ABSTRACT

WE’RE CHANGING THE WAY WE DO BUSINESS:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DIXIE CHICKS
AND THE COUNTRY MUSIC INDUSTRY

by Justine Frances Stokes

Over the last fifteen years, the Dixie Chicks have become one of country music’s most successful acts. However, the relationship between the band and the country music industry became strained following anti-war comments by lead singer Natalie Maines in March of 2003. This project analyzes this relationship from a feminist political economic perspective to examine how an apparent conservative ideology within the country music industry has impacted the career of the Dixie Chicks. By analyzing the various albums the Dixie Chicks have released since 1997 and the subsequent ways the band and their albums were marketed by their record company, questions raised about how women within country music are portrayed and treated by country music are investigated, along with how the Dixie Chicks may have subverted the treatment.
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This project began ten years ago on a muggy August day when a couple of college kids from Iowa made a trek to the Twin Cities for Lilith Fair. It was on that day the Dixie Chicks entered into my life. It was a moment proving to be more important than I could ever have imagined. It is with that in mind that I must first thank Rachel for agreeing to leave the long drink line to go see what the fuss surrounding the Dixie Chicks was all about. She is only one of many friends who provided much needed support throughout this process. Whether it was encouragement, sound advice, a kick in the shins, or articles and artifacts for research, my friends’ enthusiasm for this project only pushed me along.

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CHAPTER ONE
DIXIE CHICKS AND THE COUNTRY MUSIC INDUSTRY

1.1 Introduction

On March 10, 2003, the Dixie Chicks, an all-female country band comprised of Martie Maguire, Natalie Maines, and Emily Robison, went on tour to promote their then-current album *Home*. While concert tours often function as promotional tools to gain an audience, the Top of the World Tour was, for the Dixie Chicks, a congratulatory lap around the world. *Home* had just won three Grammy Awards: Best Country Album, Best Country Performance, and Best Country Instrumental Performance (Front Page Publicity). Their then-current single, “Traveling Soldier,” was number one on the country chart (Billboard Charts). The song, about a young girl’s relationship with a Vietnam soldier, struck a chord with listeners, as the United States already was on the eve of a war in Iraq. On March 10th, the band began their tour in London, England at Shepherd’s Bush Empire. While introducing “Traveling Soldier,” Natalie Maines made the off-handed remark “Just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas” (Clarke). Maines’ declaration would prove to be a defining moment for the band in the post-9/11 cultural landscape of America.

First reported in a *London Guardian* three-star review, the news of Maines’ comment soon made its way to America. Reactions to her comment were largely negative, as country music listeners called for boycotts of the band’s music and pundits on radio and television news programs were critical of the unpatriotic statement (Estrich). By March 13th, the Associated Press reported news of a boycott by country music fans in Nashville, Tennessee (AP). During the weekend of March 15th and 16th, 15 out of 148 country music stations did not play singles by the Dixie Chicks; on March 17th, Cumulus Broadcasting banned the Dixie Chicks from airplay on its 42 stations (Stark, Radio Reaction to Chicks' Comments Diminishing). Within two weeks of Maines’ comment, “Traveling Soldier” dropped completely off the Top 40 Country Singles chart (Billboard Charts). On March 18th, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) certified *Home* six times platinum – signifying 6,000,000 albums shipped – but it would never reach seven times platinum (Recording Industry Association of America), as sales of the album dropped dramatically from previous albums. The sales figure is still successful for a recording artist, but a significant drop for the Dixie Chicks.
Known to the Dixie Chicks as “the incident” (Tyrangiel 64), the events of 2003 define the band more than any particular musical expression. To their fans, as well as the country music community at large, the band either became champions of the First Amendment or examples of the high costs celebrities pay when speaking politically. Though this arguably “political” incident helped shape the Dixie Chicks’ image after March 2003, it was just one moment in their otherwise celebrated musical career. The Dixie Chicks’ relationship with country music is contentious, as Maines’ comment is only one way the band has defied the expectations of the industry.

The band entered into the country music scene in 1997 with the release of their first Nashville-produced studio album, *Wide Open Spaces*. At a time when country music was struggling with artists who compromised their country sound for pop music success, like Faith Hill and Shania Twain, the Dixie Chicks remained true to the sound of country while appealing to a broad audience. “Not only did they inject much hard country material into their performances,” Bill Malone suggests, “they also attracted hosts of young women to their shows” (Malone, Country Music 434). With a country sound appealing to fans both young and old, the Dixie Chicks established a rather profitable relationship with country music as an industry. Though the industry profited from the influx of young female fans, the Dixie Chicks became the biggest-selling female group of all time in any genre (Front Page Publicity). However, leading up to 2003, tensions within the relationship would erupt. Controversial lyrics by country music standards (Gates and Gordon 67) and accusations by the Dixie Chicks of withheld royalties (Dansby) put the Dixie Chicks’ position in country music in jeopardy. The fallout within the industry over Maines’ comments ended the relationship, as the band produced and distributed the 2006 album *Taking the Long Way* without the country music industry. The actions of the Dixie Chicks no longer reflected a positive country music image essential to perpetuating the ideology of the musical genre.

As a genre, country music has a complex ideology based on its core audience of the Southern white working class. This ideology is perceived as conservative due to songs expressing “examples of religious fundamentalism, racism, and right-wing political ideology” (Lund 79). However, country music often contradicts such conservative themes. “There are expressions of social conservatism, yet also an economic position that can be, in many ways, interpreted as liberal” (G. H. Lewis 209). Malone argues against linking country music to any
political ideology, as it is the “tensions and conflicting postures” not the “simplicity” found in country music driving the genre (Malone, Don't Get Above Your Raisin' 252). Conservative ideology does present itself within country music, particularly as a reflection of a particular point in space and time. Robert W. Van Sickel’s analysis of the politics and ideology of country music excludes music since 2001, because “country artists and fans have taken sides in an increasingly ugly display of jingoism, intolerance, and even censorship” (317). Reaction to Maines’ comment supports Van Sickel’s claim that a post-9/11 atmosphere reveals conservatism within country music.

This complex relationship between ideological constructs emerging out of country music as an industry and the Dixie Chicks’ career, both within and outside that industry, is the basis for this project. With the Dixie Chicks’ tenuous relationship with country music at its forefront, this project aims not only to explore the ways such a relationship impacts how female country artists are produced and consumed by the country music industry, as well as by more mainstream audiences, but also the ways in which the Dixie Chicks have resisted and redefined a woman’s place in country music. By examining the political economic conditions of the country music industry and how the image and music of the Dixie Chicks evolved over time, this project will reexamine female artists’ roles, like those of the Dixie Chicks, in country music.

1.2 Country Music, Ideology, and Gender

Country music operates within a much larger popular music industry in the United States. Encompassing music produced and distributed commercially, popular music relies heavily on genres to categorize music not only stylistically, but also by audience (Frith 85). Success of a genre is built upon creating and maintaining a profitable ideology, requiring the development of a genre operating in conjunction with the beliefs, tastes, and expectations of a perceived consumer base. Stylistically within country music, there are variations or subgenres: bluegrass, rockabilly, honky-tonk, Texas country, pop country, alt-country, etc. For this project, the genre refers to “the stream of commercial music that began to develop rapidly in the 1920s and is now widely recognized around the world as ‘country music’” (Peterson, Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity 9). Commercially produced primarily in Nashville, Tennessee, Malone contends country music developed an ideology mirroring southern working-class consumers, as
the music developed with “a southern accent and a cluster of preoccupations that reflected its southern working-class identity” (Malone, Don't Get Above Your Raisin' 115).

Conservatism as an ideology of country music and as an identifier of its consumer is a point of contention. Conservative is not limited here to just a political ideology, but rather is a broader term, as defined by Van Sickle:

A conservative is one who tends to support the interests of the state or society over the individual; who favors regional or local autonomy over national authority; who is relatively unsympathetic to persons accused of crimes, to First Amendment claims, and to assertions of civil rights; who seeks to preserve traditional values, practices, and social arrangements, such as the nuclear family, parental authority, patriarchy, and religion; who is suspicious of government efforts to equalize the distribution of wealth; and who normally offers uncritical support for the military and the president’s foreign policy. (317)

While Malone cautions against labeling country music as conservative, themes found in country music – American values honoring traditional roles for men and women and supporting traditional values of honoring family, God, and America – do fall within Van Sickle’s definition of “conservative.”

Complicating the presence of conservatism in country music is the distinction between the conservatism of the music and the conservatism of the industry. In Rednecks and Bluenecks, Chris Willman argues that the country music industry supported a conservative ideology through support of the Republican Party and President George W. Bush during the years following 9/11. “The stereotype that country music has become the house genre of the GOP isn’t easily or persuasively disproven” (7). Supporting a political party with a conservative agenda, country music also has the power to ensure the music produced and heard on the radio is supportive of such an agenda. This conservative atmosphere influenced the reaction to Maines’ comments; support for the Dixie Chicks by members of the country music community was minimal, as many artists distanced themselves from vocally supporting the band.

To be successful in country music, artists must negotiate these issues of conservatism, both in their music and in their relationship with the country music industry. While there are
contemporary country artists who are supporters of the Democratic Party – most notably Tim McGraw and Toby Keith – many choose to separate music from politics. In 2004, Vote for Change, a concert tour that featured artists such as Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, Pearl Jam, and James Taylor, along with the Dixie Chicks, took place in political battleground states across the United States. Taking place during the lead up to the November general election, the purpose of the tour was to register voters and offer support for Democratic nominee Senator John Kerry. Organizers were interested in forming an all-country line-up independent of the Dixie Chicks’ participation in the main tour, but when McGraw declined to participate as a headliner, not wanting to publicize his politics, the tour fell through (Willman, Rednecks and Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music 183). The decision by the Dixie Chicks to participate in Vote for Change negated any allegiance to a conservative and/or apolitical association with country music, and simultaneously associated them with the more liberal pop and rock ‘n’ roll music genres.

The presence of conservatism in country music and in the industry has led to a complicated history of gender politics. Women have always had a strong presence in country music; June Carter, Patsy Cline, Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, and Reba McEntire are only some of the female artists who have achieved great success in the genre. Despite the success of these female artists, women are, according to Peterson, “expected to fit a few stereotyped performance roles” removing them from the business of country music (10). The roles of men in country music are also stereotyped, but these roles offer men more control over their careers than that enjoyed by women. David Sanjek accuses country music’s gender dynamics of “assigning to the feminine habits of constancy and tradition while the masculine becomes associated with a predisposition for impatience and innovation” (viii), preventing women from taking an active role in the development of country music, despite their contributions as artists.

Male artists often take on the role of the ‘singing cowboy’. Wearing a cowboy hat and boots with a guitar strapped to their backs, the singing cowboy becomes the very definition of American masculinity. According to Malone, he is an honest man who has conquered nature and women, goes to church, and loves his mother (83). The most famous of the singing cowboys was Gene Autry, whose nickname as a country artist and movie star was “The Singing Cowboy.” The male artist is capable of complicating issues of conservatism through the portrayal of the
‘outlaw’. The outlaw also loves God and family, but has fallen on hard times, either with his family or with the law. This image offers male artists an opportunity to renegotiate country conservatism without completely rejecting it, as it is his circumstance, not his belief, which leads to non-conservative practices. One example is Johnny Cash, whose song “Folsom Prison Blues” – with the famous lines “I shot a man in Reno / just to watch him die” (Cash) – and famous concert at Folsom Prison in 1968 – established Cash as one of country music’s most famous outlaws. In addition, while he sang about and at a prison, Cash’s image as an outlaw allowed him to remain a part of country music. The outlaw allows male artists to question the ideologies of country music, as it is the expectation of country music that he should be an outsider looking in.

The images of the singing cowboy and outlaw are strictly male, but, more importantly, are independent of women’s images. However, the image of the woman artist is dependent upon that of her male counterpart. She is a beautiful cowgirl or songstress, playing the role of wife or mother to the cowboy. She holds the ideals of God and traditional roles for women, reaffirming conservative values of religion and family values. Tammy Wynette’s “Stand by Your Man” positioned Wynette as the queen of country music during the 1970s as the song’s lyrics reinforced women’s role as faithful wife no matter the circumstance. The outlaw image is rarely associated with female artists, although Tanya Tucker, whose real life struggles with multiple marriages and substance abuse were as well known as her music, found success in the late 1970s with an image of the female outlaw. Tucker is one of the few women who managed to create a profitable image counter to the songstress.

These images of artists manifest themselves in the music, as the lyrics of country music reinforce the gendered roles of artists. Karen Saucer’s analysis of men and women in country songs found images of men and women supporting normative ideals of family and marriage. A man is judged by “his ability to provide for his woman and family as well as his ability to satisfy his woman” while a woman is judged by “her ability to get and keep a man” (255). By measuring a woman’s worth by her relationship with a man, her main roles in song become those of housewife, mother, and lover – never as a woman with a career (249). Songs have also rarely featured women in friendships with other women, as she is always presented in juxtaposition with men.
The representation of women both as artists and as images in song developed out of the political economic conditions of country music. From the early years of the development of the industry, it was believed women could not be profitable artists, let alone producers and songwriters driving the production of music (Jensen, The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, Country Music 110-11). The industry operates under a tightly constructed relationship between songwriters, performers, session artists, and producers, under the control of Nashville record companies, to create radio-friendly and profitable music. The production of popular music, not just country music, is largely dependent upon the relationship between the producer of the album and the artist, often to the detriment of the female artist. Steve Jones describes the process a female artist goes through in the production of an album:

The meditation of recorded music begins when the artist(s), producer, and engineer begin working. The compromises that occur between them constitute a large portion of the design of modern recordings. And, the artist’s work is subject to modification by the producer, engineer, or anyone else having access to the master tape and recording facilities. Though a musician may gain control over sound by recording it, she also surrenders some control to the person who recorded it, the person who is responsible for the overall sound of the recording, the person paying for the recording, and so forth. (188)

This producer role is almost filled always by males. As Emma Mayhew points out, the recording studio is a space where women may only enter as singers and occasionally as instrumentalists (150). While women historically only achieve producer status after they have achieved great success as artists, women have made strides elsewhere in the country music industry. Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann point out that the feminist movement in the United States during the 1960s brought change to country music as women became “songwriters, singers, performers, and businesswomen” in larger numbers, bringing their “distinct identities as women” to the industry (xi). By 1980, women were dominating the country charts; during the week of April 26, 1980, women held the top five positions on the country music chart (388).

By the middle of the 1990s, the success of women took hold of the cultural landscape in the form of ‘girl power’. Girl power came to be known as a cultural movement of the 1990s
through the commoditization of the rise of successful women in sports, music, television, and movies, with the term “girl power” being at the center of the Spice Girls’ musical bravado (Riordan 279). In 1997, 60 percent of artists on the Top 20 Album chart were women, compared to only 33 percent ten years earlier (J. Dickerson, Women on Top 242-48). Five female country artists reached the Top 20 Country chart in 1997: Deana Carter, Reba McEntire, LeAnn Rimes, Shania Twain, and Trisha Yearwood (248). That same year, Sarah McLachlan organized the summer music festival Lilith Fair, bringing together women across musical genres. With its slogan, “a celebration of women in music,” the festival ran for three summers and stood as a testament to the success of women.

It was during this time of 1990s girl power that the Dixie Chicks gained popularity in country music with the song “Wide Open Spaces.” Released in early 1998, the song recounts the story of a young girl leaving home for the first time in need of “wide open spaces / room to make a big mistake” (Dixie Chicks). As three young female country artists singing a song about female empowerment, many saw them as country’s answer to the Spice Girls. In a concert review from 1998, The New York Times noted the band’s similarity to the Spice Girls: “The Dixie Chicks have the high-beam smiles, the malt-shop sauciness. Ms. Maines bears a slight resemblance to Baby Spice. There isn’t an exact equivalent in their lexicon for ‘girl power,’ but they use ‘chick’ for the same purposes” (Ratliff). Like many other female artists, the Dixie Chicks ended the decade at the top of their careers.

However, the changes in the American cultural landscape following the attacks of September 11, 2001 affected the country music industry. As fear and insecurities about the future and the march to war dominated the American culture, a return to traditional American values replaced the girl power of the 1990s. In country music, the airwaves were dominated by jingoistic music such as Toby Keith’s 2002 song “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (Angry American),” featuring the lyrics: “And you'll be sorry that you messed with The U.S. of A. / 'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass / It's the American way” (Keith). Traditional gender roles were championed in Kenny Chesney’s “The Woman With You,” a 2004 song that is told from the point of view of a husband whose wife has the career she wants, but says “it sure is nice / to just be the woman with you” (Chesney). These events within country music following Maines’ comments in 2003 show signs of conservatism, as did the reaction to the release of the band’s 2005 album, Taking the Long Way. The mutual decision by both band and industry not to
categorize the Dixie Chicks as country music only furthered the perception of conservatism in country music.

No band can remain genreless in an industry where categorizing music is used to market music. However, the Dixie Chicks made such an attempt by pursuing non-traditional forms of marketing, allowing the Dixie Chicks to market their album without the help of country radio. Relying heavily on a strong Internet presence through their own website and the online music store iTunes, and on the documentary Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing, which chronicled their experiences in 2003 and the recording of their new album, the band was able to market a successful album, selling over two million copies (Recording Industry Association of America).¹ The experience of the Dixie Chicks with the country music industry raises many of the issues facing female artists in the industry, and the ways in which these artists attempt to challenge the standards and practices of country music.

1.3 Research Question

The project will attempt to answer the following question through research on women and country music: how has the struggle with conservatism within the country music industry shaped the image, music, and practice of female country artists as illustrated by the case of the Dixie Chicks? In support of this main question the following issues will also be addressed: the impact of the rise in female artists participating in the production and distribution of country music; the ways in which female country artists disrupt the status quo of country music; and the larger impact of the Dixie Chicks on the popular music industry, based on their decision to break away from the role of the traditional female artist of country music.

1.4 Literature Review

For the purposes of this study, the literature review will focus on issues of music relating to genre, authenticity, and gender, and in particular on how these issues have been explored relative to women in country music and exemplified by the Dixie Chicks.

Issues in Popular Music

¹ While this sales number is considerably lower than the Dixie Chicks’ three previous albums, the album is still considered successful as it debuted number one on Billboard’s Country, 200, and Digital charts, and ended 2006 as one of the top 20 selling albums of the year.
Theodor Adorno theorizes that experiences with music occur on an ideological level and, therefore, at a class level: “music has something to do with classes in so far as it reflects the class relationship in toto” (121). Music’s ideological meanings can shift through time and across class, as music’s meaning is never fixed. “The reception of music can turn it into something altogether different; indeed, it will presumably and regularly become different from what is currently believed to be its inalienable content” (118). The meaning a song holds will change from what it is at its release as class conditions vary through time. The relationship of music to class is significant to country music, which historically has been understood through its relationship with the working-class of the South.

In “On Popular Music,” Adorno introduces the concept of pseudo-individualization, referring to the standardization of music occurring with a free market of cultural mass production. Through standardization of successful music, audiences are trained to recognize successful music, as standardization of song hits does “their listening for them” (308). While Adorno’s statements were about jazz music and pop music being “low” brow in contrast to “high” brow classical, his statements do introduce the beginnings of the standardizations of genres. “The types of popular music are carefully differentiated in production. The listener is presumed to be able to choose between them” (309). Standardization by type allows listeners to produce identification for him or her, but also for the band or performer through a specific mode of production. Simon Frith researches the importance of popular music in the construction of social identities. Genres are largely ideological, with record companies making assumptions about its consumers: “record companies are assuming that there is a manageable relationship between musical label and consumer taste” (85). Companies create “fantasy consumers” and genres categorize not only what music a consumer listens to, but also what the music means to the consumer.

