrast, their supposed ‘real lives,’ the private and intimate as
well as the various public lives” (187). In contrast to the country singer, who typically emphasizes the similarities between their public and private lives, “the screen star invokes a number of codes to indicate his or her ultimate independence. This code of acting, the active reworking and then publicly performing his or her private life for public consumption, and the playing of ‘serious’ or against-type roles all work to concretize the star as a more permanent sign of the public sphere” (187). Thus, the actor typically performs one “personal” image and then deliberately plays against that image in films in order to make it clear that they are actually acting, and not just playing themselves. The emphasis on Witherspoon’s similarities between herself and Carter, then, is somewhat atypical.

It is important to establish, however, that prior to *Walk the Line*, Witherspoon already had a well-established screen persona that was quite different from the June Carter role. When *Walk the Line* premiered in 2005, she had appeared in more than twenty films, including *Freeway*, *Cruel Intentions*, *Election*, and, perhaps most notably, *Legally Blonde* and *Sweet Home Alabama*. Though the range of roles that she had previously played was actually quite vast, she was most closely associated with the characters she played in *Legally Blonde* and *Sweet Home Alabama*, both romantic comedies. Thus, her role in *Walk the Line* can actually be seen as playing against her popular persona; Witherspoon’s choice to emphasize the similarities between herself and Carter can be read, first, as an attempt to distance herself from previous roles, and, second, as a means of establishing that she is qualified to play a character like June Carter. Reviews of *Walk the Line* indicate that this paid off, as many praised her performance specifically in relation to her previous work. The *Las Vegas Weekly*’s review of the film, for example, which was largely negative, noted that if the film’s scenes between Phoenix and Witherspoon “work at all, it’s because of Witherspoon, who after five years of wasting time in stupid romantic comedies has
delivered a performance of passion and precision worthy of the promise she showed in *Election.*” Similarly, *Film Journal International*’s Daniel Eagan wrote that “Witherspoon is a revelation, showing a balance and maturity that’s been missing from much of her previous work.” This highlights the fact that each role an actor plays is a negotiation with his or her previous roles; however, this can work in an actor’s favor when critics view that role as a departure.

From *Walk the Line,* then, we are given further insight into what it means to negotiate authenticity as a female country musician. Both *Walk the Line* and *Sweet Dreams* illustrate how difficult it is to be truly “authentic” as a female country musician when it is likely that you will be judged negatively if your real life does not fit a preconceived standard for what a country woman’s life should be. Further, *Walk the Line* is unique in that it specifically highlights the tension between onstage and offstage life. While *Coal Miner’s Daughter*’s Loretta Lynn struggles with life on the road, she does not have to worry that people will judge her negatively if they find out who she “really” is: she can sing about who she really is, because her life, for the most part, does closely match preconceived standards for female country authenticity. *Sweet Dreams,* meanwhile, suggests that Patsy Cline doesn’t fit the preconceived mold for country authenticity but doesn’t really care. *Walk the Line,* in contrast, presents us with a woman who very much wants to meet preconceived standards of country authenticity but does not; one of the primary tensions in the film is her struggle to accept that and, through this acceptance, become *personally* authentic.

Further, *Walk the Line* suggests that the “woman behind the man” role does not necessarily have to fit the standard mold. The fact that it does not in *Walk the Line* can undoubtedly be partially attributed to the fact that the film is told through the lens of a romance, a genre that is typically female-centered; when that formula is placed in a male-centered
narrative, gender roles must necessarily changed. It can also be attributed to Witherspoon’s performance, and the fact that she is able to successfully negotiate Carter’s struggle with authenticity. It can also, potentially, be attributed to the fact that Witherspoon perhaps *could* understand Carter in ways that another actress might not have been able to. As she told *Entertainment Weekly*’s Chris Willman of the role, “For me, it’s an interesting study of a Southern woman in that she had so much potential and used it not only for herself but to make the man in her life shine and become the most important voice in country music” (32). The character, then, becomes valuable because the actress portraying her believes she has value, and portrays her as if she has value. Thus, while in today’s increasingly mediatized culture, actor and performer will undoubtedly overlap, this does not always have to be a negative thing.

Perhaps most importantly, *Walk the Line* illustrates that authenticity is always a negotiation—for the female country musician, and for the performer portraying her on film.
CHAPTER IV.

SIX STRONG HANDS ON THE STEERING WHEEL:

SHUT UP AND SING, THE DIXIE CHICKS, AND CONTEMPORARY COUNTRY AUTHENTICITY

County Road 233 under my feet.
Nothin’ on this white rock but little ol’ me.
I got two miles ‘til he makes bail
And if I’m right, we’re headed straight for Hell.

I’m goin’ home, gonna load my shotgun,
Wait by the door and light a cigarette.
He wants a fight, well now he’s got one
And he ain’t seen me crazy yet.
Slapped my face and he shook me like a ragdoll
Don’t that sound like a real man?
I’m gonna show him what little girls are made of—
Gunpowder and lead.

On November 7, 2007, Miranda Lambert appeared on the Country Music Association awards show to sing the above quoted “Gunpowder and Lead,” the most recent single from her second album, Crazy Ex-Girlfriend. The song appeared second on the roster of performances for the ABC telecast, following only an opening performance by Rascal Flatts, the band that would ultimately take home the Vocal Group of the Year award, and introductory remarks by Desperate Housewives star James Denton; as Denton explained, that night hosting duties would be shared by several entertainers, some country music stars and others like Denton who, in his words, “just love listening to the greatest sound in the world—country music.” In previous chapters of this dissertation, I have presented you with Loretta Lynn, who struggled to establish her own identity in a life and career that had been alternately dictated by circumstance and by her husband’s decisions; Patsy Cline, a “hellraiser” who producers and, arguably, the makers of the filmed biography of her life weren’t quite sure what to do with; and June Carter, who existed in a
time when a fan found it perfectly appropriate, and even necessary, to chastise her for the fact that she had been (gasp!) divorced. The question that naturally follows after reading about the mediated depictions of these women, who came of age musically in the 1950s and 60s, is, has the role of women in country music changed between then and now?