Frith also explores the concept of songs as texts, arguing that songs can be explored either as literary pieces separate from the music, or as speech acts as performance. Frith breaks listening to song lyrics into three concepts:

*Words*, which appear to give songs an independent source of semantic meaning; *rhetoric*, words being used in a special, musical way, a way which draws attention to features and problems of speech; and *voices*, words being spoken or sung in human tones.
which themselves are “meaningful” signs of persons and personality. (159)

These key concepts form the basis for analyzing popular song lyrics. However, it is important to take Frith’s work further to examine how each of these concepts works differently within different genres of popular music as well as for men and women. For instance, in country music, is the voice more important than the words? How does gender complicate country music?

Roy Shuker’s *Understanding Popular Music* further investigates the role of genre in popular music – specifically rock music. “They [genres] are operating with a commercial system of record companies, contracts, marketing, publicity, management, support staff and so on; with this context bands tour and perform, make records, and create an image (or an anti-image)” (146). Shuker agrees with Frith’s claim that musical genres function economically, used as a marketing technique. However, Shuker sees cohesiveness in genres through “a combination of (a) stylistic traits in the music; (b) other stylistic attributes; and (c) the sites of institutional support” (146). This combination of creating genres has led to the establishment of a hierarchy within music based on authenticity, sincerity and commercialism, as determined by critics and fans, but also the performers themselves (147).

*Issues in Gender and Music*

Susan McClary’s *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* explores how music has produced images of gender and sexuality throughout history. McClary’s work takes existing feminist theories on the construction of gender, discourse, and discursive strategies, and applies them to music to explore women’s relationship with, and representation through, music. McClary contends gender is constructed in cultural discourses such as music: “It also serves as a public forum within which various modes of gender organization are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated” (8). Moreover, the production of music often limits women, as stereotypes drive reactions to women’s music: “it is repeatedly condemned as pretty or trivial – or in the event that it does not conform to standards of feminine propriety – as aggressive and unbefitting a woman” (19). Women’s roles in music are restricted by strict constructions of gender and sexuality.

According to Whiteley’s *Women and Popular Music*, female musical authenticity is negotiated as a relationship between the 1990s singer-songwriter within a community of fans. Whitely contends the relationship between the female artist and her female fans provides insights
into subjective experiences and the meaning of a women’s lived reality. An artist’s truthfulness or authenticity (here referring to the truth in her songwriting) is key in developing a sense of community with her fan base, and fans must somehow share this truthfulness. “I would suggest that such communication takes place only where the gesture made has the same meaning for the individual who makes it that it has for the individual who responds to it” (197). The singer-songwriters of the 1990s constructed successful careers by writing and performing music, which created shared identities and experiences for them and their fans.

Feminist identities are explored in the book *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music*. The book focuses on four women who rose in popularity during the 1990s: Tori Amos, Courtney Love, Meshell Ndegeocello, and PJ Harvey. The book argues that these women used their music and performances to disrupt identity discourses of gender, race, and sexuality. Women perform disruptive acts of musical expression in four ways. First, women disrupt the dominant systems of music through creative techniques within music – for instance, lyrically. Second, the listener is challenged by the disruptive nature of this music. Next, artists manipulate the established codes of music through breaking the conventions of narrative structure or musicianship. Finally, women disrupt the conventions of the production of music, both at the creative and technical levels.

Emma Mayhew examines the production of music by researching the role of the producer as an example of gender divisions. Mayhew points out that while women in the 1990s rose in prominence, the producer, not the artist, is still defined as the author of a musical text. For instance, the Grammy for Album of the Year is awarded to the producer – not the artist. “As the producer has become more and more associated with an authorial position (both taking writing credits and also being associated as a brand sound), a female performer’s positioning as a valued artist is tied up with her relationship to this role” (152). The patriarchal nature of the recording business removes control, and thus authorship, from the women and hands it to historically male producers. Unless women become economically independent enough to become their own producers, they work within the masculine construct of producing.

Mary Ann Clawson’s work about women playing instruments reveals the complicated issues surrounding women playing instruments in a rock band. Looking primarily at women as bassists, Clawson found that instruments give power to the player. Women have gained notice and power in rock bands by taking on the role of bassist. They are allowed the position as men
fight over the more prestigious lead guitar positions, “men allowing, giving women permission, imply a power analysis in which men control access to the most valued instruments, leaving the lower-status bases available to those marginalized by either gender or skill level” (202). Clawson’s analysis, when applied to the Dixie Chicks, raises further issues of power, as Robison and Maguire have taken on primary roles as musicians. The stage, whether a woman is playing an instrument or not, has become a space for women to exert power and redefine gender roles. As Lisa Rhodes suggests in *Electric Ladyland: Women and Rock Culture*, “for women to take center stage, literally, and draw attention to themselves through the employment of loud volume is thus a truly liberating act” (xiv).

The stage is not the only arena where women are challenging gender expectations. Music videos have become a traditional form of song interpretation and marketing with the rise in prominence of MTV. Much criticism has been written about the exploitation of women in video. As Jennifer Hurley argues, “sexual iconography generally denotes that women are passive, submissive and/or exists exclusively for the pleasure of men” (336). However, Lisa Lewis argues the music video has become a space for women’s expression as the visual aspect allows women to create an image beyond the music. The visual form allows artists to “use woman-identified videos as vehicles of expression and breaks ground for fellow female musicians” (501). Music videos give the artist authorship, as the narrative scenarios found in music videos provide women with a narrative voice (503).

Because country music uses storytelling as a narrative device (Peterson and McLaurin 8), music videos gained popularity within country music with the launch of Country Music Television (CMT). Like Hurley, Janelle Wilson argues music videos have positively affected women, giving women the opportunity to challenge gender roles. “Female musicians in videos enter into a male domain of activity, taking over male space” (294). The music videos allow women to challenge the previously held images of female artists. Julie Andsager and Kimberly Roe’s analysis of country music videos of “Country’s Year of the Woman” in 1997 found some evidence of women challenging their expected roles during a time when women were having unprecedented success on the charts, but women still were portrayed traditionally in the videos of men and some women (79). In “Contradictions in the Country,” Andsager further researched the contradictory positions of women in country music videos, finding the representation of
sexuality and love by female artists “must either be subordinate to men’s or independent and possibly superior – but apparently not both” (235).

Dorothy Marcic traces the development of women in popular music in her book Respect. Marcic categorizes women, not only through the popular music of a particular time period, but more importantly by the archetype of women dominating the period in music. During the 1990s, images of women in music were dominated by the archetype of Lilith or the Responsible Adult who was characterized by wisdom. The themes of women’s music of the time included “love is good; strength; love is good and difficult; codependency; sex; cynicism; self-growth; social issues; men are bad; fun; and anger” (183). It is these themes the Dixie Chicks would negotiate not only as a female band of the 1990s, but, more importantly, as a country band, as these themes are problematic within country music.

While the two previous books do not deal with female country artists, two books written by James Dickerson include female country artists in the discussions of women in music. The first, Women on Top: The Quiet Revolution That's Rocking the American Music Industry, explores the rise of women within the music industry during the last fifty years of the twentieth century. The book explores women not only as artists, but also as record producers and executives. Dickerson also includes the rise of country artists as part of the women’s movement in music during the late 1990s, including country in his analysis of the success of women in music over time. In his analysis of the Top 20 Album charts in the years 1954-59, women only accounted for 29% of artists on Top 20 charts; however, by 1997, women accounted for 60% (242). Further research would need to be undertaken to determine if women have continued to dominate the Top 20 charts between 1998-2007. Dickerson also dedicates a chapter of his book Go, Girl, Go! The Women’s Revolution in Music to country music. This book also traces the rise of women in popular music; however, the book is historical, not critical of women in music, as Dickerson traces the careers of female artists during the last sixty years of popular music.

Issues in Country Music

Several books on country music trace its history from its roots in traditional music to the current production of a commercialized country music sound, commonly called “the Nashville sound.” Bill Malone’s book Country Music, U.S.A. provides the most definitive work on tracing the history of country music, focusing on the people (singers and songwriters) of the industry,
not the industry itself. Malone writes of country music as a regional genre, which has become a part of a much larger national identity.

The massive commercialization it has undergone is merely a facet of that larger technological and communications revolution which as so radically transformed American popular tastes and steadily worked to pull the rural, socially conservative South into the homogenizing mainstream of American life. (1)

Malone traces the changes in complexity of a genre of music that demands a continual negotiation of its regional past as it attempts to compete as a commercially relevant genre within a national musical landscape.

Richard Peterson in Creating Country Music traces the development of country music from its beginnings in Atlanta, Georgia in the 1920s through the beginnings of Nashville’s development as the epicenter of the country music sound in the 1950s. Peterson focuses his analysis on the importance of authenticity in the development of the country music genre and its close relationship to the radio industry. Peterson contends that the perception of authenticity was integral to the development of the genre, leading to the production of distinct male images of country music – the old-timer, hillbilly, and cowboy. Between the 1920s and 1950s, authenticity was produced through the success of such country artists as Gene Autry and Hank Williams. Peterson contends that the authenticity and its importance were created during this time, and has had long-term effects on the country music industry. Authenticity in today’s country music is built upon a complex web of signifiers used by audiences, artists, and record companies to create meaning. For country music fans, the difference between now and then has become the process of identification: “New fans can choose whether to like country music or not, while for the earlier fans country music was not a choice but part of their lived experience” (222). This disconnect has led to signifiers of authenticity being embedded into country music: “the verbal accent, vocabulary, grammar and prior rough work experience affirm that a person is from the great geographic cradle of country music” (225). To created these signifiers, new country artists are introduced through an authenticity frame by record companies in press packets; “these highlight signs of authenticity that are consistent with the stereotype, including hometown, family, musical experience, musical apprenticeship, hobbies, prior rough work experience, and so forth” (227).
The investigation of authenticity and country music continues into the 1960s and 70s in Joli Jensen’s book, *The Nashville Sound*. Where Jensen’s work on authenticity diverges from Peterson’s is in how authenticity is used: as a designation of what country music is not. “Authenticity offers country music an identity—this is what country music is. And it also offers generic demarcation—this is what country music is not” (7). Therefore, country music is never rock or pop. If a country artist crosses over to one of these genres, they are no longer country, because authenticity defines the genre.

In *The Selling Sound*, Diane Pecknold also traces the evolution of country music historically, but more importantly does it through the cultural economy of country music as an industry, its changing cultural meaning, and its relationship with commercialization. Pecknold largely ignores the early historical work on tracing the history of country music by disregarding the music and artists themselves. Instead, Pecknold traces the development of the commercialization of country through its industry from the record companies producing the music, the radio stations distributing the music, to the audience consuming the music. Pecknold specifically traces the development of the conservatism of country music in the chapter “Silent Majorities.” The chapter traces the development of the country audience as a “fully defined… commodity with specific socio-economic features” (10). Pecknold’s historical analysis reveals the social and class subtexts driving commercial country. “The commodity and class politics of country’s marketing and consumption, though they emerged independently of New Right politics, easily aligned the music with ‘Silent Majority’ cultural populism” (242). Referring to the early 1970s, Pecknold’s work provides a thorough investigation of the political economic conditions within the development of current country music. Dan Daley also writes of the country music industry in his book *Nashville’s Unwritten Rules*. An insider’s look at the country music industry, the book details the producers, songwriters, publishers, and musicians in Nashville who produce country music.

Malone investigates the relationship between the Southern working-class and country music in his book *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’.* Malone argues that country music is born out of a Southern, working class identity, and, as the genre developed, many of the successful country artists (predominantly males) came from a Southern, working class background. His book negotiates issues of modern country music related to maintaining a link to its past as country has become “Top 40.” Responding to concerns that modern country music is lacking
artists with a Southern identity, Monroe contends, “The ‘twang’ is still there. Country singers and songwriters still make songs that comment explicitly on the South, or they lace their lyrics with references to scenes, habits, or topics that could only be associated with the region and its people” (254). Malone goes so far as to argue country music, while never forgetting its roots in the South, has transformed itself into the popular music format in the United States: “country music has become the nation’s new pop music, offering a sound and a thematic package that resonate with a diverse audience of listeners, not all of whom are old and socially conservative” (255).

Several authors have attempted to negotiate the appearance of conservative ideals in country music through different historical periods, including wartime. A study by DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco, Jr. found that even though Southern conservatism exists in country music, it does not primarily support one political or social ideology at a time; rather, “country music changes with the mood of the nation at large, expressing popular opinion quite accurately” (45). A more recent analysis of country music lyrics by Robert W. Van Sickel found that very little music is actually political. Looking at number one country songs from 1960-2000, Van Sickle found successful country music “explicitly apolitical, but concepts such as religion, conservative politics, male dominance, and patriotism are not mentioned nearly as often as commonly believed” (329). Van Sickle’s choice to not include post-9/11 music, because of “jingoism, intolerance, and even censorship” (317) complicates his research. What had changed within country music after forty years that lead to such a different response during wartime? Is there an explanation for the sudden appearance of jingoism on the charts during the Iraq War? Van Sickle’s analysis does not venture to answer either question.

A collection of essays on country music, All That Glitters: Country Music in America, includes John Buckley’s essay, “Country Music and American Values,” which attempts to trace the main themes in country music, arguing these themes mirror the values of country music’s Southern fan base. These themes of country music include satisfying and fulfilling love relations, unsatisfactory love relationships, home and family, country, work, individual worth, rugged individualism, and patriotism (201-2). While these themes exist in other genres, only in country music do all these themes exist, as their sum creates the symbolic world of country music.
Significant research has been completed on gendered images in music and with artists. Karen Saucier’s research found women often portray stereotypical roles in lyrics – housewives, mothers, and best friends – often serving as the “emotional fixer” for men (249). A woman’s power is both informal and based on her sexuality (251). Roy Clark argues the representation of a working-class culture oversimplifies the roles of women by limiting them to “martyred wife” and “the fallen angel” (415). In a comparison of gender roles in rap and country music, a study by Ryan, Calhoun, and Wentworth makes the following determination of gender roles in country music:

Country is a musical genre gaining middle-class acceptance, and its competency/strength is voiced largely by white women emerging from minority status amidst more egalitarian-minded males who, incidentally, sing songs of heterosexual caring/love. (146)

This study is one of the few to recognize the gender differences in country music, along with the differences of race and sexuality.

Research into female country artists reveals the complex relationship women have always had with country music. Joli Jensen’s research into the career of Patsy Cline reveals an artist whose life as a hard-drinking, opinionated woman put her at odds with an industry that turned her into a “honky-tonk angel.” “Her temperament and habits, her unusually rich and expressive voice, the problems of being a honky-tonk angel in a business that portrays women performers as saintly and pure – all effected her success, then and now” (97). Cline’s problems within the country music industry as an artist who found success on the pop charts mirror those of contemporary artists Faith Hill, Shania Twain, and the Dixie Chicks. Kenneth Morris’s interpretation of Tammy Wynette’s “Stand by Your Man” calls into question the anti-feminist reaction the song received in 1968. Morris argues that juxtaposing its controversial chorus with the verses reveals a “conflict between the dominant male and the obedient female” (7), as the song is an “ironic aesthetic statement about a woman’s oppression” (8). Andrea Newlyn’s work on the Judds, the famous mother-daughter duo who dominated country music during the 1980s and 90s, argues their stage performances “contest and interrogate normative constructions of masculinity, femininity, and the heterosexuality, as well as the naturalized mother-daughter bond” (273). The stage performance, and the presence of her mother, Naomi, allowed Wynonna
to subvert country music’s sexual expectations for its female artists (290). The book *The Women in Country Music* edited by Charles Wolfe and James Akenson further explores these issues facing women in country music. In particular, Jocelyn Neil uses the career of Faith Hill as an example of how contemporary artists are redefining their identities to create a modern country female artist (110).

In *A Boy Named Sue*, Beverly Keel argues female country artists such as the Dixie Chicks, Faith Hill, and Shania Twain suffer from an industry steeped in double standards. The industry is not interested in musical authenticity, but in maintaining an image of the quiet female. During the 1990s, female country artists were not allowed the same freedom of women in rock ‘n’ roll and pop to explore issues of feminism. While artists such as Ani DiFranco were taking control of their careers, country artists were unable to free themselves from the constraints of the industry. The conservative themes of country music restricts women: “Female country singers have had to create change by working with the system, by promoting music that is inspiring to their female audience while remaining appealing to the male gatekeepers in the country music industry” (171). Applying the Dixie Chicks to Keel’s analysis proves her analysis that female acts have to work within the system, but the Dixie Chicks still found ways to challenge the system.

David Fillingim investigates country music through theology in his book, *Redneck Liberation*, arguing, “country music embodies certain basic beliefs about reality” (6). Tracing the theology of country music through its performance and song, Fillingim argues that there was a development of “honky-tonk feminism” in the late 1990s through songs exclusively about women’s experiences coupled with the rise of the music video. Fillingim’s view is positive as he argues that male-dominated country accepted acts such as Trisha Yearwood and the Dixie Chicks and their feminist songs as an acceptable change to country music. However, Fillingim’s book, published in 2003, is unable to account for the backlash against female country artists, such as Shania Twain’s attempt to enter the pop music genre being seen as a betrayal of her country roots, or the Dixie Chicks’ anti-war comments being seen as anti-country.

Bufwack and Oermann’s book *Finding Her Voice: The Illustrated History of Women in Country Music* provides a thorough exploration of women in country music from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. The book traces the history of women in country music though the context of the changing social and political roles of women in society.
Much of the book focuses on the working class as country music “stands as one of the only documents of the working-class women’s thoughts created by working-class women for working-class women” (x). The work of Bufwack and Oermann stands as the most complete investigation of women’s roles in country music.

Dixie Chicks

Searches on scholarly literature on the Dixie Chicks revealed a limited number of sources, with many only examining the Dixie Chicks following the remarks made by Natalie Maines in 2003. A thesis written by Jennifer Blum in 2002 called “Chicks Making Track: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of the Dixie Chicks” is an analysis of songs from the band’s second studio album Fly. While the research offers a feminist analysis, it fails to analyze the music within the larger context of country music. Lynn Fitzgerald’s 2004 thesis, “War Rhetoric, Popular Culture, and Celebrity Dissent: A Rhetorical Analysis of the ‘Dixie Chicks Controversy,’” is an analysis of the Dixie Chicks controversy as part of the 2003 war rhetoric. Fitzgerald examines the band’s comments within the framework of war dissent, looking specifically at how celebrity dissenters are held to different rules by society. Kristi Gerding Scholten’s dissertation, When Art and Celebrity Collide: Telling the Dixie Chicks to Shut Up and Sing, also frames an analysis of the Dixie Chicks around the propensity of celebrity-artists to speak out. This work looks at the band as celebrities, building a case for how the ideologies of country music limit how outspoken its artists can be. Neither Fitzgerald nor Gerding Scholten introduces issues of gender into celebrity war dissent.

The Dixie Chicks are prominently featured in Chris Willman’s book Rednecks and Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music. Written in 2004 in response to the controversy surrounding the Dixie Chicks, Willman investigates the role of politics in country music in the current cultural landscape. Willman makes a case that the political and social climates post-9/11 and the association of country music with conservatism provided the circumstances leading to the backlash against the Dixie Chicks. The Dixie Chicks are also featured in a chapter of the book Bring ‘Em On: Media and Politics in the Iraq War, in a chapter focusing on how the backlash toward the Dixie Chicks led to stronger support of the war.

In 2002, The Journal of Country Music published an article on the Dixie Chicks as part of their Texas music issue. The article traces the history of the band from its beginnings in Dallas, Texas in the early 1990s to their rise in popularity following their first two Nashville-produced
albums. Much of the article discusses their decision to return to Texas to produce their third album while their legal issues with Sony over residuals were being resolved. The article includes interviews with current and former band members, producers, and Sony executives, and provides insight into the band at a crossroads in their career. Kathleen Hudson’s *Women in Texas Music* features interviews with various female Texas artists, including Emily Robison. The interviews cover various topics facing female country artists, including longevity, the radio industry, taking control of recording practices, and women as performers.

**Methodological Frameworks**

Previous works using methods similar to what will be implemented in this project include Keel’s “Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl.” Keel’s analysis looks at the role of female country artists during the 1990s women’s music movement, comparing the success of 1990s country artists to mainstream female artists and also to country artists of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Her analysis is twofold: Keel looks at both the music being produced and the feminist images being presented and compares them to how the music is being produced and how it is perceived by the country music industry. Joli Jensen takes a similar approach to an analysis of Patsy Cline in her piece “Patsy Cline’s Crossovers.” Jensen analyzes how Cline’s image has changed over time, looking at the production and distribution of her music during her lifetime, and how her image has transformed since her death in the 1960s. By deconstructing the gender and class identities of country music over time, Jensen determines Cline’s representation of feminist and authentic country identity posthumously, despite her reputation while alive (130). Finally, Andrea K. Newlyn’s critique of the Judds, the mother-daughter country act of Naomi and Wynonna Judd, explores how the group often subversively challenged the conceptions of feminine identity and gender essentialism in their performances (273). Newelyn’s method of analysis includes a feminist critique of the band’s various stage and music video performances. Wynonna’s performances are critiqued both during her time in the Judds and during her solo career in order to theorize her role as an example of “pluralities in gender” (285).

### 1.4 Scope of Study

This study will focus on the career of the Dixie Chicks from 1989-2007. From 1989-1995, the Dixie Chicks played traditional Texas bluegrass with only regional success, producing three records independently. The original band lineup consisted of Robison, Maguire, Laura
Lynch, and Robin Macy. As the band’s sound moved toward a more commercial, Nashville sound, Macy left the band. In 1995, the band signed with Sony Nashville/Monument, and Maguire and Robison made a final change to the line-up, replacing Lynch with Maines as lead singer. Two years later, Monument released the band’s first Nashville-produced album, *Wide Open Spaces*, selling over ten million copies, and winning two Country Music Awards and two Grammy Awards (Front Page Publicity). Through 2003, the Dixie Chicks successfully launched two more studio albums (1999’s *Fly*, 2002’s *Home*) and one live double album (2003’s *Top of the World Tour*), and headlined two sell-out concert tours (Fly and Top of the World). The study will also cover the events surrounding the Dixie Chicks’ appearance at London’s Sheperd’s Bush Empire on March 10th, 2003, and the fan, industry, and media reactions to Maines’ anti-Bush comment. The band took a break from their career, returning in 2006 with their first studio album since the incident. Marketing it outside of country music, *Taking the Long Way* received five Grammys at the 51st Grammy Awards. Finally, the careers of the Dixie Chicks’ contemporaries -- Shania Twain, Faith Hill, and Carrie Underwood -- will be utilized for comparison.

1.5 Research Methodology

The methodology of the research will focus on two specific types of analysis, each taken with a feminist perspective. First, there will be a feminist analysis of the Dixie Chicks’ image, investigating the ways in which the band reinforced, challenged, or ignored the practices of the country music industry. The analysis will be textual and political economic, relying on the band’s albums, songs, videos, the documentary *Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing*, interviews, and media coverage of the band to investigate how the band, country music industry, fans, and media constructed the band’s image. Working chronologically, the analysis will examine how the band’s image changed through time, from album to album.

The second aspect of the analysis will be a political economic critique of how the music of the Dixie Chicks is produced and distributed. Focusing on the level of control the women were given over their own musical production, the critique will look at the Dixie Chicks’ relationship with the country music industry – in particular, their well-publicized lawsuits over residuals from their first two studio albums and the fallout from Maines’ comments. This
analysis will look at the various methods of production and distribution used to produce each of the band’s albums.

1.6 Chapter Organization

This project will be divided into four chapters examining the Dixie Chicks’ country music career. This first chapter includes an introduction to the issues surrounding the Dixie Chicks and the country music industry, a review of current literature, and the methods being implemented for this project. Chapter two is a historical background on various aspects of country music: development of the industry, the appearance of conservatism, and the role of women throughout its history. Chapter three provides the textual and political economic analysis of the Dixie Chicks. Chapter four concludes the project, offering conclusions from the analysis and issues for further research.

1.7 Conclusion

The role of women in country music is worthy of scholarly exploration, as there is still much to be investigated in the ways female artists are portrayed and treated within the country music industry. The Dixie Chicks have experienced both highs and lows as country music artists, and an analysis of their career provides great insight into how women have navigated an industry whose ideology is at times conservative. Natalie Maines’ comment, “just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas,” was revealing, as its aftermath defined not just the legacy of the Dixie Chicks in country music, but also the ways in which country music treats its female artists. By exploring the career of the Dixie Chicks, a perspective on the roles of female country artists can be achieved that has never been presented before.
CHAPTER TWO
A BRIEF HISTORY OF COUNTRY MUSIC

2.1 Introduction
Before beginning an analysis of the Dixie Chicks’ career as country music artists, it is necessary to ground the analysis in an understanding of country music. The country music of today is an economic and cultural powerhouse industry centered in Nashville, Tennessee, where producers, musicians, songwriters, and singers flock to Music Row for an opportunity to create music that is radio-friendly and profitable. The roots of country music begin over one hundred years ago as the folk music of the South. This chapter will trace the transformation of country music from its beginnings into a multi-billion-dollar worldwide industry.² It begins with a discussion of the early influences and development of country music, and proceeds to examine the rise of Nashville, Tennessee as the country capital of the world, and the production of country music today. This chapter will also include a discussion on the impact wartime in America had on the presence of conservatism in country music. Finally, the chapter will trace the career of prominent female artists throughout the history of country music concluding with a discussion of female artists in the 1990s and the Dixie Chicks.

2.2 The Early Years of Country Music
Country music is as old as America itself. As the British began to colonize the New World, they brought with them the folk music of their homeland. Bill Malone explains the early development of folk music in America as the mixing of the old with the new: “Colonists began creating songs from other cultural groups with whom they came in contact” (Malone, Country Music 4). Soon, the British folk music became American folk, as the experiences of the colonists became the inspiration for song. The rise of folk music was particularly strong in the South, where British settlers came in contact with many different cultures: “the Germans of the Great Valley of Virginia; the Indians of the backcountry; Spanish, French, and mixed-breed

elements in the Mississippi Valley; the Mexicans of South Texas: and, of course, blacks everywhere” (4). While today’s country music is primarily white, the influence of the African-American communities on the development of early country music is prominent. Southern folk artists borrowed the spirituals and blues music of the culture – even vocal and instrumental techniques. The banjo, a core instrument in country music, came from Africa. A gourd-like instrument called the “banjar” made its way to America through the slave trade (26).

Another heavy influence on the development of early folk music was the rise of Protestant church life in the south. Music was a major aspect of church life, and its influence remains in the country music of today. “Country music has been subjected to no greater influence than southern religious life, which affected both the nature of songs and the manner in which they were performed” (10). While learning to sing in church, future country artists also learned the values and lessons of the church, impacting not just the sound, but also the themes of early country music. Choral music introduced harmonizing, which over the years became a major characteristic of country music. As the choral music of the church moved to rural barn parties throughout the south, the most identifiable instrument in country music gained prominence: the fiddle. As years went on, the guitar, an upper-class instrument from the north, gained prominence in country music, along with the mandolin, brought to America by Italian instrumentalists. By the early 1900s, country music had developed a sound created from the hundreds of years of settlement in the south, but it would not be until the development of radio that country music would become commercially accessible – a development that would take country music out of the rural south, bringing its sound to all of America.

2.3 The Early Commercialization of Country

In the early 1900s, country music was a marginalized form of music. At the time, the music industry was centered largely in the north, and consisted primarily of vaudeville, the sheet music business, the phonograph, and the industry. Consequently, urban artists primarily performed any music inspired by the sounds coming from the rural areas. The industry feared the raw sound of folk music performed by someone from the area would turn off listeners (31). Everything changed with the development of radio. According to Monroe, “[t]he development of southern radio broadcasting was important in the discovery, refinement, modification, and eventual standardization of southern country music” (32). The first major radio station in the
south was WSB in Atlanta, Georgia. On March 16, 1922 the station went on the air, and on November 29, 1922, played what is believed to be the first all-country radio program, “Old-fashioned Concert” (Peterson, Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity 20). The beginning of the radio industry is also the beginning of the country music industry, as the proliferation of radio stations allowed country music to find distribution. The relationship between radio and country music endures today, as both industries’ rise in prominence came from a mutually beneficial relationship.

While Atlanta would be the home of the first country radio station, the barn dance program, a staple on many radio stations throughout the south and beyond, would play a major role in spreading the sound of country. On January 4, 1923, WBAP in Fort Worth, Texas, would introduce an hour-and-half program of square-dance music featuring the fiddler Confederate Captain M.J. Bonner (34). While WBAP’s program was the first, WLS, out of Chicago, Illinois, would introduce the most influential barn dance program the following year, National Barn Dance. The station manager, Edgar L. Bill, programmed the show on Saturday nights, explaining, “it was quite natural to book old-time music, including old-time fiddling, banjo and guitar music and cowboy songs” (Pecknold 15). Bill’s description reveals how, during the 1920s, radio programmers had yet to create the term, “country music.” National Barn Dance relied on diverse styles of music and entertainment to help fill its program.

The typical barn dance was a stylized rendition of the tradition of old-fashioned country ‘sociables’, consisting of a series of musical and comedy selections introduced by a master of ceremonies who was also frequently the advertisers’ spokesman. (16) Shows mimicking National Barn Dance began to pop up during the 1920s and 1930s as staffers from WLS moved on to other radio markets: WNOX in Knoxville, Tennessee, Midday Merry Go-Round and Tennessee Barn Dance; WHO in Des Moines, Iowa, Iowa Barn Dance Frolic; WLW in Cincinnati, Ohio, Renfro Valley Barn Dance and Boon County Jamboree; and WSM in Nashville, Tennessee, the famous Grand Ole Opry (16).

As radio stations began to program barn dance shows, Atlanta’s strong presence in the south with WSB positioned the city as the first home of commercial country music. The city helped establish a music industry centered on the music of WSB, providing music to be played on other stations’ barn dance shows. The establishment of Atlanta as the first home of country
music and the dominance of country music on radio was accidental. In the beginning years of radio, programmers were just trying to fill time, and country music was only one of the many genres of music programmers used to fill space. Peterson argues country gained prominence on radio because it was quick and easy:

Country musicians were programmed because they did not require complex or expensive studio arrangements, because they could be called upon to play at a moment’s notice, as well as because they were capable of playing for as long (or as short) a time as required.

Radio was only a small reason the country music industry developed at all, let alone in Atlanta. It would be Atlanta businessmen who would create a system of commercializing country music.

Peterson identifies the five major components to this early commercialization of country music as recording, radio performance, touring, song publishing, and songwriting (18). At the center of production in Atlanta was the Okeh Record Company, owned by Polk Brockman. Brockman would become instrumental in establishing a system of commercializing the music of Atlanta and the south. Okeh Record Company established a system of using portable recording equipment and a vacant building to record artists Brockman had scouted. At the first recording session in June of 1923 in Atlanta, various performers, ranging from a white dance band to two female blues singers, were recorded. Also recorded was Fiddlin’ John Carson, as Brockman believed recording “native Southerners” would appeal to white farmers and townsfolk, much like blues recordings had appealed to Atlanta’s black population. Two songs recorded by Carson on June 19, 1923 were released in the Atlanta area and quickly sold out. Country music had found its first recording star (19).

Carson had already been a performer on WSB prior to the release of his first records. However, Brockman used radio play as a promotional technique for selling Carson’s records and promoting WSB. Referring to Carson as “Fiddlin’ John Carson – Radio and Recording Artists,” Brockman urged WSB listeners to buy records at Polk Furniture store (owned by Brockman), and the record was advertised as “Fiddlin’ John Carson, famous radio artists appearing regularly on WSB” (19-20). This method of cross-promotion between radio and records to sell music would become an enduring technique of the country music industry.
There was no money to be made in the 1920s by going on radio, and very little was offered to artists for their recordings. Artists such as Carson used touring and promotional events to turn being a country artist into a career. Carson and his contemporaries used their newfound fame as radio and record stars to perform shows at community buildings and events within the boundaries of Atlanta’s radio reach (23). The money made off these touring events allowed Carson to become a professional musician.

The folk traditions from which country music developed had no form of publishing its music. The songs were handed down from generation to generation, as performers committed music to memory. There were no official versions of songs, only the version of a particular artist. During the 1920s, the song publishing industry was located in New York, in an area called Tin Pan Alley. There, a stable of writers wrote songs, and promoters would then attempt to get these songs introduced into Broadway musicals, vaudeville acts, and dance bands (23). The songs were written first, and then the performers were found. However, Brockman reversed the system of song publishing. To supplement the versions of folk songs their performers were recording, Brockman would request artists to bring original, composed music. These songs could then be published and copyrighted, turning the songs into property that could be “bought, sold, and merchandised as sheet music or as recordings by other artists” (24).

This is not to say Brockman did not employ songwriters similar to Tin Pan Alley. In fact, Brockman would commission music to be written about various topics and events he felt would appeal to his target audience in Atlanta. In 1925, Brockman commissioned a song to be written about Floyd Collins, a spelunker who died after becoming trapped in a Kentucky cave. The song, “The Death of Floyd Collins,” was commissioned by Brockman, written by one of his writers, Andrew Jenkins, and originally recorded by Carson. When the song sold poorly due to Carson’s inability to read music, which led to a poor recording, Brockman sold the song to Columbia Records where it was recorded by one of their artists. That version of the song became a huge success, making Brockman a great deal of profit. Atlanta would not remain the center of country music, due in part to WSB management’s lack of dedication to playing country music and Brockman’s inability to understand the system he had created – the system of commercialization that had developed in Atlanta during the 1920s and set in motion a system of production and distribution that would drive the commercialization of the country music industry (24-5).
While Atlanta’s position as the center of country music slowly faded away, country music only gained in popularity during the 1930s and 1940s as its image grew stronger and developed into a profitable image appealing to a broader audience. The continued success of country music can be attributed to various events. In many ways, the development of country music rode the wave of technological advances in communication. In the 1930s, the development of electrical amplification had a major impact on country music (Malone, Country Music 157). The introduction of electric guitars and amplification helped country music to transform its sound from folk-inspired to honky-tonk, the music of the bars and roadhouses of the south and southwest. Not only did honky-tonk bring a new sound to country, it brought conflict to its image. Joli Jensen describes honky-tonk’s conflict with the traditional image of country: “The tension between wholesome family and community, on the one hand, and disreputable drinking and carousing, on the other, is incorporated in the honky-tonk sound” (Jensen, The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, Country Music 24). Hank Williams with his songs “Lovesick Blues” and “Your Cheatin’ Heart” would help cement honky-tonk as part of a new commercialized country sound.

The film industry would also help define country music. Where radio would develop the sound of country music, film (and television) would help create the look of country. While touring helped support country stars, its audiences were limited; with film, country artists could be introduced to a larger audience with one successful film appearance. The movie industry helped reshape the image of “hillbilly” – a term often used for commercial country music coming from the south (Malone 39) – into a more acceptable “singing cowboy.” Gene Autry, one of the most successful hillbilly singers of the 1930s, began to make Hollywood films in 1934, starring in films establishing him as “the stereotype of the heroic cowboy who was equally adept with a gun and guitar” (143). Autry, along with his contemporaries, began to buy into the Hollywood image of the cowboy, a move which, according to Malone, altered country’s image: “After the heyday of Gene Autry the term ‘western’ came to be applied even to southern rural music by an increasing number of people, especially by those who were ashamed to use the pejorative term ‘hillbilly’” (145). Malone even suggests Autry and others bought into the new Hollywood stereotype of country performers – “most hillbilly singers became fascinated with the western image and eventually came to believe their own symbols. Autry was the first of a long line of country singers who clothed themselves in tailored cowboy attire” (145). Hollywood may
have been thousands of miles away from the rural south, but it was instrumental in creating the image of the country artist. However, it would be the south, not Hollywood, which would become the home of country music.

2.3 Nashville, Music Row & the Nashville Sound

By the late 1940s, country music was a dominant force in American culture. However, two events threatened the existence of country music. First, radio was being threatened by new technology – television – forcing the radio industry to change the way it was organized. Traditionally, set lists were determined by the station and disc jockeys, based on audience calls and local record sales. However, fearing eroding listenership to television and changes in technology toward portable radio, format radio, or “Top 40”, was introduced. Jensen traces the impact of programming changes on song selection: “Programming moved from general popular music to popular music with national hits, to a tight playlist of repeated hits” (42). Country music was forced to change its practices to compete with radio, which was now dependent upon charts and hit songs to determine playlists.

Country music was also being threatened by a new genre: rock ‘n’ roll. Prior to the mid-1950s, there were clear lines between rhythm and blues, country and western, and popular music (46). The new sound of rock ‘n’ roll was confusing as a genre, as it incorporated sound from rhythm and blues and country and western, while remaining the antithesis of pop music, but soon, it was the dominant label of artists: “In the 1950s rhythm and blues as well as country artists called themselves rock ‘n’ rollers, and the popular music industry quickly learned to record and market a rock ‘n’ roll sound” (47). Jensen argues the rise in rock ‘n’ roll was not so much a co-opting of the sounds of rhythm and blues and country western, as is often argued, as it was a sign of the times: “The move toward a mass, rather than a regional, audience and toward recorded rather than live listening brought old and new practices to bear on an already hybrid conglomeration of music styles” (49). Rock ‘n’ roll was a whole new genre, for a whole new way of producing and distributing popular music, and country music would now have to contend with rock ‘n’ roll for the label of anti-thesis of pop.

The country music industry faced these new challenges by making changes in the marketing, production, and distribution of country music. At the center of these changes was the city of Nashville, Tennessee. The Grand Ole Opry radio program on WSM thrust Nashville into
the forefront of country music, as the radio program became the symbolic home of country music. Launched in 1925, the program gained network status in 1939, and in the years of World War II became the premier radio barn dance program in the country (69). Jensen describes the development of the Opry by its show runners as “a conscious decision was made to maintain a rustic image and to make the musical presentations as nostalgic as possible” (71). The Grand Ole Opry created the image of country music, by this attention to nostalgia.

The atmosphere of the broadcasts was designed to be folksy and casual. The live audience was part of the show – the radio broadcast purposely maintained the feel of listening to a live performance. In the Ryman, the audience sat on long wooden benches, fanning themselves in the heat, eating picnic lunches, laughing, talking, and cheering their favorite performers. Children ran up and down the aisles. The performers joked with each other and with the audience; the humor was the rube comedy, vaudeville, medicine show tradition. Even today, performers make much of the ‘big happy family’ that is the Opry cast. The Opry represents a broadcast version of the imaginary front porch, where friends and neighbors pick and sing for love, not money. It perfected the communal, relaxed, folksy performance style that became, and remains, a defining aspect of the country music genre. (71)

Jensen’s description of the Opry reveals the importance of the atmosphere – not the music – to the development of the country music industry. The Opry helped to build the ideology of country music, and as more mainstream images of “country” began to be developed through Hollywood singing cowboy films and the introduction of rock ‘n’ roll, its image would become more important, as the country music industry fought to protect its image and profits from a popular music industry less interested in country music, and more interested in Top 40 hits from a more accessible “pop” sound.