One need only look to Lambert’s performance of “Gunpowder and Lead” on the CMA awards to know that the answer to that question is a loud, resounding yes. As evidence of this, there is, of course, the song itself, which tells the story of a woman waiting with her shotgun for her abusive boyfriend to be released from jail, a cigarette in one hand, a beer in the other. There is Lambert’s performance of the song: on the CMA awards, she sings it wearing a short red dress and high-heeled silver boots, her long blonde hair ratted up; at the song’s conclusion, she turns and begins storming towards the back of the stage, pausing to point her finger like a gun and “shoot” the nearest male (her guitar player) in perfect time with the gunshot sound effect that ends the song. There is the crowd’s reaction to the song, which is not shocked or outraged, but appreciative; as the song ends and the audience members applaud, the camera catches fellow country singer Gretchen Wilson offering an appreciative “That was good” to Kid Rock (yes, Kid Rock), who sits beside her in the audience. And there is, perhaps most tellingly, the fact that the song is hardly the first recent song about a wronged woman seeking violent revenge; Lambert’s own work (which includes Crazy Ex-Girlfriend and a previous album, Kerosene) is peppered with enough images of guns, cigarettes, and hard drinking to warrant far closer examination than is appropriate in the context of this conversation, while Carrie Underwood’s recent

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9 In the next verse, Lambert sings that she is “another six pack in,” indicating that she has been drinking heavily as she waits.

10 As relevant examples, I offer “Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,” which describes an encounter with an ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend that quickly turn volatile (“I started throwing things and I scared folks half to death/I got up in his face, smelled whiskey on his breath/Didn’t give a second thought to being thrown in jail/Cause baby to a hammer everything looks like a nail”) and “Kerosene” (“Now I don’t hate the one who left, you can’t hate someone who’s dead/He’s out there holdin’ onto someone, I’m holdin’ up my smokin’ gun.”)
crossover hit “Before He Cheats” details a woman trashing the car of a cheating ex-boyfriend.\textsuperscript{11} Such songs, taken in context with others like Gretchen Wilson’s “Redneck Woman” and “Here for the Party”—which are not violent but similarly paint their singer as a badass, hard-drinking kind of woman—paint of picture of who the “authentic” country woman is today. And that woman knows her way around the bedroom. She can drink with the guys. If you cheat on her, she is going to be pissed, and you are going to know about it. And if you lay a hand on her, you may just end up on the wrong end of Miranda Lambert’s smokin’ gun.\textsuperscript{12}

I am, perhaps, painting a somewhat limited picture of what women in country music are doing today; Lambert, Underwood, and Wilson, after all, are only three of the women making up the contemporary country music landscape, and there are certainly others who are decidedly less provocative.\textsuperscript{13} And while I hesitate to say that this particular brand of hell-raising country woman is a purely recent phenomenon, revenge songs (such as “Gunpowder and Lead” and “Before He Cheats”), along with those that feature a woman going out to cut loose, drink a little, and maybe have a one-night stand following a break-up with a no-good man, are a noteworthy trend as of late. While undoubtedly, different arguments could be made as to where, precisely, this trend started, a line can be seen to lead fairly directly from these songs back to two released in 2000: “Goodbye Earl,” in which the abused Wanda and her best friend Mary Anne remorselessly kill Wanda’s abusive husband, Earl, and “Sin Wagon,” in which a woman who has been “good for way too long” puts on her red dress and goes out in the hopes of doing a little “mattress dancin’.”

\textsuperscript{11} The chorus of the song’s lyrics read, “I dug my key into the side/Of his pretty little souped-up four-wheel drive/Carved my name into his leather seats/I took a Louisville slugger to both head lights/Slashed a hole in all four tires/Maybe next time he’ll think before he cheats.” The song was awarded Single of the Year, and Underwood Female Vocalist of the Year, at the November 7th award show.

\textsuperscript{12} This is a direct reference to the previously quoted “Kerosene” by Miranda Lambert.

\textsuperscript{13} I started to list examples here but found myself deleting each, as even singers who are typically viewed as more traditional and conservative, such as Reba McEntire and Martina McBride, have sung about topics such as infidelity, domestic violence, and murder.
Both songs were recorded by the Dixie Chicks, and were substantial hits for the band, with “Sin Wagon” spending twenty weeks on the Billboard country charts and “Goodbye Earl” peaking at #2 after forty-nine weeks. In an interview with Chris Willman, *Entertainment Weekly* journalist and author of *Rednecks and Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music*, Wilson cites the Dixie Chicks as paving the way for herself and artists like her: “Nobody can for one minute say that they aren’t unbelievably talented and that they haven’t broken down doors. The Dixie Chicks made it easier for me to say ‘Hell yeah’ on the radio—there’s no doubt about it. With the song ‘Goodbye Earl,’ they broke a lot of ground” (Willman 52). While Wilson’s statement supports my claim that the Dixie Chicks have served as, if not a direct influence, than at least a precursor to artists such as Wilson, Lambert, and Underwood, it is telling in another way: the fact that she begins with the somewhat defensive statement that no one can say that the Dixie Chicks haven’t broken down doors indicates that someone might try, or might judge Wilson harshly for aligning herself with the Dixie Chicks in any way. Indeed, while Wilson, Lambert, and Underwood are mainstays on contemporary country radio, it is rare to hear an old Dixie Chicks hit like “Goodbye Earl,” and almost unheard of to hear songs from their most recent album, 2006’s *Taking the Long Way*. And no one would make the mistake of thinking for a minute that this absence is because their songs are too provocative, that there is no room for their brand of music on contemporary country radio. No, this absence can be attributed to one little sentence, uttered by Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie Maines at a 2003 performance at Shepherd’s Bush Empire in London, England:

“*Just so you know, we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas.*”

By now, everyone knows what happened next: their music all but disappeared from country radio; in *Rednecks and Bluenecks*, Willman reports that in a July 2003 congressional
hearing on deregulation, Cumulus Radio head John Dickey admitted that he ordered Cumulus stations to take the Chicks off the air\textsuperscript{14} (50). Some radio stations set up trash cans and organized events for listeners to throw away their Dixie Chicks CDs. And the Chicks, in 2006, released an album, \textit{Taking the Long Way}, that could not definitively be classified as \textit{not} country, but that was decidedly more rock-influenced than previous Chicks efforts. On individual tracks from the album the Chicks also firmly positioned themselves as unrepentant for what all three band members (Maines, fiddle player Martie Maguire, and banjo player Emily Robison) now all invariably refer to as “the incident.” “Not Ready to Make Nice,” in particular, declared loud and clear that the three were “not ready to back down” and “still mad as hell.” And so they may never be fully embraced by the country music community again, and, as the album clearly indicates, and as the Chicks have plainly stated in interviews, they don’t really care: “I’d rather have a smaller following of really cool people who get it, who will grow with us as we grow and are fans for life, than people who have us in their five-disc changer with Reba McEntire and Toby Keith,” Maguire told \textit{Time} magazine in 2006. “We don’t want those kinds of fans. They limit what you can do” (Tyrangiel).