While The Grand Ole Opry was instrumental in creating and sustaining an image of country music, associates of The Opry were instrumental in helping to create Nashville as the center of country music production. Much of the music industry was centered in Los Angeles and New York, due in part to the formation of the American Society of Composers and
Publishers (ASCAP) in 1914. ASCAP was instrumental in preventing hillbilly singers, composers, and publishers from receiving profits, as ASCAP marginalized the genre, allowing few country artists into ASCAP to receive profits. However, ASCAP’s position was threatened by the formation of Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI). BMI’s practices of monitoring airplay and collecting performance royalties were more favorable toward hillbilly artists, and it helped to create, according to Diane Pecknold, “a single identifiable field of country music” and “a distinct industry infrastructure” (55). The creation of BMI in 1939 allowed country music to center its industry away from the less-than-accepting Los Angeles and New York music industries. In 1942, Nashville’s first major publishing house opened, as Grand Ole Opry star Roy Acuff created Acuff-Rose Publications along with songwriter and pianist Fred Rose (55). Eventually, major record labels began to form country recording studios in Nashville: Decca (1944), Capitol (1950), RCA (1956), and Columbia (early ‘60s). By 1963, the country music industry was firmly planted in Nashville with “at least ten recording studios, ten talent agencies, four record pressing plants, at least twenty-six recording labels, and over two thousand musicians and performers based in Nashville” (Jensen 77). The recording studios, talent agencies, etc. would collectively become known as Music Row, a mythic area of Nashville where country careers are created.

While the industry was finally coming together in Nashville, country music still had a public relations problem within the larger popular music industry. To help with this issue, in 1958 the Country Music Association (CMA) was created. At a keynote address on the formation of the CMA, Jack Strapp, a former program manager at WSM, addressed the goals and concerns of the industry. As quoted in Pecknold’s book The Selling Sound, the country music artist was viewed as “an uncouth, unintelligent, no talent, no appeal individual” and the goal of CMA was to “educate the people behind the closed doors” of television and radio of the profitability of country music (135). CMA would also help nurture its long-standing audience, while attempting to expand country music into new radio and television markets. Strapp warned: “If country music does not become more accepted nationally… if we do not saturate the country with good publicity, if we do not educate the public, we must be prepared to suffer the consequences” (136). CMA quickly began to mobilize, generating income and publicity through a series of concerts. However, it was CMA’s research on the country radio audience that would help country music’s image as a genre. In 1960, as a part of a campaign to advertisers, Charles
Bernard conducted a national survey of the country radio audience. Bernard found the median income of country listeners was higher than the national average, and that the core audience was adults, “the man who works for the dollar and the woman who spends it” (142). CMA would use this newfound information about its audience to help create a profitable and dominant country format in radio. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, CMA would work with preexisting and new country stations to create “an image of professionalism and intelligence… more direct portrayals of a modern sophisticated country audience” (151). CMA’s efforts created a country radio network competitive with the Top 40 stations ignorant toward country music.

The creation of a production and distribution infrastructure is only one part Nashville’s place in country music. Nashville is also responsible for changing the sound of country music to a more commercial, or “pop,” sound, more accessible to country radio audiences. Led by Chet Atkins (RCA), Owen Bradley (Decca), and Don Law (Columbia) the “Nashville Sound” developed a new, more pop-friendly country sound, a commercialization seemingly at odds with the sounds of the Grand Ole Opry. Bill Ivey, in his essay on the Nashville Sound, describes the three major characteristics of country music: a recovery from the rise of rock ‘n’ roll, “a graft of pop sophistication onto country music performance style,” and the various techniques and instrumentation incorporated by Nashville session musicians (138). These characteristics led the music being produced in Nashville that was far from the music being played on stage at the Grand Ole Opry. However, as Jensen describes, the rise of the Nashville Sound is complicated by its history with the Opry:

The sidemen, technicians, and A&R men who formed the backbone of the developing industry were originally connected to the Opry. But in the ‘50s, Music Row developed its own identity, based in its different orientation. Success on the Opry meant air play, celebrity, and sell-out crowds on live dates; success on Music Row meant chart position – where your record placed on the Billboard or Cash Box charts. (85)

The competing identities of country music – the “authentic” Opry sound versus the “pop” Nashville sound – led many consumers (Grand Ole Opry supporters) and producers (the competing Bakersfield Sound) to accuse the music of the country radio formats of being unauthentic and/or commercialized. While the introduction of the Nashville Sound produced
country-pop stars ranging from Jim Reeves to Patsy Cline, it would also introduce issues of authenticity into discussions of country music for years to come. The commercialization of country music in Nashville saved country from being a victim of the rise in popularity of rock ‘n’ roll, but the authentic sounds and images of the south became tools to sell music, not just the characteristics of its artists and audiences. The debate between authenticity and pop-ness is an issue Nashville’s country music producers must still contend with today.

2.4 War & Conservatism

As discussed in chapter one, country music has a complex ideology, including the perception of hewing to conservative values and political affiliations. These perceptions are at their most heightened during wartime in the United States. The narrative traditions found in country music have found the events surrounding war, which impact the artists and listeners of the American South, a popular topic in lyrics. In her anthology of country lyrics, Sing Your Heart Out Country Boy, Dorothy Horstman explains the enduring appeal of war songs:

A country audience likes nothing better than a tragic song, and what better setting for it than a war? It has all the elements of drama – separation, loneliness, betrayal, danger, disfigurement, and death – and hillbilly songs about the experience have managed to cover them all. (17)

The Civil War provided plenty of this music for country artists, as the oral folk tradition kept the songs of the Confederacy alive well into the early years of country music’s commercial years. One Confederate song, “Dixie,” was recorded over ten times between 1924 and 1926 (Smith and Akenson 5). The Civil War also inspired music: Johnny Cash released the song “God Bless Robert E. Lee” in 1983, and, a decade earlier, recorded a recitation of President Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

War songs would continue to develop during World War I and World War II. Most notably, Gene Autry’s career was heavily impacted and influenced by World War II. In September of 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland, leading Great Britain and France to declare war on Germany, Autry was in Liverpool as part of a concert tour of the United Kingdom and Ireland. During the trip, Autry would learn of the song “South of the Border,” a popular song among the British troops. When he returned to America, he recorded “South of the Border” and
the song was released in December, along with a cowboy film by the same name. Autry would participate in benefits supporting the troops and victims of the war, including working with the Cowboy Association for British War Children’s Relief in 1940. Autry would enter the service in 1942, but not before completing six films that could be released once he entered the service. Autry served in Europe until 1945, and during his absence, new music and movies, along with rereleases, kept Autry in the public eye. While Roy Rogers would gain popularity in Autry’s absence, Autry’s career in country music remained strong, as his fans welcomed his patriotism. Following his participation in the Army, Autry began to perform in USO tours throughout the Pacific (Cusic 44-46).

The representations of war within country music lyrics and the careers of country artists do not assume a particular political or ideological stance. As Horstman suggests, war as a narrative tool is popular within country music, and the music is often without any association to a particular political party. However, during the 1950s with the Korean War and the fear of the atomic bomb, the rise in a conservative ideology within country music began to appear. Two songs in particular supported an anti-communist stance: “I’m No Communist” by Lulu Bell and Scotty and “The Red That We Want Is the Red We’ve Got (in the old Red, White, and Blue)” by Elton Britt. While political music began to make an appearance in the 1950s, it would be a generalization to say they were all conservative. For instance, Sons of the Pioneers’ “Ole Man Atom” called for world peace in the age of nuclear proliferation (Malone 317).

During the politically-charged 1960s, the civil rights movement occurred at home while the Vietnam War was waged abroad. According to Malone, “the civil rights revolution did most to politicize some country musicians” (317) as George Wallace began to align himself with the country music industry. “The George Wallace-country music alliance was a major factor which contributed to the music’s rediscovery by the media—the belief that at worst the music represented reactionary and racist politics, or that at best it spoke for alienated American working people” (318). Country music supported the Vietnam War, with Kris Kristofferson’s “Vietnam Blues,” Tom T. Hall’s “Hello Vietnam,” and Dave Dudley’s “Mama, Tell Them What We’re Fighting For”. There were also what Malone calls “protesting the protestors” songs, such as Stonewall Jackson’s “The Minute Men Are Turning in Their Graves” and Merle Haggard’s “The Fighting Side of Me.”
Merle Haggard is also responsible for the 1969 song “Okie From Muskogee,” an anti-protest song. The song’s attack upon the anti-war movement characterized by the hippies begins with the verse: “We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee / We don't take our trips on LSD / We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street / We like livin' right, and bein' free” (Haggard). Haggard’s lyrics positioned country music in opposition to the anti-war sentiments of the late 1960s, associating being anti-war with being anti-country music, which in turn was anti-American. The success of “Okie from Muskogee” would garner Haggard CMA’s Entertainer of the Year in 1970, but as the American involvement in Vietnam ended, Haggard’s music would be known less as conservative or patriotic, and more as the music of the working class. Haggard’s career followed a similar trend as country music as a whole. According to Van Sickle, between 1970 and 2000, No. 1 songs evoking patriotism were very rare, as nationalism was replaced with songs evoking pride in the traditions and values of the south (328). While Van Sickle’s analysis supports a view of country music as apolitical, it is clear that, at times of war, country music does produce music reacting to the social climate of the times without a persistent political bent.

However, Van Sickle’s own omission of post-9/11 music due to its “jingoism” suggests a shift in the ideological representations of country music during wartime. This may be due to the country music produced is a perpetuation of the conservative ideologies of country music. Initially, this perpetuation steered clear of politics; however, as the conservative, religious base began to redefine the Republican party – particularly during the 2000 election, as Bush ran on his “compassionate conservative” platform – suddenly, religion and conservative beliefs, major themes of country music, became the ideology of the Republican party. Meanwhile, country music’s biggest competition on the radio waves became talk radio, dominated by conservative hosts. The affiliation of similar ideologies between a music industry, radio, and a political party began to create an ideological atmosphere where country music became much more aligned politically. Suddenly, the values perpetuated in country music – traditional family values, religion, and traditional gender roles – became the major themes of the ruling political party in the United States. As such, in the post-9/11 atmosphere where the United States entered into wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, country music became a symbol of what the country was fighting to protect. Country music’s ideology suddenly became co-opted by the dominant cultural ideology of the country.
Wartime and the civil rights movement during the 1960s were not the only things country music was responding to. Country music was also responding to what the role of women would be in the industry during both the development of the Nashville sound and the rise of the women’s rights movement. This was particularly crucial for a city and industry not known for its women. “Other early music centers, like Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, and Los Angeles, produced female stars. Music City did not” (Bufwack and Oermann 243-44). Bufwack and Oermann’s observation of Nashville’s early history with female performers points to a criticism of Nashville’s treatment of women and responsibility for helping shape the image of women in country music.

Nashville’s conservatism shaped the country music industry. Tennessee’s capital is also the headquarters of the Southern Baptist Convention; the Methodist Publishing House; the Nazarene Church; and Thomas Nelson, the world’s largest publisher of Bibles. It is an aggressively middlebrow town whose culture revolves around churchgoing. You could not buy liquor by the drink in Nashville until 1967. It is a community run by wealthy good ol’ boys, not the type of place that nourished professional women. (243)

While women were making appearances at the Opry, most notably The Carter Family, led by Maybelle Carter and featuring her daughter June Carter, and the sister act Sarie and Sallie, fewer women were appearing at the Opry in the 1930s compared to the 1920s. However, as more women left the private sphere for the public sphere during World War II, the Opry and Nashville began to recognize the talent – and marketability – of women.

One of the most famous women of country music is Patsy Cline. Her importance to country music goes well beyond her talent as an artist famous for singing such songs as “Crazy,” penned by Willie Nelson. Her enduring legacy is marked by her success first as a Nashville recording artist, and second as one of the first crossover stars into pop music. As previously outlined, the development of the Nashville Sound during the 1950s and 60s was due in part to the surge of pop music on the radio. Jensen’s research into Cline reveals an artist who is both “an example of country music’s commercialization” and “a key figure in ‘real’ country music” (92).
Cline stands as an example of a country artist whose success in part contributed to the development of a Nashville system:

Her early performance career was in small clubs and honky-tonks; she used radio, and then television, to become regionally known; to become successful, her records had to succeed in both the pop and country markets; she valued her country identity and connections and maintained them in spite of her pop success. (97)

Cline’s success on both the pop and country markets led to a tightly controlled, at times contradictory, image – an image that would help define a female artist’s place within commercial country music.

Cline herself did not wish to become a pop star; however, it was her pop-inspired songs, such as “Walking After Midnight,” which gave her the greatest success. It was not only in her music that the pressure to succeed forced Cline to compromise her image as a country act. Performing on television programs, she would fight to wear traditional Opry cowgirl outfits, but would often be forced to wear “the chaste cotton frocks popular at the time for ‘girl singers’” (99). As the Nashville Sound gained in popularity, Cline eventually caved to the music and images being forced upon her by Nashville. As one of the first stars of the new country sound coming out of Nashville, Cline became the definition of the new female country star: a singer with a soft pop sound, not a hard country twang and an image of a good country girl, despite two divorces. Her Nashville-produced image was in contrast to her life, as Cline’s career became a tightly controlled identity where her country roots became a liability to her career. Her reputation as a “hard living, rough talking, temperamental hell raiser” (111) was nowhere to be found in promotional materials where she would be promoted as a “God-fearing religious girl who is thankful for all the goodness in her life” (112). Nashville didn’t just create the new sound of country, a more profitable, radio-friendly sound – it also created the new woman of country.

The contradictions within Patsy Cline’s were not uniquely hers; many female country artists often were faced with tensions between the music they were performing and the actions within their own lives. Malone’s assessment of female country artists highlights this juxtaposition: “they do not “Stand by their men” through think and thin; they do not defer to the leadership of the “stronger sex”; and they certainly do not remain in their homes – but they publicly, and in their songs, adhere to the myth of domesticity” (307). It is this myth of
domesticity many female artists during the 1970s contended with, as the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s impacted country music. It was during this time that three women rose in prominence during country music and would become known as the honky-tonk angels: Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, and Dolly Parton.

Bufwack and Oermann describe the state of 1960s country music for women, both as artist and audience, as a time when women artists were a novelty, and female audiences listened primarily to men.

Records by women were treated gingerly. A record label would rarely release two female singers’ singles at the same time, since there were so few radio slots available to women. It was assumed that women bought the show tickets and records of the rhinestone-studded men who were fantasy lovers or country dream dates.

These assumptions were tested with the career of Loretta Lynn. Not just a country singer, but also a songwriter, Lynn proved the successfulness of female artists performing music for a female audience. Lynn established a career for herself as a woman proud of her poor, working-class upbringing (as documented in the 1980 film Coal Miner’s Daughter) and pride in being a woman. While many of her songs perpetuated the myth of domesticity, she also wrote songs challenging the role of women both in support and opposition of the women’s movement. Lynn released such songs as “Adam’s Rib (To Women’s Lib),” “We’ve Come a Long Way Baby,” and “Hey, Loretta,” a song where women proclaim the start of women’s liberation. Lynn also criticized the women’s movement for ignoring the women of middle America. In the song “One’s On the Way” released in 1972, Lynn sings:

The girls in New York City, they all march for women's lib
And, better homes and garden shows, the modern way to live
And, the pill may change the world tomorrow, but meanwhile,
Here in Topeka, the flies are a buzzin'
The dog is a barkin' and the floor needs a scrubbin' (Lynn)

Lynn’s music at times brought controversy within the country music industry, moving beyond the socially acceptable boundaries of the myth of domesticity. Radio stations throughout the United States banned three songs in particular. In 1969, “Wings upon Your Horns,” a tale of lost
teenage virginity; in 1973, “Rated X,” a condemnation of the image of divorced women as easy; and in 1975, her most famous song, “The Pill” was banned. In an interview with Robert Oermann, Lynn explained radio’s refusal to play the song: “See, they’ll play a song about making love in a field because they think that’s sexy, from a man’s point of view. But something that’s really important to women, like birth control, they don’t want no part of, leastways on the air” (311).

Lynn’s music gave voice to the women listening to country music, and it wasn’t just her music challenging the role of women in country music. While Lynn was one of the honky-tonk angels, her personal life was less than perfect in the eyes of country music. Lynn was married by thirteen, and was a mother of four by eighteen. She was known for working herself to exhaustion, and in 1976 had a mental breakdown onstage in Illinois (313). Her life story did not stop her success, as the song, book, and movie “Coal Miner’s Daughter” only helped establish Lynn as a voice for the underrepresented working-class women of the south.

If “Coal Miner’s Daughter” propelled Lynn’s career, “Stand By Your Man” did the same for Tammy Wynette. Released in 1968 and co-written by Joe Sherman, the song has become synonymous with country music’s myth of domesticity and rigid gender roles. While Lynn was challenging the feminists of the 1960s and 70s, Wynette was being criticized for perpetuating traditional values. However, much like Lynn, Wynette performed music addressing issues facing her female fans. Divorce was a main theme in Wynette’s music, with the songs “I Don’t Wanna Play House” and 1968’s “D-I-V-O-R-C-E.” However, it was Wynette’s relationship with George Jones, her third husband and duet partner, which defined Wynette’s career. Her relationship with Jones was tabloid fodder, as Jones was the abusive, alcoholic husband, and Wynette, the drug-dependent wife who wouldn’t leave. Wynette did leave, though, and found success in the 1980s and 90s, co-writing and performing with Lynn and Dolly Parton (338-39).

Dolly Parton’s place in country music is often overshadowed by her image as a loud, big-breasted Southern woman with her own amusement park, Dollywood, and a successful career as an actress. However, Parton is also known as one of the most prolific songwriters in country music. Malone describes Parton as “a fortuitous combination of physical attractiveness, singing talent, and a genius for song composition” (311). Parton used her sex appeal and talent as a songwriter to test the limits of the kind of career a country artist – male or female – could have. Following her success in the early 1970s with the songs “Jolene” and “Coat of Many Colors”,

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Parton used her wins in 1975 and ’76 as CMA Female Vocalist of the Year to become the first female country artist with her own television show. In the late 1970s, Parton turned her attention away from country music by performing pop and adult contemporary music. She became one of the first country artists to move beyond music into the the world of television and movies since the rise of the Nashville Sound. Parton became one of the first country female artists to use her sexuality as a selling point, making the cover of Playboy in 1978 (370).

The honky-tonk angels would find success writing and performing together in the early 1990s. In 1993, Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, and Dolly Parton would release the successful album, Honky Tonk Angels. It featured country standards and songs written by the trio. And, even though Patsy Cline passed away in a plane crash in 1963, the three women sang Hank Williams’ “Love Sick Blues” to a vintage recording of Cline’s. Wynette died in 1998, but Lynn and Parton are both still successful recording artists today. In 2004, Lynn released Van Lear Rose, the first album completely written or co-written by her, and it was co-produced by indie rock artist Jack White. Dolly Parton released Backwoods Barbie in early 2008, which reached No. 2 on the Billboard Country Charts. Cline and her fellow honky-tonk angels are only a few of the successful women in country music’s long history, but they represent the artists who both perpetuated and challenged the traditional values found in country music that often dictate the way women are presented and represented by Nashville.

2.5 1990s Nashville and Redneck Feminism

Despite the success of female country artists during the 1970s, by the late 1980s country music was dominated by male artists. In 1989, the Billboard Hot Country charts included Clint Black, Conway Twitty, Ricky Skaggs, and Steve Wariner (Billboard), returning country to a traditional sound, void of the pop sensibilities of the early Nashville Sound. However, Nashville still had Music Row, and its domination of the country music industry continued. The success of Garth Brooks helped bring country music to its height in popularity that in many ways still exists today. Brooks first hit the charts in 1989, and by 1996 produced three of the top selling country albums of all time – No Fences, Ropin’ the Wind, and The Garth Brooks Collection – and had sold sixty million albums. Only the Beatles and Billy Joel had sold more at the time. His success was not only on the country charts, but he was a crossover act who performed well on the pop charts and brought new fans to country music (Malone 427).
The success of Brooks helped reinvigorate the country music industry, both in its image and its sales. The rise of the girl power movement in the mass media, and the heavy use of music videos on CMT to promote country music, led to a surge in female country artists. Beginning with Shania Twain in 1993, there was an upward trend in the number of female country acts coming out of Nashville. By 1997, the three top selling country albums were two albums by LeAnn Rimes, *Blue* and *Unchained Melody*, and Deanna Carter’s *Did I Shave My Legs for This?* (Billboard). David Fillingim calls the female artists and music of the 1990s examples of “honky-tonk feminism”, arguing the artists of the 1990s shared the following common traits: “the rejection of sexual inequalities and double standards,” “life’s meaning is revealed in life’s simplest moments,” “community among women,” and “a woman’s right to self-determination” (137-138). Fillingim cites the success of Martina McBride’s “Independence Day” as an example of what he calls redneck feminism. The song tells the story of a woman who burns down her house while she and her husband are in it, to save herself from her abusive husband. “The blend of imagery exposes how Christian myth and patriotic myth are conflated in patriarchal America to reinforce an arsenal of traditional “values” that often have damaging effects on women and children” (129). However, redneck feminism was met with resistance by country radio stations. Beverly Keel’s investigation into “Independence Day” found radio programmers were resistant to playing the song and it only hit No. 12 on the *Billboard* charts in 1994. This is in contrast to the previous year when Brooks’ “Papa Loved Mama,” a song where a husband kills his cheating wife, hit No. 3 (176). Fillingim’s critique of McBride’s redneck feminism and Keel’s comparison of McBride and Brooks reveals a country music industry willing to produce redneck feminism, but unable to treat female artists with gender equity.

### 2.7 Dixie Chicks

According to Fillingim, one of the most successful examples of honky-tonk feminism is the Dixie Chicks. While the Dixie Chicks would become one of Nashville’s biggest acts in the 1990s, the birth of the band occurred not in Tennessee, but in another Southern state famous for country music: Texas. If Nashville is home to mainstream country music, then Texas has become the home to a musical counterculture not as concerned with hewing to a particular “sound” as dictated by the business of Nashville. Austin, starting in the 1970s, became a haven for artists experimenting with a fusion of folk, rock, and country. The Armadillo World
Headquarters began as a showcase for rock bands, but soon became a home for country bands as “cowboys and rednecks began to rub shoulders with the long-haired counter culture community” (Malone 394). Nicholas Spitzer referred to the Austin movement of the 1970s as “romantic regionalism,” describing the musical style as “country-rock, not western swing, although it is based on an amalgam of Nashville country, rockabilly and western swing” (89). Spitzer cites “progressiveness” within Austin’s country music scene due to a diverse audience as a catalyst for Texas music moving beyond the rigid definitions of Nashville’s commercialized genre (93). Dallas is also an alternative home to country music, but instead of being a progressive alternative like Austin, its history is grounded in traditional country music that is heavily influenced by acoustic and hillbilly-based music of the 1930s and 40s (Malone 170). Dallas offers the traditions of early country music prior to the commercialization through radio and Nashville.

It is in Dallas during 1989 when the Dixie Chicks first formed. Playing traditional bluegrass music, the original lineup of the band was Maguire and Robison (twenty and seventeen respectively), Laura Lynch, and Robin Macy. Lynch and Macy were responsible for lead vocals, while the sisters provided harmonies. The women played their own instruments with Lynch on upright bass, Macy on acoustic guitar, Maguire playing fiddle, and Robison on banjo. The band performed mainly in the regional bluegrass circuit, winning Best Band in 1990 at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival (Bufwack and Oermann 473). The band was successful, in part due to an image reminiscent of mid-1900s traditional country. In his book Dixie Chicks, James L. Dickerson describes the band’s image as “brightly colored skirts and blouses, cowboy boots, and western-style, a throwback to the Roy Rogers and Dale Evans cinematic imagery of the late 1940s and 1950s” (Dickerson 1). This image of the Dixie Chicks was furthered with their first album, the independent release Thank Heavens for Dale Evans in 1990. While their first release failed to gain the notice of Nashville and a major label signing due to a sound too outdated for Nashville’s modern sound, the band did gain enough regional success to record a second independent album in 1992, Little Ol’ Cowgirl. In hopes of creating a sound more desirable to country music executives, the band added drums – a dramatic departure from a traditional bluegrass sound – and famous Texas producer and slide guitarist Lloyd Maines. The modern sound only increased the Dixie Chicks’ popularity within Texas, but again failed to gain the band a record deal in Nashville. By the time the band recorded 1993’s Shouldn’t a Told You That, Macy left the band, concerned over a modern sound pandering to Nashville executives (44).
1995, the band finally signed with Sony/Nashville Monument, and they would make one final change to their lineup. Lead singer since Macy left the band, Maguire and Robison informed Lynch they wanted to buy out her contract. In an interview with Dickerson, Lynch recounts one of the sisters telling her, “We want to make a change. We need to get with the market and do something differently musically” (85). The change would be replacing Lynch with Lloyd Maines’ daughter, Natalie. Natalie Maines would be the final piece of the puzzle for the Dixie Chicks’ success in Nashville. In 1998, *Wide Open Spaces*, the band’s first Nashville produced album, and the first album featuring Maines as lead vocals, would be released. Its success would position the Dixie Chicks as one of the most successful bands in country music history.

Replacing Lynch with Maines has become a part of the legend of the Dixie Chicks – a story told that shapes the image of the Dixie Chicks as a band meant for greatness that was helped out with a bit of luck. During a 2006 radio interview, Maguire and Robison tell how Maines’ father, Lloyd Maines, gave the sisters his daughter’s Berkley School of Music audition tape, how the sisters would secretly steal it from each other and listen to it, and how finally they both came to each other with the idea of replacing Lynch with Maines (XM Radio). The story is told with a touch of serendipity – of how a bit of luck led to a successful lineup after years of producing independent albums without mainstream success. However, a *Rolling Stone* article by Richard Skanse tells a much different story of pressure from their Nashville producer:

*Fly* co-producer Blake Chancey saw enough potential in the Chicks four years ago to give them a demo deal. He loved the virtuosity of Seidel and Robison, who had been playing fiddle, banjo and dobro in bluegrass festivals since childhood; but with lead singer Laura Lynch on board, the group was still a soft-folk act. After signing the Chicks, their manager informed them that Lynch was out in favor of a new singer, a "firecracker." (Skanse)

The differing stories highlight the way in which musical artists construct their image at times in contrast with the truth of the business practices. The myth of the band is as important as their music itself. These tensions between the myth and the reality, the band and Nashville, would help make the band the biggest-selling female band of all time. It would also lead to the band having one of the most controversial careers in all of music. The next chapter will analyze how the Dixie Chicks are representational of the relationship between commercial country music and
women – how the Dixie Chicks stand as examples of how Nashville tightly controls the image of its women, but also how the Dixie Chicks, as businesswomen, made strides against this strict Nashville control.
CHAPTER THREE
THE DIXIE CHICKS

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 described the historical development of country music into one of the biggest music industries in the United States, and highlighted the role women had in shaping country music as an industry. History showed how women’s labor in country music is mediated through concepts of authenticity and conservatism, which form the key ideological ground of the country music industry. This chapter will examine the career of the Dixie Chicks in order to analyze how the country music industry perceives and presents female artists. This will focus on the release of the four studio albums the Dixie Chicks have released under their Sony contract, the music of the band, public relations material, media appearances, and articles will be used to trace the relationship between the Dixie Chicks and the country music industry.

3.2 Wide Open Spaces

In 1998, the Dixie Chicks released their fourth album, *Wide Open Spaces*. There are two main differences between the album and the band’s previous three: it is the first album since Natalie Maines became the band’s lead singer in 1995, and the first produced under their contract with Sony Nashville’s Monument label. The differences were enough to help transform the band from a successful Texas band into a successful national and international country act. With Maines’ voice, the band had a powerful vocal sound to complement the band’s strong instrumentation. With Monument, they had the means of marketing and distribution to move the band beyond its Texas roots.

In the two years before the release of *Wide Open Spaces*, the Dixie Chicks worked to incorporate Maines’ powerful voice with the sisters’ harmonies and instrumentals. The result was the slow removal of the “country as cowgirl” (XM Radio) music from the pre-Maines era, transforming the band’s sound to a more radio-friendly Nashville sound. Many of the songs the band began to play would eventually find their way onto *Wide Open Spaces*. “You Were Mine” would be the only track off the new album penned by members of the band. Written by Robison and Maguire, the song is reminiscent of the music of Lynn and Wynette of the 1970s: a ballad filled with slide guitar and banjo as Maines sings of the agony of a cheating husband and
divorce. (The song is a dramatization of Maguire and Robinson’s parents’ own divorce.) It would be the strongest ballad off *Wide Open Spaces* and the only ballad released as a single. The rest of the singles, starting in 1997 with “I Can Love You Better” are fast-paced country songs showcasing not only the talent of the band, but their energy.

Another song the band began to play out on the road was “Wide Open Spaces,” written by Texas musician and Lloyd Maines collaborator Susan Gibson. The song is emblematic of the Dixie Chicks, as women and as artists. The song’s lyrics helped the Dixie Chicks to become champions of young female independence. “Wide Open Spaces” begins with the question, “Who doesn’t know what I’m talking about?” and proceeds to recount the story of a young woman leaving her family and hometown behind because “she needs wide open spaces / room to make big mistakes” (Chicks, *Wide Open Spaces*). The song asks the female listener to remember the moment when they left home. Its performance by three twenty-something women seemed to solidify the band’s connection to its young female audience, and the song quickly became an anthem for the band and their audience.

Robison calls “Wide Open Spaces” “the first song we put in the set that felt like us.” However, Blake Chancey and Paul Woorley, the Nashville producers assigned to the Dixie Chicks’ first album, met the song with resistance. Robison claims the band “had to fight for that song,” as the producers felt it sounded “nothing like us” and not country enough. According to Maines, the band finally won the opportunity to record the song, and afterward one of the producers pronounced, “alright now, let’s play some country music” (XM Radio).

The song ended up being country enough to make its way onto the album as the title track, and would become the most successful song and video off *Wide Open Spaces*. The third single after the release of the album in 1998, “Wide Open Spaces” would become a number one hit, and the accompanying video would help establish the Dixie Chicks as a serious country act. However, if it was not country enough for their album’s producers, it was too country for non-country venues interested in capitalizing off the success of the song. In the summer of 1998, as the single and video began to dominate the country charts, the Dixie Chicks’ music slowly began to appear on the pop charts. Crossing over onto the pop charts goes back to the 1950s and Patsy Cline, and it was still just as difficult a process in the 1990s as it was four decades earlier.

In an interview with Craig Kilborn on *The Late Late Show* in 1999, the band addressed their hesitancy to cross onto the pop charts like their contemporary Shania Twain. The band had
been gaining prominence in pop music, but there was hesitancy on the part of the band to embrace a pop career. Maguire described VH1’s desire to play the video for “Wide Open Spaces,” but with conditions: “Well, they wanted to play our video on VH1, and take off the fiddle for some reason, and we said no way.” She continued to explain the band wished to stay “country,” refusing to change the essence of their music in order to garner pop success. The discussion ended with Kilborn asking, “is the ultimate goal to get on Hee Haw?” (Maguire, Maines and Robison, The Late, Late Show with Craig Kilborn)

Kilborn’s question was a cheap joke, but it is central to the perception of country music artists such as the Dixie Chicks who have the opportunity to cross over. The Dixie Chicks may have become one of the biggest acts in country music; however, becoming one of the biggest acts in popular music is neither a guarantee nor a necessity. The decision to cross over runs the risk of alienating country fans. Authenticity of the artist is central to the identity of the country music genre, and as such the Dixie Chicks, as highlighted in the Kilborn interview, chose to remain loyal to country in terms of “crossing over.” These issues surrounding the recording and distribution of “Wide Open Spaces” were not isolated incidents surrounding the band. Questions of their authenticity as country artists, as opposed to pop or mainstream rock artists, would continue to plague the group with the release of each new album. The central issue of authenticity reaches beyond their music and rests within the identity of the band as women and country artists.

One of the main ways the identity of the Dixie Chicks formed during the release of Wide Open Spaces was the marketing done by Monument. In the project overview detailing the marketing strategy for Wide Open Spaces, Monument describes the band as “a name synonymous with great musicianship, vocals and entertaining” (Monument Records 10). Much of the project overview describes the marketing of the band, and the first single, “I Can Love You Better,” primarily to country music outlets, including country radio stations, magazines, and cable stations. The overview of the marketing stresses, “the emphasis will be placed equally on the incredible vocal ability and musicianship of these girls” (4). While the project overview is an in-house document never meant for an audience to see, the fact that the Dixie Chicks are referred to as “girls” is disturbing, as it infantilizes the women despite their “incredible vocal ability and musicianship.” The passage from the marketing plan continues with, “The striking photos will lend themselves to a fabulous CD layout, lyric poster and intensive ad campaign” (4). The
assumption would be that these “striking photos” would somehow promote the vocal ability and musicianship, but two examples of material associated with Wide Open Spaces negates the equal representation, and suggests a furthering of the image of these women as girls, not musicians or vocalists.

The first example is the CD layout and lyric poster for Wide Open Spaces. The cover of the CD case is a wide shot of all three women walking together looking at the camera. They are dressed in darker-colored clothing, drawing the eye up to the faces of the three women, each with almost the identical shade of blonde hair. The name of the band is featured prominently across the bottom third of the picture; “Dixie Chicks” appears in a frilly, fun font in a bright shade of yellow.3 Absent from the picture is any hint that the three play instruments. In the fifteen pictures of the band either together or separate that are featured in the lyric sheet, only one is of the band playing their instruments. Three of the pictures are extreme close-ups of the face of each member of the band; three other pictures are extreme close-ups of each of the instruments played by a member of the band. Both the instruments and the women have been fragmented and separated from each other. The emphasis is far more on their looks than their musicianship.

Another example contradicting the marketing plan of the band is the video for the album’s first single, “I Can Love You Better.” Released to CMT to help promote the single, this video is the first opportunity for a national audience to see – not just hear – the band. The project overview describes the song as “a combination of tempo and brains” (2). The video captures the tempo, choosing an airport as the location for the video, giving the impression the Dixie Chicks have landed; but it fails to incorporate any of the “brains” of the song. The video consists of various scenarios throughout the airport where the band is performing the song, but in only one instance are instruments featured. In most of the shots featuring the instruments, the shot quickly cuts in to a close-up of one or more of the women, leaving no trace they are each playing instruments. While the video opens with shots of guitar and fiddle cases going down a conveyor belt, the end of the video forgets the instruments as the looks of the women dominate.

If the band disapproved of the way the conflicting ways they were being marketed, there were no public comments made. The very fact the band chose to pursue a Nashville recording contract, suggests they were more than willing to become active participants within the country

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3 See Appendix A for the Wide Open Spaces album cover.
music industry. As chapter two highlighted, Music Row’s control over its artists and the ways it markets its female artists is well documented and should have come as no surprise to the Dixie Chicks. The band certainly could have chosen to remain as Texas regional band or pursued as independent country career in Austin, Texas – a city that has developed into a haven for disillusioned Nashville acts or independent artists. The band’s willingness to change lead singer and their sound following the signing of their contract shows the band was willing to do whatever it would take to achieve Nashville success.

The Dixie Chicks from becoming one of Nashville’s biggest acts, as well as one of the most respected. The album would reach number one on the Billboard Country Music Chart and number four on the Billboard Top 200 on its way to becoming the biggest selling debut album in country music history, the biggest selling album by a group in country music history, and the biggest selling album in Sony Nashville history. Five singles would reach the Top 10 on the country music charts, with three reaching number one. As of 2008, the album has sold twelve million copies, and as of the present remains the band’s biggest seller. The music and the band resonated with the country music audience. *Wide Open Spaces* also resonated with the country music industry, as some of the biggest associations within country music honored the band. The Dixie Chicks would become the first new artists nominated for Entertainer of the Year at the Country Music Awards. They would lose that award, but would win CMAs for the Horizon Award (Best New Artist, 1998), Group of the Year (1998 & 99), Music Video of the Year for “Wide Open Spaces” (1999), and Single of the Year for “Wide Open Spaces” (1999). The Academy of Country Music would honor them with Album of the Year for Wide Open Spaces (1999), Top Vocal Group (1999), and Top New Vocal Duo/Group (1999). They would also win the Grammys for Best Country Album and Best Country Music Performance in 1999 (Awards & Accolades). By 1999, the Dixie Chicks had established themselves as one of country music’s most successful acts.

3.3 *Fly*

In 1998, *The New York Times* ran a concert review of the band, suggesting the Dixie Chicks were aspiring to be a country version of the Spice Girls, a manufactured Britpop group featuring five females with nicknames ranging from Sporty Spice to Posh Spice, known for
fusing pop music with girl power. Ben Ratlif notes Maines referenced the group twice during the concert, also noting:

One attacks only what one privately wants to be. The Dixie Chicks have the high-beam smiles, the malt-shop sauciness. Ms. Maines bears a slight resemblance to Baby Spice. There isn’t an exact equivalent in their lexicon for “girl power,” but they use “chick” for the same purposes. (Ratlif)

The review would go on to compare “chick power” to “girl power” and country to pop, and describes Maines’ stage presence as “more visually reminiscent of Gwen Stefani of No Doubt than, say, Tammy Wynette, to whom she gave obligatory respect before an allegro shuffle version of ‘Stand by Your Man’” (Ratlif).

The juxtaposition of “chick power” and “girl power,” on the surface, seems like a harmless marketing ploy for the Dixie Chicks. However, the positioning of what the Dixie Chicks do as separate from the mainstream suggests there is not room for country music within the wave of girl power sweeping popular music in the late 1990s. With the release of Fly in 1999, the Dixie Chicks’ music and marketing sought to center the band within the larger girl power movement in pop music, while sustaining the country music audience gained during the release of Wide Open Spaces.

Before the release of Fly in August of 1999, Senior Management, the agency led by Simon Renshaw representing the Dixie Chicks, released a promotional booklet outlining the status of the Dixie Chicks. Much of the booklet features reprints of trade and popular magazine articles, a rundown of achievements of the band, and future tour and press appearances. Interspersed throughout are pictures of and quotes from the band, furthering the notion the band is about girl power and nonconformity within country music.

MAINES: We don’t want to be too cautious. Be yourself, that’s our thing. Tell the truth… don’t get wrapped up in what’s politically correct. (1)

ROBISON: We used to get some flack for calling ourselves chicks, but we’ve come full circle, and women can call themselves anything they want. I think we’re symbolic of that strength, that women can do
anything, call their own shots, play their own instruments… we’re breaking stereotypes. (3)

MAGUIRE: For us, it’s not about definitions. We don’t worry about whether it’s too country or too ‘out there’. We just know when it’s right. We’re hoping to do things by example, not by some sort of motto of some big philosophical statement. Our music and what we do, touring and running our own company, hopefully inspires young girls to go out and do whatever they want to do. (9, 11)

These quotes reveal an ideological stance on the part of the Dixie Chicks to establish themselves as anti-establishment within country music. The claims of breaking stereotypes, running companies, and not worrying if music is country enough appeal to a mainstream audience that may believe “chick power” is limited by the ideologies of country music’s rigid gender rules. The quotes helped reposition the Dixie Chicks within country music, allowing them to also reposition themselves within the much larger mainstream music scene of the time. Specifically, the Dixie Chicks were positioning themselves directly within the larger music movement of the time, where female artists were achieving great success.

Because of the success of women in music, Canadian artist Sarah McLachlan launched Lilith Fair in 1997. A traveling summer music festival, Lilith Fair featured some of the biggest female acts at the time: McLachlan, Sheryl Crow, Indigo Girls, and Natalie Merchant, among others. In 1999, the final year of the tour, the Dixie Chicks joined the festival as its first country act. In an interview with Billboard about the announcement, Lilith organizer Terry McBride explained the opportunity for the band to “have a chance—without changing their sound—to cross into the mainstream pop market”; the same article quoted Mike Kraski, VP of Sales and Marketing for Sony Nashville, claiming the opportunity “can bring people back to the [country] format” (Flippo). Kraski is careful to suggest the Dixie Chicks are anything more than a country artist, despite participating in Lilith Fair. Simon Renshaw emphasizes the point, “We are trying to expose their music and them to as wide a potential audience as we possibly can, while at the same time holding very fast to the realization that this is a country group, and they owe their success to a very great extent to country radio” (Flippo).
The caution in referring to a spot on the Lilith Fair tour as “crossover” reveals the need by country acts to not alienate the country fan base. However, in redefining what it means to be a female country artist by “breaking stereotypes,” the Dixie Chicks made their participation in Lilith Fair not about “crossing over,” but about acting as ambassadors of country music within the larger women’s music movement of the time. Becoming a crossover artist, to the Dixie Chicks, no longer meant releasing more pop friendly versions of country music like Shania Twain and Garth Brooks would do. Instead, their success in the mainstream was reframed as female artists challenging the expectations of women as artists and musicians within country music, which would appeal to the larger girl power movement of the time.