“The incident,” the Chicks’ response to it, and the process of writing and recording \textit{Taking the Long Way}, were recorded in the 2006 documentary \textit{Shut Up and Sing}, directed by Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck. In this chapter I would like to turn my attention to this documentary, for several reasons. First, and perhaps most obviously, while \textit{Coal Miner’s Daughter}, \textit{Sweet Dreams}, and \textit{Walk the Line} provide portraits of country singers who were popular in the past, \textit{Shut Up and Sing} offers a look at contemporary country musicians, and thus,

\textsuperscript{14} Willman further reports that though it was rumored that Clear Channel did the same, the company’s Adam Sledge denied the claim; he did, however, admit that a series of advisories had been issued to individual stations telling them to “pay attention to their listeners” (28). He quotes Sledge as stating, “It was very important to let our radio stations know that we as a company did not want to be in a position of censoring…It’s not our job to censor—but it \textit{is} our job to reflect the tastes of our local communities and local audiences” (28-29).
a lens through which to observe how the lives, music, and expectations of female country musicians has changed over time. I do not mean to argue that the Dixie Chicks are representative of all contemporary female country musicians; however, as I have previously established, the band can be seen as a precursor to, if not a direct influence on, many female country musicians currently popular.

Second, as I have nodded to, but not had the opportunity to fully explore in previous chapters, there are different ways of telling life stories; the biographical film is merely one of many ways that the life stories of country singers are packaged and given to audiences. Examining a documentary, then, provides an opportunity for examining how the contours of a life are arranged in a different format, and, through that examination, the opportunity to answer several questions. How, for example, is a life story organized when freed from the narrative formulas and constraints of the musician biopic? What role do the typical narrative elements that play a role in the musician biopic (such as romance, concert scenes, and the writing and recording of music) play in a documentary such as *Shut Up and Sing*? Does the form itself allow opportunities for exploring issues that the musician biopic genre does not? *Shut Up and Sing* provides a particularly rich example for exploring such questions, as many critics pointed out its generic hybridity. Online critic Rob Vaux, for example, noted that in addition to providing a look at a political issue—in his words, “how freedom of speech in the 21st century is dominated by the elite on both sides, how a voice is nothing without a microphone to amplify it, and how so much of our public discourse continues to be driven by the bottom line”—the film “also acts as a more traditional backstage biopic, given a fresh spin through the unique nature of the band itself.” As he points out, “As the most popular all-female ensemble in the world, the Chicks follow a different pattern than most performers of their stature. There’s no bacchanalian
excesses on display here, no Spinal Tap indulgence in sex, drugs, and gauche sensuality.” With that in mind, then, even if we were to treat this simply as a traditional biopic, it would perhaps tell us that such a film can follow a different narrative structure if the band itself is different; however, because it can more accurately be read as a documentary that is part political film, part backstage concert film, it allows us, again, to see how a band’s story is told differently in a different genre.

Finally, I choose to place Shut Up and Sing in conversation with the other films examined in this project because it makes overt issues that the other films only hint at—namely, issues of authenticity and legacy. While the performers featured in Coal Miner’s Daughter, Sweet Dreams, and Walk the Line, in their own ways, grapple with issues of authenticity, Shut Up and Sing focuses on artists actively questioning what it means to make country music, to belong to the country music community, and to be “real,” to be “authentic.” As will be made evident through my analysis of the film, Maines’, Maguire’s, and Robison’s views on what it means to be “real” sometimes overlap with the country music ideal of what it means to be “real” and sometimes contradict it. As will also be made evident, what it means to be “authentically country” is sometimes different in theory than it is in practice. Further, Shut Up and Sing deals directly with the idea of legacy as a mutable, constructed thing; in the film, the Chicks are shown actively wondering what their legacy will be, actively discussing how they would like to be remembered. This sets it apart from the other three films examined in this project, in which the artists are not shown actively discussing the issue of legacy, or actively trying to construct their own legacies in particular ways. Thus, through Shut Up and Sing we are allowed to look at the issue through a different lens. It is for these reasons that I consider Shut Up and Sing to be a relevant—and even necessary—inclusion in this project, and with these reasons in mind that I
It is first important to note that *Shut Up and Sing* was marketed less as a story about the Dixie Chicks than a political film about free speech. This is made evident by the film’s official web site, a MySpace page bearing the headline, “Welcome to the Largest Discussion of Free Speech the Web has Ever Seen—or Heard!,” followed by the caption, “Brought to you by *Shut Up and Sing*.” A statement slightly lower on the site explains, “The Dixie Chicks were criticized by the American media and the American public for voicing their opinions. What are your views on freedom of expression in the U.S.? Is there a price to be paid for free speech? Whatever side you fall on, get your opinion out there.” Directly below are posts from people who have already responded, followed by a place where the viewer of the site can post his or her own thoughts. The site makes it clear, then, that the Dixie Chicks are really just an opportunity for a larger discussion about freedom of speech—both on the site, and, by extension, in the film itself.

Critics, however, were quick to point out the emphasis on the Chicks’ lives throughout the film. While Salon.com columnist Stephanie Zacharek, for example, characterized the film as “a shout of defiance, a chronicle of the price we have to be willing to pay to stand up for what we believe in,” she further noted that “the film is politically potent precisely because it’s not solely about politics. This isn’t a picture filled with speechifying: it’s a movie about people’s lives.” *USA Today*’s Claudia Puig agreed, noting that while the film ostensibly “examines the backlash created by [Maines’] comment and takes a fascinating, fly-on-the-wall look at damage-control efforts, mostly what we get is a better understanding of the Chicks.” The *Houston Chronicle*’s Andrew Dansby further observes that “Posters, trailers, and the other marketing for *Shut Up and Sing* suggest directors Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck have made a big-issues film, specifically about freedom of speech. But the moments that work best in *Shut Up and Sing* are the smaller
ones. The filmmakers have caught candid, warm footage of the three Chicks at home.” Such observations indicate that though the Chicks’ story is told through a political frame, then, it is as much about their lives as *Coal Miner’s Daughter, Sweet Dreams*, and *Walk the Line* were about the lives of their subjects; the filmmakers have simply chosen a different genre, and a different framework, through which to tell their story. Indeed, through the framework of the controversy and its aftermath, *Shut Up and Sing* can be read as an exploration of, and ultimately a statement about, who the Chicks are politically, musically, and personally.