The music released on *Fly* supports this attitude – that the Dixie Chicks could find mainstream success by redefining what it means to be a female country act. The music selected to appear on the album featured five songs written by one or more of the women, and supported the image of the Dixie Chicks as women not worried about stereotypes, but about producing quality music inspiring to women. Many of the songs on the album where metaphors for “fly”: “Ready to Run,” about a woman who will run when faced with marriage and commitment; “Cowboy Take Me Away,” a country ballad written by Maguire for her sister’s wedding; “Let Him Fly,” a Patty Griffin song about letting go of a man. These three songs in particular are reminiscent of the music of the 1960s and 70s released by Lynn and Wynette: songs of marriage and love.

Unlike *Wide Open Spaces*, the album artwork and lyric notes reflected the musicianship of the Dixie Chicks. Along with pictures featuring the band flying on a rocket and stuck to fly paper are pictures of the band in studio producing the album. These pictures show the band playing instruments, singing, and listening to music – active participation in the music process. The cover of the lyric sheet doesn’t include a picture of the band just the name of the band and the album title, but the artwork on the actual CD is of the Dixie Chicks’ feet featuring their six chick feet tattoos, one each for each #1 single, #1 album, RIAA Gold certifications and RIAA Platinum certifications (Dixie Chicks). The tattoos are visual reminders of the previous success

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4 In 2002, Shania Twain released the 3-disc album *Up!*. Each disc is a different style of the music: country, pop, and world. In 1999, Garth Brooks released a rock album under the name Chris Gaines.

5 See Appendix B for *Fly* album cover.
of the band. The prominence of these tattoos shows a confidence by the band normally not allowed by country music as far as women are concerned. Tattoos are not normally associated with country artists or women, tattoos are a part of the costume of a male rock and roller, a sign of an artist’s independence and nonconformity. For three female country artists to not only get tattoos, but to so publically feature them, signifies the band’s resistance of the traditional role of the perfect wife and mother bestowed upon females in the country music industry.

The level of confidence is most pronounced in the inclusion of two songs on the album – “Goodbye Earl” and “Sin Wagon.” The second single from *Fly* is the humorous song “Goodbye Earl,” about two women who kill an abusive husband with poisoned black-eyed peas. It became one of the band’s biggest hits – and greatest controversies. Country music critics felt it was a topic a band with young female fans shouldn’t be singing about. Champions of the song took the approach that men have been singing about abusing women for years, so why shouldn’t women. In an interview with Larry King in 2006, Emily defended the song: “I think when kids hear a song like that and they sing along to them, they have fun, if they come in contact with a man who abuses them down the line, maybe, you know, they’ll be strong because they heard about it” (Maguire, Maines and Robison, An Interview With The Dixie Chicks).

The video only helped the popularity of the song. The video featured a star-studded cast including Dennis Franz, Jane Krakowski, Lauren Holly, and Natalie Maines’ future husband Adrian Pasdar. The video is a comical take on the song, as the band observes as the narrative of the song is acted out. The ending is a minute long dance sequence celebrating both the death of Earl and the liberation of the two friends. While the video is playful about a serious topic, it is, more importantly, a celebration of the freedom of women, akin to the much darker and starker ending of *Thelma and Louise*. Juxtaposed with the standard country songs portraying women as loyal to their men to the very end despite their misgivings, “Goodbye Earl” celebrates the girl power of the 1990s that allowed women to find their independence. In 2000, the video would win Video of the Year at both the CMAs and the ACMs.

Another song which brought the band a lot of press for challenging the standards of country music is “Sin Wagon,” written by Maines and Robison, which is a hard-charging song about a woman cutting loose by drinking and having sex. It challenged the conventions of country music that only men could participate in such activities:

He pushed me 'round
Now, I'm drawin' the line
He lived his life
Now, I'm gonna go live mine (Dixie Chicks)

The record company found problems with the allusions to sex, primarily the use of the euphemism “mattress dancing,” informing the band that they could not use the song on the album. The band forced their record label’s hand by playing the song in concert, solidifying its place on the album (J. L. Dickerson 138). The band revealed in the fact that the industry was outraged about what they saw as harmless, fun music. When the record company forced the Chicks to put a disclaimer in the liner notes to “Goodbye Earl”, they agreed, but the disclaimer is more half-hearted and sarcastic – “The Dixie Chicks do not advocate premeditated murder, but love getting even” – and made the joke that they named the album *Fly* because they couldn’t name it *Sin Wagon* (The Dixie Chicks).

In a *Newsweek* article on the songs, former Billboard country journalist Ed Morris criticizes the band’s desire to become so outspoken. “Sometimes they're talking when they should be playing. They just sound so goddamn full of themselves. They want to be glib and flippant” (Gates and Gordon). Morris’ comment is in keeping with the gatekeepers of country music’s attempt to control their women, which starts with keeping them quiet. The band might be the biggest act in country since Garth Brooks, but the double standard exists. The Dixie Chicks’ campaign to change the role of women in country music, and country music’s place in popular music, challenged an industry built on conservative ideologies that dictate a woman’s place, which do not include “mattress dancing” and killing abusive husbands.

Despite the criticism, framing of the Dixie Chicks as ambassadors of country music to the mainstream that also maintained a country audience was effective. The album would debut at number one on both Billboard’s Hot 200 and Country charts. *Fly* again brought the Dixie Chicks unprecedented award success, as it was voted Best Country Album at the Grammys, ACMs, and CMAs, and they would be named Entertainer of the Year at the 2000 CMAs and 2001 ACMs. The band’s popularity grew both within country music and in the mainstream media with television appearances: late night talk shows, *VH1’s Behind the Music, Austin City Limits, Sessions at West 54th, Dixie Chicks: On the Fly, America: A Tribute to Heroes*, and *Women Rock: Girls and Guitars* (Dixie Chicks Hen House). The band had managed to become a major mainstream act without compromising its country sound.
3.4 Home

The relationship between the Dixie Chicks and country music was strong following the release of *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly*. Even with the criticism that the band was being too outspoken and testing the limits of the industry with the songs “Sin Wagon” and “Goodbye Earl,” the relationship was mutually beneficial. The girl power message had made both the Dixie Chicks and the country music industry millions of dollars. One of the mainstream programs the band appeared on during the promotion of *Fly* was *60 Minutes II*. Dan Rather did a biography on the band, detailing their rise from Texas band to country music superstars. He also investigated the record deal between Sony Nashville and the Dixie Chicks.

RATHER: If you had 17 million CDs sold, at roughly $14 a throw, that comes to well over $200 million.

ROBISON: Hmm. You’re depressing me because we see so, so little of that…

RATHER: Again, the gross – gross almost crowding a quarter billion.

ROBISON: I’ll just say that Sony Nashville has remodeled their new building. They remodeled on that.

RATHER: Now, I’m not saying the record company got all of that. Let’s just say they only got $150 million.

MAINES: Yes, they did.

RATHER: They—well, you probably got 50 million yourself.

MAINES: I don’t even have $1 million in the bank. Tell me where the money goes. I have no idea. (Maguire, Maines and Robison, Country Music Group The Dixie Chicks)

The exchange was only a small part of the interview, but it would dramatically change the business dealings between the Dixie Chicks and Sony Nashville.

On July 13, 2001, the Dixie Chicks served notice to Sony that they were terminating their contract due to “Sony’s material misconduct and material breaches.” Five days later, Sony sued the Dixie Chicks, claiming the allegations were “trumped up and baseless,” and that the band still owed Sony five albums. The Dixie Chicks countersued on August 21, filing a list of claims,
including fraud and breach of contract, and charged that Sony withheld $4.1 million in royalties, at least $1.4 million still unpaid (Stark 12). While the Dixie Chicks originally stated they would not work with Sony, on May 10, 2002, the band signed a new deal with Sony. According to Billboard, the agreement included Open Wide Records, the band’s own imprint through Sony; a $20 million signing advance; and a 20% royalty rate (Stark, Launch of Open Wide Records 4).

Finally, in 2002, the Chicks and Sony came to an agreement. According to Dickerson in Go! Girl, Go!, the band would no longer answer to the gatekeepers, “the men who signed them and produced their first two albums were banished from the Chicks’ sight. They would deal directly with executives in the New York office” (177).

The Dixie Chicks’ legal battles with Sony took the concept of girl power to the next level. During the promotion of Fly, it was a marketing tool to help sell the country sound of the Dixie Chicks to a broader audience, thereby solving the crossover issues the band faced with Wide Open Spaces. However, with the lawsuit, the Dixie Chicks took the girl power from their music and applied it to their business practices. The “breaking of the stereotypes” Robison spoke of now extended to how the band chose to operate its career within the industry. The band had challenged the limits of a woman’s place within country music. The band’s decision to work only with the New York office and to release albums on their own label dramatically changed the relationship between the artist and label. The country music industry’s success depends, in part, on the tight control it maintains in Nashville. The relationship between the artist, label, and radio is nurtured in Nashville, and for one of its biggest acts to leave is unheard of. In addition, for an industry known for a conservative ideology and strict gender roles, for it to be a female act leaving is even more shocking. According to Robison, the separation gave the band control it never had before: “To me, [having our own imprint] means a little bit more stability within the label. It means that they recognize you're basically making the artistic decisions” (Stark, Dixie Chicks Come 'Home' To Sony 1).

Even before the settlement, the Dixie Chicks had already left Nashville to take control of their careers. While the lawyers attempted to come to an agreement, the Dixie Chicks went back to Texas to record their next album. Producing along with Lloyd Maines for the first time since signing with Sony, Home is a stripped down, bluegrass album. Texas is home to its own country music scene out of Austin, and the influence is strong. Made without the input of Nashville, there is maturity to the music, both in lyrics and musicianship, which had been missing from the
previous albums. Talking about Austin’s influence on *Home*, Maguire explained, “Emily and I grew up around bluegrass, but we've never been so inspired by bluegrass as in this last year…and living in Austin, Texas, it's all around you” (1). Going back to Texas sent a strong message to Nashville – Texas is the anti-establishment of country music. Texas provided a space of rebellion, strength, and pure country, themes the Chicks infused into *Home*.

The lawsuit and production of *Home* weren’t the only changes happening to the Dixie Chicks. First, the image of the Dixie Chicks was transformed from young, single girls having fun, into wives and mothers. The personal lives of the Dixie Chicks have always fit into the Southern stereotypes of marriage, divorce, and babies. Both Maguire and Maines were married, divorced, and remarried by 1999, and in 1999, Robison married fellow country artist Charlie Robison⁶. Natalie was the first to have a child, and, by 2008, there were eight children between the women. Their roles as mothers and wives brought maturity to the group. It also fulfilled another Southern stereotype the band enjoyed having a bit of fun with: the incestuous, Southern way everyone seems to be related. In an entry on the Dixie Chicks MSN website, Dixie Chicks blogger Junichi P. Semitsu explains the relations between the tightly knit group:

> It’s hard to keep the connections between the Dixie Chicks and their extended family straight: Martie Maguire, for example, is married to Gareth, whose brother is Shane, who is married to Kim, who is the sister of Natalie Maines, whose husband is Adrian Pasdar, who was a groomsman to Charlie Robison, who married Emily, who is the sister of Martie. (“Three Chicks and Seven Peeps”)

For the traditional country music fans, their new roles only cemented their “conservative” values – making music and having fun is fine, but getting married and having kids is fulfilling the traditional role of women. The image of mother would begin to dominate coverage of the band. The band appeared on the cover of the October 2002 issue of *Redbook*. The women are hugging each other, with Robison’s pregnant belly the focal point of the picture; the headline reads “Learn the Dixie Chicks’ Tricks: Exclusive! You name it, America’s top girl group has beaten

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The band would also appear on the cover of the February 2, 2003 issue of *People*. The cover features the three women looking at the camera with the headline above them reading, “Feuds, Fame, and Family: Country’s coolest girl group opens up about divorce, infertility, babies, music and marriage.”

The accompanying article in *People* features pictures of Robison and Maines’ children. Both articles reframe the Dixie Chicks as mothers, staying away from the girl empowerment messages of earlier years.

However, that did not mean the band would stop producing music with women as strong and independent. The mood of *Home* is somber; song themes include war (“Traveling Soldier”), divorce (“Home”), and the passage of time (a cover of Stevie Nicks’ “Landslide”). *Home* also features two songs dedicated to their children, “Lil’ Jack Slade” and “(Godspeed) Sweet Dreams.” The band, however, wouldn’t lose its sense of humor: The song “White Trash Wedding,” a fast-paced bluegrass tune, pokes fun at Maguire and Maines’ quickie marriages.

The band also challenged country music radio with *Home*’s first single, “Long Time Gone,” featuring the chorus:

We listen to the radio to hear what’s cookin’
But, the music ain’t got no soul
Now they sound tired, but they don’t sound Haggard
They’ve got money, but they don’t have Cash
They got Junior, but they don’t have Hank (The Dixie Chicks)

The song’s pessimistic view toward the country music industry serves as a reminder of the lawsuit with Sony. The song’s antagonism toward radio stations that don’t play classic country artists such as Merle Haggard, Johnny Cash, and Hank Williams, is a strong statement from a band that recently left Nashville to produce and distribute their country album. Chet Flippo, CMT’s editorial director, in writing of the wedge between the Dixie Chicks and country music “Long Time Gone,” furthers the antagonism between the Dixie Chicks and country music:

The rousing new Dixie Chicks song "Long Time Gone" serves up a potent reminder of a simmering split in country music that won't go away. When Natalie Maines sings -- bitingly -- of modern

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7 See Appendix C for *Redbook* cover.
8 See Appendix D for *People* cover.
country music, "They got Junior but they ain't got Hank," she suggests, one supposes, that modern country music may tolerate Hank Williams Jr. but has no room for the original. There is, bubbling under the surface in Nashville, a lingering family feud that threatens to render the country genre in two. (Flippo, Future of the Music Is Here Today)

Flippo credits the band’s “spirit of personal independence, of musical adventurousness and a just plain don't-give-a-damn attitude” for challenging Nashville’s claim that it produces the music that focus groups want to hear on country radio. The band’s music of fiddle and banjo, mixed with an independent image of chick/girl power, may have been new to the country music scene of the late 1990s/early 2000s. However, the music and image of the Dixie Chicks, particularly the acoustic bluegrass music of Home, is reminiscent of past country artists: Patsy Cline’s country-pop career, Loretta Lynn’s women’s lib music, and Haggard’s outlaw status. Where the Dixie Chicks differ is in their challenge to country music, not only within the definition of what is country, but also in challenging an artist’s role in the production and distribution of country music.

The Dixie Chicks not only challenged the country music establishment in Nashville, but also one of its biggest artists. In the summer of 2002, as the Dixie Chicks were settling their court dealings with Sony and preparing Home for its August release, one of the biggest songs on the country music charts was a song by Toby Keith. Keith’s post-9/11 era, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (Angry American)” features the lyrics:

And, you’ll be sorry
that you messed with the U.S. of A.
‘Cause we’ll put a boot in your ass
It’s the American way (Keith)

Keith’s patriotic lyrics struck a chord with country music fans, helping make it the number one song on the country charts. Asked about the song, Maines questioned its message: “I hate it. [It's] ignorant, and it makes country music sound ignorant. It targets an entire culture - and not just the bad people who did bad things. You've got to have some tact. Anybody can write, ‘We'll put a boot in your ass’” (Los Angeles Daily News). Keith responded, claiming Maines had no right to criticize, since she herself was not a songwriter, challenging her to write her own
music (CMT News). The exchange of words highlighted the shift within country music following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The redneck feminism of the late 1990s was welcomed by country music, as women, both as artist and as audience, were a profitable market segment for Nashville. Nashville’s promotion of the Dixie Chicks’ combination of traditional musicianship and girl power messages made Nashville millions, as described by Rather. However, in a post-9/11 atmosphere, Keith’s patriotic music became just as popular as “Long Time Gone.” Even the Dixie Chicks’ *Home* suggested a return from the wide-open spaces of the 1990s. The release and promotion of *Home* coincided with the US’s response to 9/11, as the country had already entered Afghanistan, and was currently drumming up support for a war in Iraq.

“Long Time Gone” isn’t the only reminder of the lawsuit and the changes the Dixie Chicks had made in their personal and professional lives. The album artwork for *Home* is a drastic departure from *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly*. Gone are the bright colors and fun pictures of previous album covers; in its place are stark, sepia tone pictures shot with rural Texas as a backdrop. The most striking image in the liner notes is on the back page: a sign reading, “We are changing the way we do business.” Accompanying the sign is the word “Buy” imprinted on the cd itself. These statements put Nashville on notice that the lawsuit was about more than money; it was about making changes to their career in other ways. The declaration positioned the Dixie Chicks for a showdown with country music just as, in March 2003, *Home* became their third number one album, selling six million copies and earning their third Grammy for Best Country album.

As detailed in Chapter 1, on March 10, 2003, the Dixie Chicks opened their sold-out “Top of the World” tour in London, England. Bette Clarke, a journalist for the *London Guardian*, reviewed the concert. In her review Clarke called the band, “good-time girls the country establishment loves to hate. Too direct, too old-fashioned, too modern… an emasculating threat” (The Dixie Chicks, Shepard's Bush Empire, London). To support her claim, Clarke retold a moment from the concert:

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9 See Appendix E for *Home* album cover.
10 See Appendix F for *Home* liner notes and CD imprint.
And they don’t know when to stop. “Just so you know,” says singer Natalie Maines, “we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas.” It gets the audience cheering – at a time when country stars are rushing to release pro-war anthems, this is practically punk rock. (Dixie Chicks, Shepard's Bush Empire, London)

If Clarke wanted further proof the Dixie Chicks had become a threat to country music, on March 13, the Associated Press reported fallout from Maines’ comment, as radio listeners around the US demanded a boycott of the band’s music, citing WKDF in Nashville as one such station (The Associated Press). Their music was also pulled at Houston’s country station, KILT, and a Kansas City radio station held a “chicken toss” where listeners were encouraged to dump Dixie Chicks music and memorabilia into trash cans (Reuters). A memo from Sony music tried to dissuade radio stations from boycotting the band’s music by suggesting that the boycotts were not orchestrated by fans, but a right-wing website, Free Republic (Flippo, Shut Up and Sing?).

By March 14, the band had released two statements trying to explain the comments. The first one detailing the circumstances of the comment: “The anti-American sentiment that has unfolded here is astounding. While we support our troops, there is nothing more frightening than the notion of going to war in Iraq and the prospect of all the innocent lives that will be lost” (Singer's Remarks Rankles Country Fans). Maines would also release her own statement: “I feel the president is ignoring the opinion of many in the U.S. and alienating the rest of the world. My comments were made in frustration, and one of the privileges of being an American is you are free to voice your own point of view” (Singer's Remarks Rankles Country Fans).