The film establishes who the Chicks are politically, first, through establishing them as politically concerned citizens even before Maines makes her statement. Before they go onstage the night of “the incident,” Maines is shown asking if someone can get online and check what is going on with the war, establishing that this is something that she is concerned about and has been following. When she makes the comment that she makes, then, she has also been established as well-informed on the issue; this was not something she said simply to play to the crowd. This political concern is echoed throughout the film, as politics are shown as being a regular topic of conversation for the Chicks (along with, among other topics, marriage, motherhood, music, sex, and celebrity gossip). One example of this comes as Maines, Maguire, and Charlie Robison (Emily Robison’s husband) sit in a hospital delivery room with Robison as she prepares to give birth to twins. As Maines and Maguire flip through issues of *Us Weekly* and run across a picture of Bill Maher, the two, along with Charlie Robison, begin to discuss their opinions on recent statements Maher has made about the war. In the conversation, all three reveal themselves to be staunchly against the war in Iraq, though they have differing opinions on what the next step should be. Again, then, the Dixie Chicks are depicted as politically concerned, as well as informed on the current dialogue surrounding the war. They are also
characterized as holding the same opinion that Maines expressed at Shepherd’s Bush Empire.

Why is this significant? In *Rednecks and Bluenecks*, Willman speculates as to the reasons for the “instantaneous virulence” towards the Chicks following Maines’s statement. He quotes Martha Hume, editor of the *Journal of Country Music*, as theorizing that it was partly because,

To the fans, their statements came out of left field. Willie and Merle can sing anti-war songs or anything they want and even audience members who are voting for Bush will say, “They’re good men, they can do it.” But when the Chicks did it…There’s something there, and I don’t know if it’s sexism. My feeling is that it’s because their politics are not otherwise reflected in their work, and with Cash and those guys, their politics were, so when you hear what they’re saying, it’s consistent with the character they’ve put out there. (33)

In other words, in the Chicks’ case, fans felt shocked and betrayed when Maines made the comment because they had no idea they had such political views; it seemed inconsistent with what they thought they knew about the Chicks. The scenes in *Shut Up and Sing* in which the Chicks are shown discussing politics, then, can be seen as “setting the record straight,” if you will—establishing that regardless of what misconceptions audiences might have had about their politics, they are not only politically concerned, but politically liberal people. If films such as *Coal Miner’s Daughter* and *Walk the Line* can be seen as authenticating their subjects—that is, establishing that their subjects really did “live out the songs that they wrote,” and what’s more, live authentically “country” lives—*Shut Up and Sing* can be seen as authenticating its subjects in another way: in establishing that the politically liberal persona Maines exhibited onstage in the moment she made the anti-Bush comment was neither a lie or a fluke, but an accurate reflection
of her political views.

Comments made by Maines, Maguire, and Robison throughout Shut Up and Sing demonstrate an overt concern with being honest, truthful, and “real.” One example of this comes in the immediate backlash of Maines’s comment, as manager Simon Renshaw advises Maines to draft a statement for the Chicks’ web site, and to distribute to the American media, explaining the intent behind her comment. Maguire initially suggests that Maines downplay the comment, saying that she could explain that it was a smoky bar gig and she just got a little carried away. Maines insists that it was more serious than that. When Maguire points out that she did say it in a joking way, Maines agrees that yes, she did—but that doesn’t mean that it wasn’t true. Maines is firm in that she will not pretend that she didn’t mean it, which is reflected in the statement that Maines does ultimately issue; while she apologizes on the grounds that the comment was disrespectful, she does not apologize for the comment itself. This insistence on honesty is echoed in later scenes; for example, when a consultant from Lipton, sponsor of the Chicks’ 2003 Top of the World tour, advises the Chicks not to be judgmental of the President in the interviews they will be doing with Diane Sawyer and with Willman, Maines states that while she is willing to say that she supports the troops, she will not say that she supports their Commander in Chief.

Despite Maguire’s early suggestion that they downplay the incident, she and Robison echo Maines’s concern with honesty—and, by extension, with not being hypocritical. In the interview with Diane Sawyer that they ultimately give (shown in part in Shut Up and Sing), Sawyer presses the two of them to admit that they must have, at some point, gotten angry with Maines for saying what she did. Maguire and Robison firmly deny this; Maguire states that one of the reasons that they had become as popular as they had in the first place was that fans liked

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15 Maines later stated that she regretted even apologizing to the extent that she did, telling Time magazine’s Josh Tyrangiel, “I apologized for disrespecting the office of the President. But I don’t feel that way anymore. I don’t feel he is owed any respect whatsoever.”
Maines the way she was. In other words, it would be wrong of her and Robison to celebrate
Maines’s outspoken nature when it was working in their favor only to condemn her for it when
she said something fans didn’t like. Robison reinforces this in an interview given with NPR
(also featured in Shut Up and Sing); as she states, “I feel like people relate to us because we’re
real, and when you’re real, you stick your foot in your mouth sometimes.” In other words—fans
shouldn’t expect to have it both ways. It’s unfair for them to love how “real” the Chicks are and
then turn against them when that “realness” causes them to say something that some find
objectionable.

The fact that many fans did just that reveals a tension between what the Chicks consider
relatively unclear terms such as “real,” “honest,” and “authentic” to mean and what it means to
be “authentically country.” Indeed, in Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity,
Richard A. Peterson notes that from country music’s very inception, this tension has existed. He
highlights that though entertainment industry impresarios initially expressed dismay and
confusion at the popularity of country music, with its reliance “on untrained, high-pitched nasal
voices and simple musical accompaniments, evoking images of farm, family, and old-fashioned
mores along with more than a dash of sexual double entendre,” they ultimately—correctly—
realized that “the appeal of the music was rooted in the feeling of authenticity conveyed by its
performers” (5). With that in mind, they sought out performers “steeped in tradition, playing old
songs in traditional ways,” only to find that audiences found these performers to be little more
than “bemusing novelties” (Peterson 5). It was then that industry executives found what perhaps
is still true: “to the consumer, apparently, authenticity was not synonymous with historical
accuracy”; rather, it was important that singers fit a pre-conceived mold for what was considered
“authentic.” With this in mind, it perhaps makes sense that Chicks fans stopped embracing them
when they revealed themselves not to fit a pre-determined mold for what a country performer
should be, in spite of the fact that the Chicks never stopped being “real” or “honest.”

It was with realism and honesty in mind, however, that the Chicks went about recording
*Taking the Long Way*, their first “post-incident” album, a process that is documented in *Shut Up
and Sing*. In the film, Robison discusses the fact that on this album—unlike on their previous
three—the Chicks would be writing or co-writing every song. As she states, “Almost anything
that isn’t written by us now, at least on this album, seems a little bit false.” Indeed, songs on
*Taking the Long Way* ranged from songs that directly addressed the incident (most notably, “Not
Ready to Make Nice,” which firmly positioned the Chicks as unrepentant for their actions) to
songs on other personal topics, such as infertility, which both Maguire and Robison struggled
with. *Shut Up and Sing* both chronicles the process of writing and promoting this album and
many of the experiences the Chicks discuss in their songs. Through chronicling both of these
things, the film, first, highlights aspects of the songwriting process and the music business that
are left unseen in films like *Coal Miner’s Daughter* and *Walk the Line*, and, second, verifies the
songs as “authentic,” as really about and written by the Chicks.

*Shut Up and Sing*, first, reveals the songwriting process to be a far more collaborative and
work-intensive process than *Coal Miner’s Daughter* and *Walk the Line* would have one believe
(and, to be fair, perhaps far more collaborative than it actually was for solo artists like Lynn and
Cash than it is for members of a band). In both *Coal Miner’s Daughter* and *Walk the Line*,
songwriting is shown as something that happens as a result of sudden inspiration. Loretta Lynn
writes “You Ain’t Woman Enough to Take My Man” in a scene that directly follows her
catching her husband fooling around with another woman. Johnny Cash writes “Folsom Prison
Blues” in a scene directly following watching a film about Folsom Prison during his time in the
Army; similarly, June Carter cries alone in her car after telling Johnny Cash that she doesn’t love him and, in the next scene, is shown struggling over the words and melody to “Ring of Fire” at her kitchen table. Such scenes work to authenticate such songs as being directly inspired by the artists’ experiences; they also paint songwriting as being something very organic, very spontaneous. Though the songs on the Dixie Chicks’ Taking the Long Way can be read as every bit as personal as such songs as “You Ain’t Woman Enough…” and “Ring of Fire,” Shut Up and Sing depicts the songwriting process as much less spontaneous: in scenes in which the Chicks are shown writing songs, they are together in a room, sometimes with a co-writer such as Semisonic’s Dan Wilson, brainstorming ideas for songs and specific lyrics (in one scene, as they write “The Long Way Around,” Robison suggests the lyric, “I fought with a stranger,” clarifying that “the stranger” would be President Bush; Maines responds with an enthusiastic, “Good, Emmy! Gooooooood!,” to which Robison pumps her fists triumphantly). A song, then, is depicted not as something that immediately comes to you following an intense experience, but something that only comes to life after a discussion between a group of three or four people. This can be attributed both to the documentary form—the camera captures the artists actually working on the songs, as opposed to actors reenacting what a screenwriter and director might imagine the songwriting process to be like—and, again, a reflection on the nature of the artists being depicted; we are looking at a band that works on songs together, here, as opposed to solo artists.

While we are never treated to a scene of one of the Chicks having an intense experience and then immediately writing a song about it, however, the editing of the film does work to authenticate the songs in a way that is very similar to such scenes in Walk the Line and Coal Miner’s Daughter. Scenes of the Chicks writing or recording specific songs are often intercut with scenes of the Chicks talking about or even living through the experience. For example,
scenes of the Chicks working on the song “So Hard,” which includes the lyrics, “Felt like a
given, something a woman was born to do/A natural ambition to see a reflection of me and you/I
feel so guilty, that was a gift I couldn’t give/Could you be happy if life wasn’t how we pictured
it?” are intercut with scenes of Maguire and Robison talking about their respective problems with
infertility, the different options they considered, and the fact that in vitro fertilization ultimately
worked for both of them. Such scenes are also intercut with scenes featuring both women and
their husbands interacting with their children, and an interview in which Maguire laughingly
recalls the way the she and her husband reacted when they learned that they were having twins.
Robison also ultimately gives birth to twins; as another illustration of the way that scenes from
the Chicks’ lives are intercut to establish the Chicks’ songs as an accurate reflection of their real
lives, the song “Lullaby,” which the Chicks wrote for their children, plays over footage of the
three women and Charlie Robison taking turns holding the Robisons’ twins in the hospital
delivery room.

Such scenes can be seen as having a second function, in addition to authenticating the
Chicks’ songs; they can be seen as showing who the Chicks are apart from musicians holding an
unpopular political view, as establishing that the Chicks are also friends, mothers, and wives—
and wives in very different types of married relationships than artists like Cline and Lynn were in. As depicted in Sweet Dreams, Cline’s marriage was a volatile one in which her husband
often expressed resentment at her success. As shown in Coal Miner’s Daughter, Lynn’s husband helped jump-start her career, but ultimately resented her newfound independence; he also felt
emasculated when it got to the point where she was financially supporting him. Though the
Chicks’ romantic relationships do not play nearly as large of a role in the narrative of Shut Up
and Sing as Cline’s and Lynn’s do in their respective films, what we do see of them provides a
marked contrast to the other films examined. First of all, both Maguire and Robison speak to the fact that their husbands—a musician/actor and a musician/rancher, respectively—usually travel with them; Maguire refers to her husband as a “Mr. Mom” and talks happily about how much he loves being a dad, statements that her husband (Gareth Maguire) confirms, talking about how much he loves to be there for her when she comes in after a day in the studio. Even in moments when any of the three Chicks talk about times when their careers are hard on their respective families, however—Robison, for example, talks about how difficult it was to have to be away from her husband, and their ranch near San Antonio, when she briefly relocated to Los Angeles to work on *Taking the Long Way*—the relationships come across as far more equitable and less volatile than those characterized in *Coal Miner’s Daughter* and *Sweet Dreams*. It is virtually impossible to picture the episodes of abuse that appear in *Coal Miner’s Daughter* and *Sweet Dreams*; this can be seen, again, less as a contrast between the documentary vs. biopic format, and more as a contrast between marriage in the 1950s and 60s vs. marriage in the 21st century. Other scenes featuring the Chicks’ families can also be seen as a reflection on the way touring has changed in the time that has elapsed between the women’s careers; it is possible, now, for each Chick to have their own tour bus on the road, and for each to have their children with them most of the time, as opposed to leaving them at home (as Lynn, Cline, and Carter all had to do).