Despite the apologies, the intense reactions to the Dixie Chicks did not diminish, and Chet Flippo’s blog, Nashville Skyline, on CMT’s website became a space for discussion. At the center of the controversy were two key questions: did the Dixie Chicks have the right to speak out on foreign soil, and was the reaction by fans out of control? On March 24, 2003, Flippo posted an entry on his blog entitled “Shut Up and Sing?” Flippo refers to Maines’s comment as “her latest lecture” and questions if she and her band understand a country music audience:

That audience is usually loyal to a favored country artist for life.
And that audience is tolerant of artists’ mistakes and foibles: drunkenness, drug use, adultery, no-shows, and any amount of
indulgent behavior. What that audience will not tolerate is an artist turning on that audience. And Maines’ attack on Bush was in effect a direct attack on the country music audience. And its values. And its patriotism. (Shut Up and Sing?)

Flippo is here defending the boycott based on this relationship between artist and audience, arguing that the band broke their contract with the country music audience and is deserving of being dropped from country radio. He is claiming that the band’s country audience was never that big to begin with: “A look at the Chicks’ career suggests that much of their audience pull has been teenage girls, whose musical attention span traditionally has not been long and which certainly does not translate into the long-term loyalty that country artists have enjoyed” (Shut Up and Sing?). While only months before, Flippo had lauded the band for its independence, similar to the artists sung about in “Long Time Gone,” Flippo’s post is the beginning of a movement in country music to deny the Dixie Chicks’ place within the industry.

In the months following the incident, the Dixie Chicks came under attack by both the industry and the artist in the industry. At his concerts, Toby Keith began to perform the song “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” in front of a large doctored photo of Natalie Maines and Saddam Hussein. In May 2003, at the Academy of Country Music Awards, the Dixie Chicks performed via satellite, with Maines wearing a shirt with “F.U.T.K.” written across the front. Although she denied it at the time, in Shut Up and Sing, Maines admits it stands for “Fuck You, Toby Keith”. At the end of the night, the audience booed the band’s nomination for Entertainer of the Year, an award they lost to Toby Keith (The Academy of Country Music Awards). They would be booed again at CMT’s Flameworthy Video Music Awards, when comedian Brett Butler asked the audience to forgive the band (Flameworthy Video Awards).

There were members of the country music community who defended the Dixie Chicks’ right to free speech. A week after Flippo’s post on the incident, he allowed a counterpoint to be posted on his column’s site. Country music historian Bill Malone challenged Flippo’s assertions the Dixie Chicks should not have spoken out, because it was offensive to the country music audience.

I am sorely offended by your attempts to argue that the country music audience is monolithic, or that some of us are more patriotic than others because of our attitudes toward the current president.
Many of us spend large sums of money on country music concerts, CDs and literature, and have done so for many years and we were part of the majority who voted against George Bush back in 2000. Some of us vehemently oppose the war that Bush has instigated, and, like Natalie Maines, we worry about the consequences that the war will have not only for men and women who have to fight it, but also for other people who may suffer from its ravages. And we insist on our right to assert our dissent. (Malone, Guest Viewpoint on Chicks Controversy)

Malone’s counter-argument attempts to debunk a myth that helped those interested in boycotting the Dixie Chicks – that, somehow, every member of the country music audience operates with the same conservative ideology. Malone’s assertion is the more logical truth; however, it is the belief of a patriotic, conservative ideology that ultimately drives the sales of country music – particularly during wartime. Malone also questions Flippo’s suggestions that the members of the Dixie Chicks’ audience are not country music fans:

You then go on to question the nature, authenticity and durability of the fan base that the Dixie Chicks already have… Part of the Chicks' audience, in fact, is made up of the same non-traditional fans that made O Brother such a huge success. In liking the Dixie Chicks, people of disparate ages and incomes have also been introduced to good acoustic music and songs, and to young women who can skillfully play string instruments. I think that we ought to value the contributions that the Dixie Chicks have made. (Malone, Guest Viewpoint on Chicks Controversy)

Malone was one of the few within the country music community to defend the band and its non-traditional fans. He attempted to remind everyone of the impact that the Dixie Chicks had on helping to redefine who a country music fan is and what a country music act can do – especially for women.

One of the few country artists to defend the Dixie Chicks was Merle Haggard, one of the artists mentioned in “Long Time Gone,” known for speaking out during wartime. In September 2003 he released an album featuring the song “That’s the News,” which ridicules the media for
covering sensational domestic stories instead of the war in Iraq. He also spoke out in defense of the Dixie Chicks on his website:

They've cut such an honest groove with their career, because they don't like George Bush, should we take their records off? I really found that sort of scary. Are we afraid of criticism? And if so, why? It seems to me, we're guilty in this country of doing everything we've always opposed all my life. (Haggard, Hagg Editorial)

Even Haggard, whose “Fighting Side of Me” was often covered by Toby Keith when he would sing “Courtesy Red, White, and Blue,” was unable to prevent the backlash against the Dixie Chicks. The incident only managed to fortify the country music industry, as the majority came together to promote patriotic music like Keith’s and rejecting the Dixie Chicks, despite their past efforts to promote country music to a larger populace.

Meanwhile, the Dixie Chicks attempted to repair their image while simultaneously preparing for the US leg of their “Top of the World” tour. Through much of March and April of 2003, they stayed silent, except for performing and the two statements they released. Finally, they agreed to an interview with Diane Sawyer of ABC News and Chris Willman of Entertainment Weekly just before beginning the US leg. On April 24, Primetime Live aired a one-hour special, Landslide: The Dixie Chicks, devoted to Sawyer’s interview of the band. It was the same day their cover story in Entertainment Weekly hit newsstands. The Sawyer interview was the first time the American public had gotten to see and hear from the Dixie Chicks about the incident, and Sawyer gave Maines the opportunity to take back the statement:

SAWYER: Are you ashamed that the President of the United States is from your state?

MAINES: No, I’m not truly embarrassed that, you know, President Bush is from my state. That’s not really what I care about. It was the wrong with the genuine emotion and questions and concern behind it.

SAWYER: I hear something not quite, what, wholehearted.

MAINES: Really?

SAWYER: When you talk about apologizing for what you said
about the President.

MAINES: I understand what you are saying. And, I might be doing that… I feel regret for, you know, the choice of words. For the non-choice of words. Am I sorry I said that? Yes. Am I sorry I spoke out? No. Am I sorry that I asked questions, and that I don’t just follow? No. (Maguire, Maines and Robison, Landslide: The Dixie Chicks)

Sawyer’s questioning of Maines’ sincerity, and Maines’ refusal to apologize for speaking out, prevented the interview from having any major impact on the band’s situation. The next morning, on Good Morning America, Diane Sawyer interviewed “conservative commentator” Armstrong Williams, who challenged Maines’ statements the night before, arguing free speech has a “time and a place,” and that “it was not the time and that was not the place to criticize the President during this time of war” (Williams).

During the Primetime Live interview, Sawyer also pressed the band, particularly Robison and Maguire, about reports the band was breaking up over the comments. They denied them, pointing out, “those have been going on since we were together.” Sawyer also pressed Robison and Maguire whether, as sisters, they felt, like many of their fans, Maines was out of line and should somehow change her ways. Sawyer, in her questions and voiceover, continually reminded the audience Robison and Maguire were “sisters” and used the words “rebel” and “girl” in describing Maines, establishing an ‘us versus them’ mentality – not between the band and their critics, but between Robison/Maguire and Maines. The band quickly countered Sawyers attempts to undermine them:

MAINES: Because if you don’t like who I am, I really can’t do anything about that. I’m not going to change for anybody because I know, I know who I am. And I like who I am. And I do believe we’re role models and that is what I want girls, young, impressionable girls to hear and walk away with. I’ve never broken the law.
MAGUIRE: I think partially why our audience has allowed us to get to where we are today is because they like her the way she is. (Maguire, Maines and Robison, Landslide: The Dixie Chicks)

The interview may have not done much to help the band with their current relationship with members of the country music industry, but it did give insight into how the band would handle the incident. The interview clearly establishes that the band would not apologize for speaking out as Americans, even on foreign soil, and that their refusal is in part on behalf of the responsibility they feel toward their younger, female fans. It is a decision evoking girl power in a way beyond the image with which the band presented themselves during the late 1990s. The consequences are far reaching, way beyond album sales and concert turnout.

The Entertainment Weekly cover story also did little to help the band’s relationship with country music, but again it did send a clear message of how they would be handling their career from now on. On the now infamous cover, the band appeared naked with the words “Dixie sluts,” “free speech,” “boycott,” and many other words, both positive and negative, painted on their bodies. The headline reads, “The Dixie Chicks Come Clean: Country’s Controversial Superstars Take On Their Critics.”11 In the accompanying article, “Stars and Strife,” the band takes credit for the provocative cover:

Though Maguire admits that their publicist doubted the wisdom of being branded with epithets, “we wanted to show the absurdity of the extreme names people have been calling us. How do you look at the three of us and think, Those are Saddam’s Angels? Adds Maines, 28: “We don’t want people to think that we’re trying to be provocative. It’s not about the nakedness. It’s that the clothes got in the way of the labels. We’re not defined by who we are anymore. Other people are doing that for us.” (23-4).

The band is similar to Sawyer’s interview, as Maines will only apologize for what she is sorry for, and she is not sorry for speaking out. Willman also brings up the idea that somehow Robison and Maguire are against Maines, asking the band: “A lot of country-radio people are

11 See Appendix G for Entertainment Weekly cover.
hoping Martie and Emily are closet conservatives who are slapping some sense into Natalie” (25). They again deny they are anything but ‘in this together’ – as Maguire says, “Any one of us could have said it, and I’m glad it was [Natalie]! [laughter]” (25).

Willman, a country music critic, and the band also discuss why the country music industry has had such a reaction to the band, especially since, as Willman points out, “there’s a long tradition of Texas stars having an uneasy relationship with the Nashville establishment” (27). He references Steve Earle, Lyle Lovett, Willie Nelson, and Waylon Jennings, but Maines is quick to point out the biggest difference, and perhaps the cause of all the friction between the Dixie Chicks and the industry: “It’s not their music, it’s them” (27). Maguire pointed out the fact that the industry had been treating its female acts poorly over the previous few years, citing the flack Shania Twain and Faith Hill had faced for using pop stylings in their music: “And [Faith] is the top female superstar in the [country] format. Alienate Shania. Alienate Faith. Alienate us. You’re driving away the top artists in your format. How can that be good?” (27)

The incident itself may not have been a calculated move on the part of the band to become more political or vocal about their positions as women within country music, their reactions to the incident certainly are calculated. The decision to pose nude was made by the band, the nudity signifying a shedding of their past chick power image. Ironically, the decision to pose nude was arguably the first true feminist act the band actively executed. Their chick power music was as much about selling music as selling feminism to their young fans, and while the act of speaking out on stage may be construed as feminist, the comment was not planned unlike the cover. The band, fans, and media may define the band’s history as pre- and post-incident; however, the Entertainment Weekly cover is a much more significant point in their career. It was then that the band began to actively participate in redefining themselves as female country artists.

Were they boycotted because they were from Texas? Because they were women? Because they were unpatriotic? Because they were country music artists? The truth can never truly be known, but a case can be made for one or for all those reasons. The point is, it was not expected of them. They may have had an image of redneck feminism or girl power, and they may have been talented musicians and vocalists, but prior to March 10, 2003, nothing in the band’s music, performances, or appearances had suggested they were political – that is, if one statement makes a band political. As of March 11, though, the band became viewed that way,
and that label flew in the face of everything the majority of the country music industry and its audience had thought about one of its biggest bands. What was known before Maines’ statement, however, was that the band was out to break female stereotypes of country artists and they were ready to change the way they did business.

A week after their interviews with Sawyer and Willman, the band finally started their sold-out tour in the US. Protesting and boycotts were expected, and while there was some of both, the band spent the rest of 2003 touring the US and performing to sold out audiences, with occasional protesters outside. The most tense moment of the tour came when the band performed in Dallas, despite a death threat against Maines’ life. Following the tour, the band dropped out of the spotlight, returning for a brief time in 2004 to participate with James Taylor, Bruce Springsteen, and other artists in the “Vote for Change” tour, a tour designed to encourage voting for Senator John Kerry, the Democratic nominee running against President Bush in that year’s presidential election. However, following “Vote for Change,” the band disappeared from the public spotlight with their future in country music unknown.

### 3.7 Taking the Long Way

In the spring of 2006, the Dixie Chicks resurfaced, with the release of the first single from their new album, *Taking the Long Way*. The song would be the public’s first opportunity to find out if the Dixie Chicks and the country music industry could overcome the fallout over the incident and return to a profitable relationship. However, when the name of the new track was released, it was clear a reunion was not what the Dixie Chicks were looking for. “Not Ready to Make Nice,” written by the three members of the band and Dan Wilson, former lead singer of the alternative rock band Semisonic, established the Dixie Chicks were not exactly looking to make up with the country music industry:

- I’m not ready to make nice
- I’m not ready to back down
- I’m still mad as hell and
- I don’t have time to go round and round and round
- It’s too late to make it right
- I probably wouldn’t if I could
- ‘Cause I’m mad as hell and
Can’t bring myself to do

What it is you think I should (Dixie Chicks)

The charged lyrics left little chance that country radio would play the song. Quoted in a *Time* article on the band and song, a country radio programmer called the song “a four-minute fuck you to the format and our listeners” and vowed not to play the song (Greenberg 61). In an interview on 60 Minutes, Steven Kroft questioned if the band was “picking the scab” by writing such a “unrepentant” song, but the band argued they couldn’t pretend it never happened, as according to Maines, “we didn’t write the song thinking about what other people wanted us to say” (Maguire, Maines and Robison, Dixie Chicks Release New Album to Praise, Anger).

“Not Ready to Make Nice” set the tone for the new image of the band – unapologetic country-rock, written by the band, and produced far away from the country establishment. Still under contract with Sony – but no longer Sony Nashville, after their legal issues – the band began working on a new album in early 2005. Rick Rubin, famous for producing albums for alternative acts Red Hot Chili Peppers and the Beastie Boys, along with Johnny Cash’s *American* albums, agreed to produce the album with the band in Los Angeles. In a press release regarding the new album, Rubin described the process of finding out what the new sound of the Dixie Chicks would be, now that they were free from the bonds of country: “I think this should sound like a great rock act making a country album, not a country act making a rock album” (Front Page Publicity). “Not Ready to Make Nice” is representative of this idea; while it still features the strong harmonies and musicianship that define the Dixie Chicks, it features a harder rock sound than the Chicks’ previous work.

Rubin also influenced who would be writing the songs on the album. Rubin and the band agreed the new album would be written entirely by the band with help from songwriters chosen by either Rubin or the band. Rubin brought Wilson, Pete Yorn, and Gary Louris of the Jayhawks in to write with the band, while the band brought in Sheryl Crow, Keb’ Mo’, and Linda Perry of 4 Non Blondes (Front Page Publicity). None of the co-writers was from country music, and Rubin brought in non-country individuals for the recording sessions, including Red Hot Chili Peppers drummer Chad Smith, and Benmont Tench and Mike Campbell from the Heartbreakers. These non-country influences helped to create a much harder country-rock sound. The fiddle, banjo, and slide guitar still featured prominently in the music, but the electric guitar and drums became just as prominent.
The decision for the band to write the album led to the most personal album the band had produced; it also served as a direct response to critics. Toby Keith had criticized Maines for not writing her own music after she called his music ignorant; Chet Flippo was the first of many critics of the band to urge them to “shut up and sing,” ending his 2003 post with “Memo to Natalie Maines: You’re an artist? And you have a message? Hey, put it in a song. We’ll listen to that. But, otherwise – shut up and sing” (Shut Up and Sing?). The band, with *Taking the Long Way*, was ready to take on their critics with their music.

Along with “Not Ready to Make Nice,” the band also tackles the incident in the song “Bitter End,” about those who didn’t stand by them, and “Everybody Knows” details being in the public eye during such a volatile time. Traces of the incident lace other songs, but the band also wrote about many issues they faced as women. “It’s So Hard” details infertility (which both sisters, Robison and Maguire faced); “Silent House,” dealing with a family member with Alzheimer’s; “Baby Hold On,” their romantic relationships; and “Lullaby” is a song to their children. The band returned to the journey imagery found in their earlier works “Wide Open Spaces” and “Ready to Run” with “Long Way Around,” a biographical song featuring the lyrics “it’s been two long years now / since the top of the world came crashing down / and I’m getting it back on the road now” and “I could never follow” (Dixie Chicks).

The personal and political aspects of the album were a departure for the band, and the marketing of *Taking the Long Way* reflected both the changes in the music and the uncertainty the incident would impart upon the release of the new album. Again, the press release for the album would set the tone by calling the band “superstars, renegades, innovators, heroes, villains, and moms” (Front Page Publicity). ‘Superstars’ in recognition of their past successes, ‘renegades’ and ‘innovators’ in recognition of their new musical direction, ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’ in recognition of the incident, and ‘moms’ in recognition of the fact that they are just like many of their fans.

The “fuck you” of “Not Ready to Make Nice” and the rock-influenced *Taking the Long Way* forced the band to rethink not only their image – moving from redneck feminism to renegade moms – but also how to promote and sell their music. Without the traditional outlet of country radio, the Dixie Chicks needed new ways to reach their audience. The band’s sound wasn’t pop enough to rely on pop radio, so the band turned to the Internet to sell its music. The band partnered with AOL Music to participate in *Music Sessions*, AOL’s online music and
interview program, to promote their music, and partnered with iTunes to sell the album. On April 28, 2006, “Not Ready to Make Nice” became the band’s highest entry on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, based on its first-week as a paid digital download on iTunes (7).

The band also turned away from CMT to help promote “Not Ready to Make Nice” and Taking the Long Way. While CMT did play the video for “Not Ready,” the band geared its promotions toward VH1, the music station that previously attempted to have country instrumentation removed from “Wide Open Spaces.” The video premiered on VH1’s Top Twenty Countdown and holds the record for number of weeks at number one. The video is in stark contrast to previous Dixie Chicks videos. The video is almost devoid of color, as the women are dressed in black or white in front of black and red ink-stained video images. The imagery created in the video is reminiscent of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, a play about the witch trials of the 1600s that was also a metaphor for McCarthy’s blacklisting during the 1950s. In the video, the Dixie Chicks are blacklisted. The video reinforces the band’s decision to face their critics – not through television interviews and magazine covers like they did in 2003, but with their musical productions.

The lack of color, and preference to dress in black, would become a popular image of the Dixie Chicks marketing for Taking the Long Way. The CD cover to the album has the women in all black in front of a British taxi, a subtle reference to the location of Maines’ statement.12 The pictures featured in the linear notes evoke an urban setting, a stark contrast to the rural images in the linear notes to Home. On the cover of Time, the Dixie Chicks appeared in all black, with the headline “Radical Chicks” below their picture.13 The preference for black is reminiscent of another country artist who spent much of his career in conflict with the country music establishment: the “Man in Black,” Johnny Cash.

Linking themselves to Cash supported the new image of the band in two ways. First, Johnny Cash is considered one of country music’s greatest performers, and he is even mentioned by the band in their song, “Long Time Gone.” Cash represents real country music, the country music modern country radio no longer plays. By wearing all black, the band is attempting to become a country band that is too authentic for country music, just like Cash. Second, the Dixie

12 See Appendix H for Taking the Long Way album cover.
13 Appendix I for Time cover.
Chicks and Cash share a similar contentious relationship with the country music industry. Toward the end of Cash’s career he began working with Rick Rubin on producing his *American Recordings* albums. The second, *Unchained*, would win a Grammy in 1998 for Best Country Album, despite a lack of support by country radio and Nashville. Following his win, Cash and Rubin took out a full page ad in the March 14, 1998 *Billboard* that read, “American Recordings and Johnny Cash would like to acknowledge the Nashville Music establishment and country radio for your support.” The accompanying photo is an old picture of Cash flipping the camera off.\(^\text{14}\) The authenticity, success, and behavior of Cash in relation to country music are close to what the Dixie Chicks were attempting to remarket themselves as with *Taking the Long Way*. The black clothing worn by the band is their attempt to have themselves be visually associated with such an iconic country figure.