The film can also be seen as emphasizing the Chicks’ strong friendship. “People don’t realize how tight we are,” Robison says in a radio interview shown in the film. “We’re a sisterhood, and we go through the good, the bad, and the ugly all together.” This is reinforced in scenes that show the Chicks interacting on both personal and professional levels. Personally, Maguire and Maines are there in the delivery room when Robison gives birth; at one point, Robison reminds Maguire that she should call their mother; the three laugh and talk about their
husbands. Professionally, they present an unwaveringly unified front in the face of “the incident,” never lashing out at each other; there is never a hint that this might cause them to break up. Maguire highlights both her personal and professional connection to Maines late in the film. “I think Natalie still feels pressure about what’s happened,” she tells the camera. “Even though we say over and over and over again, it was the best thing—I can tell her that and shake her all day long—It’s the best thing that ever happened to me! It’s the best thing that ever happened to our career! You’re fine! You didn’t do anything!” She pauses, choked up, and then continues tearfully, “And I just think she still—she still, um—feels responsible. And if she came to me tomorrow and said, ‘I don’t want to tour, I don’t want to record anymore, I don’t want to do this’…I’d say, ‘Okay.’ I’d give up my career for her to be happy, to be at peace.”

The film, then, can be seen as focusing on a strong friendship between women in a way that only Coal Miner’s Daughter, of the other films examined, does. As critics of Sweet Dreams noted, this absence was to Sweet Dreams’ detriment, as Cline was known to have a great impact on many women in country music.

If we are allowed to see a great deal about the Chicks’ friendship and personal lives in Shut Up and Sing, we also see other aspects about the music industry throughout the aftermath of the incident, the writing of the album, and the promotion of the album that are all but hidden in the other films. There is, of course, the omnipresence of the Chicks’ manager Simon Renshaw throughout the film, who offers advice but virtually always lets the Chicks do what they want. At times, he seems almost gleeful at the uproar Maines’ comment has caused; as he sits with the Chicks discussing the public statement Maines will release, he says that they shouldn’t shy away from controversy: “Wouldn’t it be great if we could get them, like, burning CDs and banning you from the radio?” He is half-joking, and he makes the comment without having any idea of what
will later ensue; regardless, even later in the film, he is shown betting Maines $1,000 that she won’t wear a t-shirt that says “Fuck Toby Keith” in response to a photoshopped picture of Maines and Saddam Hussein that country singer Toby Keith put up on the Jumbotron at his concerts following the incident. His ubiquitousness in the film is a marked contrast to the other films, where managers are seen far less often. Again, this can be seen as having less to do with the documentary format and more to do with the type of story being told in Shut Up and Sing; it makes far more sense that a manager would play a larger role in what is framed as a story about the aftermath of a political incident than in a love story or a “rags to riches” story.

It also speaks, perhaps, to the way that the music industry has changed since the 1960s. The Dixie Chicks’ Top of the World tour was sponsored by Lipton Iced Tea; thus, they must receive advice from Lipton executives along with Renshaw and, as Lipton consultant Michael Berland tells them, “At the end of the day, while you’re great musicians, you are a brand.” Indeed, the financial consequences of Maines’ comment are often discussed throughout the film; while the Chicks themselves do not seem concerned about this, political pundits and radio announcers comment that the Chicks “committed financial suicide,” while in the previously mentioned congressional hearings on media deregulation—at which Renshaw spoke on the Chicks’ behalf—one politician says matter-of-factly that the Chicks made a decision that had a business consequence. The film, then, can be seen as highlighting the business and financial side of the music industry.

Finally—and perhaps most significantly—we can see the Chicks’ actively debating what they want their legacy to be, what kind of music they want to make, and whether they still have

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Maines did wear a t-shirt that read “FUTK” at a concert performance broadcast via satellite on the May 2003 Academy of Country Music awards show; when later asked about it, Maines claimed that it stood for Freedom, Understanding, Truth, and Knowledge. In Shut Up and Sing, Chicks fans are gleefully shown at concerts wearing their own FUTK t-shirts and grinning as they offer similar explanations to the camera. Detractors, of course, are shown wearing similar FUDC t-shirts.
or want a place in the country music community. “We don’t want this to be our legacy,” Maines is shown stating at a press conference. “We want our music to be our legacy.” This issue is again addressed as they are shown working on the song “Lubbock or Leave It” with producer Rick Rubin, which is about Lubbock, Texas—hometown of both Natalie Maines and Buddy Holly. “International airport/A quarter after nine,” lyrics to the song read. “Paris, Texas, Athens, Georgia’s/Not what I had in mind./As I’m getting out I laugh to myself/Cause this is the only place/Where as you’re getting off the plane/You see Buddy Holly’s face./I hear they hate me now/Just like they hated you/Maybe when I’m dead and gone/I’m gonna get a statue too.” The song directly addresses the fact that legacy is something that is not fixed, that is constantly changing.

*Shut Up and Sing* shows the Chicks trying to actively determine what that legacy will be. Prior to “the incident,” the Chicks were firmly entrenched in the country community, their songs firmly classified as part of the country genre; the incident forced them to question whether or not they still belonged there. The film shows the three of them actively grappling with this issue. “I’m probably totally outnumbered,” Maguire says at one point, her voice taking on an almost conspiratorial tone. “But I think this [*Taking the Long Way*] is a country record in a lot of ways. Knowing country through and through, ‘cause that’s what I listened to, you know, most of my life, I don’t think this is that far from country.” The fact that she must even make this statement indicates that even after the album has been finished, there is still debate about precisely what genre the album, and the Chicks themselves belong to. At another point, as the Chicks and Renshaw discuss possible ways to promote the album, Maines flat out asks, “Can we decide what kind of artists we want to be right now?” The fact that such debates and questions are so ubiquitous throughout the film is telling—particularly in light of the fact that, by many
definitions, the album is country. Peterson, for example, differentiates between “hard core” and “soft shell” country, with “hard core,” traditionally sung by people such as Lynn, Cash, and Hank Williams, characterized by the artists’ personal involvement in the song, concrete references that evoke specific personal experiences, and music that changes as the singer’s life changes (151). These types of songs are characterized as more “authentic” or “real” than soft shell country songs, which are often sung in the third person; even those that are not are typically more general in subject matter, so that the listener might easily relate to the song (151). With this in mind, Taking the Long Way is in many ways more authentically country than previous Chicks’ albums Wide Open Spaces, Fly, and Home, which are peppered with story songs sung from the third person. On such albums, even such songs that are sung in the first person are either general enough for many to relate to (such as “Cowboy Take Me Away,” which speaks rather generally about what the character in the song wants from love) or obviously fictional (i.e., “You Were Mine,” in which Maines mentions a four-year-old daughter and two-year-old son; Maines doesn’t have a daughter). The fact that there is such debate about whether Taking the Long Way is a country album, then, highlights something important: that in music, genre is not strictly about the music itself, but about persona, about fulfilling audience expectations, and about what the audience thinks you are.

With that in mind, there are both scholars and musicians alike who argue that genre boundaries are rather arbitrary and unimportant. In “The Voice Behind the Song: Faith Hill, Country Music, and Reflexive Identity,” for example, Jocelyn Neal argues that such decisions are “best left to the employees of record stores who must stock the relevant bins, and to the fans who submit requests to radio stations” (124). Likewise, in the song-by-song commentary on the album This is It found on country singer Jack Ingram’s official web site, Ingram says of his “Lips
of an Angel” (a cover of a song previously performed by the rock band Hinder), “A good song is a good song. I’ll let other people choose sides between what genre is what genre and who should stay inside which box. I think there are two types of music: good and bad. I try to stay on the right side.” In the context of the arguments both Neal and Ingram are making, such comments make sense. Neal makes the statement after establishing that many critics will only say that artist Faith Hill’s music isn’t really country and stop there, as if the notion that Hill might actually be a pop singer trying to pass herself off as a country singer is reason enough to dismiss her music totally, without trying to look any deeper at what she is trying to say or do as an artist. Ingram, likewise, is a singer whose music was denied radio airplay for years because he was considered “too rock for country and too country for rock and roll”; even after being accepted by the country music community, he has continued to be criticized by some in the industry as a result of his refusal to make his sound more country, by virtue of the fact that he has no qualms about covering a Hinder song if he likes it and thinks he can do something different with it. As both illustrate, then, genre can be extremely limiting, and hardly the only thing that one should consider when determining whether this artist or that is “worth” listening to.

And yet it is hard to argue that genre means something, when artists like Carrie Underwood have fought to insist that their work does belong in a specific genre. “I want to be a country artist in a country world with country fans,” she told Entertainment Weekly’s Dave Karger (26). In response to criticisms that she isn’t country, she says, “Okay, here’s my thing. On Top 40 stations, nobody cares that you’ll have Fergie next to 50 Cent. They’re different. Why can’t you have me next to somebody that’s more traditional country? You can call me ‘not country’ until your face is blue, but I sing country music” (Karger 28). She, too, seems to recognize that generic labels can be limiting—but instead of saying that that’s fine, that listeners
can decide which genre she belongs in, she is fighting for her right to be called country. Because, as Neal recognizes, calling someone “not country” can be a way of dismissing them, or not taking them seriously; this recalls Marnie Hughes-Warrington’s concern that generic labels can be a way of denigrating something’s perceived worth. Additionally, if you say that country music is only what fits in a very small box, that extremely limits what country music is and can be.

With this in mind, it might have been interesting to see the Dixie Chicks similarly insist, in the aftermath of “the incident,” in the promotion of *Taking the Long Way*, that yes, they were country artists, and *Taking the Long Way* was a country record, no matter what anyone tried to say. That, it seems, would have sent a message that you can be politically liberal, can be outspoken, and sing country music. Because, as Willman highlights in *Rednecks and Bluenecks*, neither country listeners nor country fans are as monolithically conservative as something like “the incident” would have one believe: there is a range of political opinions, and political involvement; as may seem obvious but is not often discussed, even those who consider themselves conservative Republicans have varying reasons for doing so.

Taking this under consideration, it still seems somewhat baffling that what happened to the Chicks happened at all—that a casual comment made between songs at a concert would spark boycotts, bans, hate mail, and even death threats. Maguire offers one possible explanation in *Shut Up and Sing*: “It had to be somebody or some group that seemed like the All-American girls,” she states. “It was perfect! It had to be the unlikely voice from what looked like the conservative heart of America saying it.” Willman, on the other hand, suggests that the Chicks may have been poised for a backlash before the incident even started, with the immense popularity of *Home* (the last album the Chicks released prior to the incident); criticisms Maines
had made of Toby Keith’s pro-war anthem, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (the Angry American)”; and some resentment in the country music community over the Chicks’ much-publicized disputes with their record label. The Chicks were and continue to be the best-selling female act of all time, in any genre; Willman’s comments seem to suggest that it was almost inevitable that they be knocked off their pedestal.

If there is any good news to be taken away in the aftermath of the incident, it seems to be that in the Chicks’ absence from the mainstream country music scene, artists like the ones highlighted at the beginning of this chapter (Lambert, Underwood, and Wilson) have popped up to continue what the Chicks started pre-incident with songs like “Goodbye Earl” and “Sin Wagon.” The incident may have sent a message about what is acceptable to express politically in mainstream country music; it did not, however, seem to erase anything that the Chicks were doing musically.

And as a documentary, *Shut Up and Sing* can be viewed both as a case study on what it means to be “country” in contemporary society and as an opportunity for viewing an alternative way of telling a life story on film. Multiple things about the changing nature of the music business, and of women’s lives, can be gleaned from viewing the film in context with biographical films such as *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, *Sweet Dreams*, and *Walk the Line*. Viewing the film in context with such biographical films also illustrates something about film genres: that just as in music, generic limitations can be somewhat limiting. Though many of the ways that *Shut Up and Sing* is different from the other films can be credited to the fact that the artists themselves are different, and living in a different decade, undoubtedly, others can be seen as a reflection of the fact that the film is not bound by the constrictions of the musical biopic form. This is not to say that the documentary is fundamentally “better” or more “truthful”;
undoubtedly, it is not. It is to say, however, that different genres and mediums offer different opportunities for telling life stories on film.
CONCLUSION

And I’ll grab the wheel and I’ll point it west
Pack the good and leave the rest
And drive until I find the missing piece
You said I wouldn’t get too far
On a tank of gas and an empty heart
But I got everything I’ll ever need
I got this old guitar and a brand new set of strings

In a genre that has historically constructed women in relation to the home, female country musicians are, with increasing regularity, starting to sing about hitting the road. Sometimes, as in the case of the above-quoted “New Strings” by Miranda Lambert, they do so as a way to escape something—a bad relationship, usually, as is also the case in Sugarland’s “Down in Mississippi,” in which lead singer Jennifer Nettles gleefully declares that she’s “had it with the wife thing” and “if anyone asks—not that they would” she’ll be “down in Mississippi and up to no good.” Other times, it is less about escape than simply feeling a need to get out in the world on your own and see what you can do, as is the case in the Dixie Chicks’ “Wide Open Spaces.” While leaving is often a liberating experience, approached with excitement and a feeling of daring—as if the singer is doing something they think they shouldn’t do, and has perhaps been told that they can’t do—it can also be bittersweet; in Carrie Underwood’s “Don’t Forget to Remember Me,” the singer somewhat wistfully asks the people back home not to forget her while she is off chasing her dreams. The fact that she is wistful—and, indeed, even the fact that leaving is such a liberatory experience for Lambert and Nettles—illuminates that while today’s female country singers feel like they can leave home, it is not necessarily something that they are expected to do, and not something that is a small decision by any means.

If one primary, overarching theme exists between the four films studied in this project, it
is the tension between home and the road. This is handled somewhat differently in each of the four films. In *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, Loretta Lynn leaves home twice: once, with Doolittle, when she leaves Butcher Holler, Kentucky; and a second time, when she leaves the home she shares with Doolittle to jump on the tour bus. The first time she leaves home marks a transition: she is leaving her parents to be with her husband, putting being a wife before being a daughter. She leaves her parents’ home only to start another one; when she leaves for the second time, it is somewhat reluctantly, and with the knowledge that she might be ruining her marriage, as well as that she will not be around to see her children grow up. The results are somewhat disastrous, as illustrated by her onstage breakdown; when she returns to the road, it is with her husband at her side, and she is singing “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” firmly stating that she hasn’t forgotten where “home” really is. The film, then, does not critique the idea that a female country musician belongs at home first and foremost.

In *Sweet Dreams*, home takes on a different meaning: it is not somewhere you leave, but something you aspire to. Patsy Cline has never has a “proper” home, and her desire for “a house with yellow roses all around” drives nearly all of her actions. When she talks of being a singer, of “hitting the road,” it is merely as a means to an end, a means of making the money to get her “house with the yellow roses.” Of course, even when she gets that house, it is not all that she has expected it to be, primarily because of the man she shares the house with. When she dies, part of the tragedy is undoubtedly that she never really got the home that she aspired to.

*Walk the Line* has a more hopeful ending, at least in terms of it being “okay” for a woman to live “on the road.” The tension between home and the road is made more overt in this construction, with June Carter constantly, consciously struggling between the life she thinks she is supposed to have and the life she wants. Its climax comes when June decides that she is going
to live “on the road” once and for all, when she realizes that she is more herself on the road than at home. This can perhaps be attributed both to the fact that the film was made in 2005, when women are less likely to feel obligated to stay home; it can also, undoubtedly, be attributed to the fact that *Walk the Line* is Johnny Cash’s story, not hers, and for him, home is an oppressive place that must be escaped. In this construction, as the “woman on the road,” she represents freedom; the only problem is that she initially doesn’t feel able to experience that freedom, herself. When she decides that she can—and will—it is liberatory, and it is suggested that perhaps for the first time in her life, she will be truly happy.

Finally, *Shut Up and Sing* provides one last case study of “women on the road.” In this construction, the tension between home and the road doesn’t exist in quite the same way—home is the road, and the husbands and children get to come along for the ride. However, the tension between home and the road exist on a larger scale, as the Chicks are seen as betraying their home when they speak out against the President of the United States overseas. In this case, the tensions inherent in the construction of country authenticity are never more apparent, as the Chicks essentially have to choose between staying true to themselves or being considered “authentic” relative to a predetermined country standard of authenticity. It is here that something important becomes very clear: for country musicians—particularly female country musicians—though constructions of both home and authenticity may change, they are always of the utmost concern. Further, it seems that what was made apparent by the scene in *Walk the Line* in which a fan chastises June Carter for getting divorced is still apparent: it is nearly impossible for a woman to be truly authentic in an industry, and a society, that still chastises women for “stepping out of line.” Just because “stepping out of line” means something different now than it did in the 1960s doesn’t make that any less true.
It is similarly impossible for a biopic to be “truly authentic” given that there is little hope of ever providing an all-encompassing look at someone’s life on film. However, authenticity continues to be a primary concern for the biopic. Though narrative structures can change—though, as is evidenced through *Coal Miner’s Daughter, Sweet Dreams*, and *Walk the Line*, biographical films often contain many of the same elements, especially if the featured performer is country—issues of emphasis and time and space are always important. The film, however, almost always has to work much less hard to achieve the perception of authenticity if the performer in question gives their blessing to the production. When the performer does not do so, however, it provides far more impetus for viewers to “read outside the text” in order to get the “real” story of a performer’s life. This is not something that is unique to country biopics, but is generalizable across the biopic genre. However, in today’s highly mediatized society, the chances that viewers will have already “read outside the text” before going to see a biopic is highly likely. With that in mind, a documentary like *Shut Up and Sing* can be read almost as an intervention—a chance for performers to tell their own side of the story in a society where media consumers feel as if they already know everything there is to know.

With that in mind, I, like Custen at the end of *Bio/Pics*, must wonder about the future of the biographical film. I will not be so presumptuous as to suggest that the genre will ever completely die out, but rather suggest that it will likely change as our society becomes more and more mediatized. Will there, for example, ever be the need for a biopic on a performer like Carrie Underwood, when virtually everyone knows that she became a star by winning *American Idol*? While I don’t doubt that country music biopics will always be held up to standards of country authenticity, as well as need to choose the “correct” emphasis and to establish themselves in time and space, I do think that biopics will increasingly need to adopt innovative
narrative strategies.

The fact that I have questioned whether there will ever be a need for a biopic on a performer such as Underwood highlights another important issue: that the subjects for biopics are carefully selected, and often for very specific reasons. *Coal Miner’s Daughter* made a compelling story because it so clearly emphasized the elements of “the American dream”: a young girl coming from nothing to become a success. *Sweet Dreams* was made on the basis of *Coal Miner’s Daughter’s* popularity. It took twenty years for another country singer’s life to be placed on the big screen, and then it was Johnny Cash, a country singer who had considerable crossover appeal. The Dixie Chicks, similarly, were undoubtedly given attention in a film because their situation spoke to larger political concerns. When a country biopic is made, then, it is made for very specific reasons. Such biopics must be carefully examined; as a culmination of two genres (country music and the biopic) in which authenticity is of the utmost importance, they provide valuable opportunities for examining the importance of authenticity in our increasingly mediatized culture.
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