The lack of support from country radio was a hindrance, but curiosity by the mainstream media about what the Dixie Chicks had to offer in a post-incident world where the approval for the Iraq War had plummeted allowed the Dixie Chicks to promote their album in new ways. Making the cover of *Time* is no small feat for a musical act, let alone a country act. The band was also featured in *Playboy’s* December 2006 issue in a lengthy interview. The unconventional interview is also their most candid about country music’s role in the backlash to the comment:

ROBISON: It put country music on the front page, and the radio people were kind of enjoying the limelight. They were doing it for their own – not out of principle against what we said, but because it was good entertainment.

MAINES: Country music was being talked about outside country music – that never happens. They loved that the word *country radio* was on CNN. They fed it, I think, innocently, not knowing how serious it was. (Chusid 77)

The *Playboy* interview is one of the few times the Dixie Chicks accuse the industry of sacrificing the Dixie Chicks for publicity’s sake. The incident did bring country music to the forefront of

\(^{14}\) See Appendix J for *Billboard* ad.
the American cultural landscape, and the industry benefited from the country artists such as Toby Keith releasing patriotic songs.

However, the band was also willing to sacrifice the country music industry for publicity’s sake. In October 2006, the documentary *Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing* was released. Directed by Cecelia Peck and two-time Academy Award winner Barbara Kopple, the documentary follows the Dixie Chicks’ career from the period of the incident through the start of the “Accidents and Accusations” tour in support of *Taking the Long Way* in 2006. One of the most revealing aspects of the documentary is the revelation that the Dixie Chicks had concert footage from the night of the incident. In a scene in the film, it is revealed that the London Guardian misquoted Maines. The documentary shows Maines saying, “Just so you know, we’re on the good side with y’all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas” (Peck and Kopple). The documentary attempts to clear up many of the misconceptions created in the months following the incident, documenting the band’s attempt to control the situation while dealing with the backlash and death threats.

The documentary also spends a lot of time focusing on 2005-2006 and the band’s recording and release of *Taking the Long Way*. The band is shown writing and producing music, and many of the songs from the album are used as a soundtrack for scenes outside of the recording studio. Unlike magazine interviews and television appearances, the documentary allows the band to tell their side of the story, and the image the documentary creates supports the renegade mom image the band created with *Taking the Long Way*. When the documentary isn’t focusing on the band’s unwillingness to apologize for exercising their right to free speech, it focuses heavily on their roles as wives and mothers, particularly the birth of Robison’s twins in the summer of 2005. Another theme of the film is sisterhood; the documentary spends a great deal of time creating an image of solidarity between the women as they attempt to redefine their career outside of country music.

The marketing of *Shut Up and Sing* reinforced the band’s unwillingness to forgive and forget what happened in 2003. The U.S. poster for the documentary featured the band’s infamous *Entertainment Weekly* cover. The image was manipulated to have the women sitting on top of the U.S. Capitol building. President Bush is featured holding a marker, suggesting he marked the women with the words appearing on their bodies. Some of the words from the original picture had been removed and replaced with less volatile words: “Dixie Sluts” was
removed and replaced with “Dixie Bimbos” and “Saddam’s Angels” was replaced with “Proud Americans.”

The original image was further manipulated by covering the women up with white sheets. However, the Canadian poster still featured the women naked. The changes to the images, particularly the removal of the more provocative words and the addition of the white sheets, represent the dual images of the women created in the documentary. There is the image of the patriotic heroes standing up for free speech represented by their bodies covered in various names the band was called back in 2003, but there is also the image mom, forcing their bodies to be covered and some words to be removed. Naked women with the word slut on their bodies, does not fit the mom image. Ultimately, Taking the Long Way did not perform as well as the band’s previous three albums. However, it still managed to debut at number one on the Digital Download, Country, and Hot 200 charts (Hasty). As of July 2007, it has been certified as double platinum (Recording Industry Association of America). However, with Taking the Long Way, the band managed to redefine their career outside of the country music industry that they had supported and been supported by since the late 1990s.

The defining and redefining of the Dixie Chicks focused heavily on ideology. The band members of the Dixie Chicks were not naïve participants in the creation of their careers. The history of the band prior to their Nashville recording contract suggests the band must have been well aware of the expectations and beliefs of the industry. Country music’s long history has built a strong sense of identification for both its artists and audience. The band’s talent as country musicians has never been challenged, as the banjo and fiddle are cornerstones of country music, and signifies a link to country history’s humble beginnings. The signing of the band and release of Wide Open Spaces came at a particular time in music history, where female artists were negotiating a feminist ideology within music. While, female country artists were already popular in country music, the Dixie Chicks forced the country music industry to respond to the band’s ideology of female empowerment. The monetary success the band brought to Sony Nashville and the reinvigoration of the fan base caused the ideology of country music, which had historically been much more rigid in its acceptance of such empowerment from women, to suddenly incorporate the Dixie Chicks’ brand of empowerment.

15 See Appendix K for Shut Up and Sing U.S. poster.
16 See Appendix L for Shut Up and Sing Canadian poster.
As the band’s position within country music increased, the band didn’t just accept their negotiated place within country music, they for better or worse continued to challenge it. While the comments made in London in 2003 brought to the forefront the tensions between the band and country music, the relationship was already tenuous. As the country became more conservative in the years following September 11th, the country music industry no longer needed the feminist ideologies of the 1990s to sell records. While the band’s music did begin to reflect more traditional roles for women, as their music transformed from girl power to mom power, the band challenged the their position within the business. The choice by the band to ideologically remove them from country music was more symbolic than a shift in musicality that would force a switch in genre. As the music industry has become less defined by radio formats, the Dixie Chicks made a calculated decision to proclaim the band’s music as without a genre. However, the real message is their ideology no longer is in alignment with country music.
CHAPTER FOUR
CONCLUSION

4.1 Introduction

Throughout the course of four studio albums, the Dixie Chicks rose to the top of the country music industry, only to make a rapid descent all the way back down to the bottom. The rise and fall of the band allows for a critical examination of the function of women within the country music industry. The band was able to rise to the top of the industry due to the success of *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly*, each a mixture of traditional country instrumentation and a message of redneck feminism – which, during the late 1990s, was a profitable message for country music. In a post-9/11 era, when patriotic, if not conservative, music supplanted the redneck feminist music, the Dixie Chicks attempted to turn their musical messages of chick power into complete control of their career by suing Sony. With relations between the band and country music already tenuous after the release of *Home*, Maines’ comments on a London stage in 2003 dramatically altered the Dixie Chicks’ place in country music. As outsiders, the band released *Taking the Long Way* in 2006, attempting to reestablish their career as renegades of country music.

While *Taking the Long Way* has sold two million albums, a substantial drop from the plus 10 million of *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly* and the 7 million of *Home* (Recording Industry Association of America), the newest album has ultimately positioned the Dixie Chicks as a counter-country act. Still playing music steeped in the traditions of country music – banjo and fiddle, harmonies reminiscent of the church – as well as music exploring women's issues, the Dixie Chicks have managed to carve a place for themselves within the larger popular music consciousness. This positioning did not hurt country music, as the industry was able to use the interest surrounding the band’s new sound and image as a way to reinforce country music’s ideology.

4.2 Final Showdown: The 2007 Grammys

The final showdown between country music and the Dixie Chicks came on February 11, 2007, the night of the 49th Annual Grammy Awards. Going into the evening, the Dixie Chicks were nominated for five awards: Best Country Performance by a Duo or Group With Vocal, Best
Country Album, Song of the Year, Record of the Year, and Album of the Year (The Recording Academy). The nominations exemplified the schizophrenic reception to Taking the Long Way; the distance between the country music industry and the band did not prevent two nominations in country genre categories. The other three nominations were the major three in the all genre categories; historically, nominations in these categories are rare for a country act, but the Dixie Chicks were not just any country act. The Dixie Chicks competition in the all-genre categories included more mainstream acts: Red Hot Chili Peppers (whose album was also produced by Rubin), Gnarls Barkley, Mary J. Blige, and John Mayer. In the country categories, they were competing with mainstream acts such as the Wreckers, Alan Jackson and Little Big Town.

With the Dixie Chicks neither members of the country nor mainstream popular music genres, the Grammys would be the ultimate barometer of the Dixie Chicks’ place, not just within country music, but within popular music as a whole. Before the awards ceremony, it was announced the Dixie Chicks had picked up their first award, Best Country Performance for “Not Ready to Make Nice” – an early sign of things to come. The Grammy producers set the tone of the night, as Joan Baez, 1960s folk singer and anti-war campaigner, was selected to introduce the band’s performance of “Not Ready to Make Nice.” Baez’s introduction referred to the band mates as “three brave women” and urged the audience to “please, listen closely” (The 49th Annual Grammy Awards). Baez’s introduction made it clear the Grammys were not afraid to get a little political. As the night went on, “Not Ready to Make Nice” earned the honors of Record of the Year and Song of the Year – the latter award shared by the band and Wilson as songwriters – and Taking the Long Way was honored as Best Country Album and Best Album (The Recording Academy). Their wins for Album, Song, and Record made them the first act since Eric Clapton in 1993 to take home the trifecta, and the first female group ever (Semitsu).

Press reaction to the Grammys again pitted the Dixie Chicks against country music. Many headlines the following day heralded the Dixie Chicks’ wins in one of three ways. First, the wins were framed as redemption: “Finally Ready to Make Nice: Dixie Chicks’ Reputation Is Restored” (James), “Dixie Chicks: From Zeroes to Heroes” (Youngs) and “Redemption, Thy Name is Grammy” (Keegan 7). The second way was questioning if the wins were politically motivated: “When Awards Become Politicized” (Stillwell), “‘Long Way’ to Grammys: Was the Dixie Chicks’ Big Win Fueled by Politics?” (Boucher), “Is Sweep at Grammys Validation?” (Tarradell), and “The Message of the Grammys” (Leopold). The third and final way the win was
framed was in regards to the Dixie Chicks’ relationship with country radio: “Despite Grammys, Dixie Chicks Still On Outs with Country Radio” (Moody), “Country Radio Still Cold to Dixie Chicks” (Hall), “America’s Not Ready to Make Nice” (Nichols), and “Ready to Make Nice with Radio?” (Bream). These reactions missed the real story of how the Grammys defined the relationship between country music and the Dixie Chicks.

Whether the reasons were political or not, the wins validated not only the band’s position as a mainstream popular genre act, but it also reinforced their ideological position as country music’s current renegades. However, in order to establish themselves as renegades, someone new had to rise within the country music establishment to take their place as country music’s top female performers. The Grammys helped make that decision for country music by bestowing upon Carrie Underwood two awards that night. Underwood, a previous winner of American Idol, released her first country album, Some Hearts, with the song “Jesus, Take the Wheel” helping make it one of the most successful country albums of the year. “Jesus, Take the Wheel” is a classic country song reinforcing strong Christian values, sung by a classic country songstress. Underwood that night won Best New Artist – an all-genre category – and Best Female Country Performance for “Jesus, Take the Wheel.” The songwriters of “Jesus, Take the Wheel” also won Best Country Song; “Not Ready to Make Nice” was not nominated in that category (The Recording Academy).

Underwood’s wins allowed country music news outlets to focus their attention on Underwood, instead of on the wins by the Dixie Chicks. In CMT’s online wrap up of the night, “Dixie Chicks Enjoy Sweet Victory at Grammys,” the focus is on Underwood as much as the Dixie Chicks. After quoting Maguire backstage saying that the band is “without a genre,” the next quote is from Underwood: “I love country music” (Gilbert). The article reinforced the position that the Dixie Chicks are not country music, and introduced Underwood as the new star of the genre. It is a position the Dixie Chicks have never tried to correct, as it is, for them, self-serving. The band’s refusal to “make nice” and the industry’s refusal to play their music on radio created a yin-yang relationship.

Just as God is in part defined by the devil, country music is defined by the Dixie Chicks. By making an example of the Dixie Chicks for their outspokenness (“racy” lyrics, the incident) and business practices (court dealings with Sony), the country music industry was sending a message to their audience that those behaviors would not be tolerated. Carrie Underwood’s
“Jesus, Take the Wheel” lacks the feminist undertones of “Goodbye Earl,” replacing trust in self with trust in God. Her career’s beginning coming by way of American Idol ensures that Underwood will be under the tight control of her record company, as her win included a multi-album record deal with 19 Entertainment/Arista Nashville (Carrie Underwood Official Site). Underwood is part of a return to the pre-Dixie Chicks practices of the country music industry. For the Dixie Chicks, the Grammy wins were a completion of their new image and ideology as “superstars, renegades, innovators, heroes, villains, and moms” (Front Page Publicity). In order to be considered renegades, they can never return to country music. While the lack of radio support will mean the band likely will never achieve the record-breaking numbers of their early career, changes in music distribution and promotions online due to peer-to-peer file sharing and the development of iTunes and similar online music services have given the band new outlets in which to promote their music.

These competing ideologies only help, not hurt, the media companies involved in the production and distribution of music. Two companies that have benefited throughout the entire career of the Dixie Chicks have been Sony and CBS Viacom. Since the band signed with Monument Records, Sony has reaped the benefits that result from representing music’s best selling female group. Sony owns Monument, Sony Nashville, and Open Wide Records, and, as such, has always won where the Dixie Chicks are concerned. CBS Viacom owns CMT and VH1; therefore, as the Dixie Chicks’ career transitioned from that of a country band played primarily on CMT to a post-incident career promoted on VH1, CBS Viacom has always benefited. Even the Dixie Chicks’ appearances on various magazine covers benefited one company. From their cover highlighting their roles as mothers in People, their EW cover attempting to challenge their 2003 critics, or the 2006 Time cover as patriotic renegades, the three magazines are all a part of Time, Inc.

The battle between the Dixie Chicks and country music has always been ideological. Country music’s desire to remain profitable by maintaining a particular ideology which honors God, family, and America has been in conflict with the Dixie Chicks since day one. An all-female band that plays banjo, fiddle, and guitar while performing music perpetuating a feminist

17 Arista Nashville’s parent company is Sony, making Underwood and the Dixie Chicks label-mates.
ideology of empowerment conflicted with the country music ideology. However, the band’s talent and traditional country sound fit perfectly into country music’s desire to compete with popular music’s female music domination in the late 1990s. The Dixie Chicks were country’s answer to the Spice Girls. However, whereas the Spice Girls were a manufactured idea of girl power, the Dixie Chicks proved to be the real thing. Country music was not prepared to deal with a band that took their musical messages of breaking stereotypes all the way to Music Row, demanding the record company that profited most from their music to pay out. As America faced the war on terror, country music’s patriotic ideologies replaced the profitable message of female empowerment. Despite the industry’s ideological shit, the band did not, as the women practiced what their music preached. The public outcry over Maines’ comments was not just about when and where an American celebrity has the right to speak out; it was also about an industry unwilling to compromise an ideology that had been profitable for a hundred years and counting. The effect of this country music ideology on the Dixie Chicks was that they would no longer be called country music artists. This is despite producing music that is as country as anything on country music radio is today.

With Taking the Long Way, the band redefined a woman’s place in popular music. The renegade mom image the band has carved is a testament to what women can achieve in music. The message of the Dixie Chicks is that female musicians – even those in a more conservative genre – can play their own music, write their own music, produce their own music, and distribute their music on their own terms. The musicianship of the band has always been a point of pride for them, and when critics challenged the band to write their own music, the band rose to that challenge by writing more and more music on each subsequent album, until Taking the Long Way featured their own singular writing vision. The Dixie Chicks broke down the barriers between the artist, the record company, and the radio station. The band stood up to Music Row, challenging Sony to compensate the band fairly, demanding a larger stake in record sales, and asking for more control over their musical production. Finally, it may not have always been their choice to stop being played by country radio, but the band faced that challenge and became one of the first acts to fully embrace the Internet as a new, legal distribution outlet for music. The enormous sales of albums and concert tickets and the awards that have been bestowed upon the band are testament to a brand of feminism, both in music and in practice, that has appealed to a
broad audience not limited by the ideological expectations of a male-dominated country music industry.

4.3. Further Research

The Dixie Chicks are only one example of country music’s relationship with their female artists. To fully realize the treatment of female country artists, looking at other contemporaries to the band, Shania Twain, Faith Hill, and Alison Krauss, to name only a few, is necessary. Also, the narrow focus of the Dixie Chicks prevents a real analysis of the place gender holds within country music; looking at the band’s male contemporaries could provide a more complete understanding of the relationship country music forges with its artists. Next, this analysis only looks briefly at the lack of support by country music for artists wishing to crossover to a more mainstream audience. A recent development with country music has been the desire for artists to crossover into country. While the Dixie Chicks have positioned themselves as not country, artists such as Jessica Simpson, Michelle Branch, Kid Rock, and Bon Jovi have recently released country albums or songs. Further research would be required to see what impact if any the Dixie Chicks’ crossover to the mainstream may have impacted this reversal. Finally, future studies should examining how the band’s relationship with country music has impacted the development of newer female artists. Ultimately, some time must pass before that analysis can be conducted, as it is too soon to yet know the Dixie Chicks’ influence.

4.4 Final Thoughts

The purpose of this project was to investigate the impact of the country music industry and its ideology – which is at times conservative – on female country artists. The use of the Dixie Chicks was an obvious choice, because of both their successes and failures within Nashville. What has been most surprising about this analysis is not the willingness of the Dixie Chicks to work with the strict gender ideologies of the country music industry or the fierce reaction to Maines’s comment, as chapter two revealed the historical background which lead to the current country music landscape. What has been most surprising was the lack of support the Dixie Chicks received from other female country acts and their own unwillingness to ever proclaim their actions following their controversial Entertainment Weekly cover. The late 1990s music scene presented a country music landscape dominated by female artists, and while the
Dixie Chicks spoke of how fellow female artists Shania Twain and Faith Hill were mistreated by the country music industry, the band never worked with these women to create a new place for women in country music. This despite the fact the Dixie Chicks, Twain, and Hill are three of the most successful country artists of the last twenty years. Similarly, there is little proof female country artists *publicly* supported the Dixie Chicks in 2003. And while the Dixie Chicks in many ways performed feminist acts both in their music and media coverage, there was little to no recognition by the Dixie Chicks that these acts were in fact feminist. Despite the monetary and critical success of the Dixie Chicks and their ability to change musical and business practices by taking control of their career from the country music industry, there has yet to be a larger movement by women in country music to follow suit. While the Dixie Chicks were able to challenge country music’s ideology surrounding the role of women in music, they were unable to completely alter the position of women in country music. Despite these criticisms, what the Dixie Chicks have managed to accomplish as an all female country band does show country music’s ideologies of authenticity and individualism did allow the band to challenge their place as women in the industry.

The current relationship between the Dixie Chicks and country music industry is dormant. Following the Grammys, the Dixie Chicks stepped out of the spotlight, but rumors persist that the band is currently working on writing songs to record for a new studio album. Should another album be released, a new chapter in the saga of the band and country music will be written. The Dixie Chicks are nothing without their country roots, and the country music industry is better off with the Dixie Chicks than without, even if it is only in a counter-ideological capacity. The country music industry needs the Dixie Chicks as a mechanism to reinforce the persistent ideologies within country music of country, family, and traditional values, including gender roles. The Dixie Chicks did change the way they do business, long before they proclaimed it with the release of *Home*. By injecting such a fore-grounded message of feminism into their music (despite a lack of publicly acknowledging themselves or their music as feminist), the band was able to profitably challenge the status quo for women as defined by a conservative country ideology. The country music industry may position the band outside of the genre, a place the band willingly accepts; the music of the band reveals the truth. The Dixie Chicks are as country as the early artists of the 1900s: Robison and Maguire’s banjo and fiddle keep the music grounded in authenticity, as the band performs music detailing the themes and
values of women’s lives. The themes and values lack the persistent conservatism of country music, reflecting an American society more accepting of women empowered to forge their own careers, privately and publicly. The repositioning of the band into the broader popular music spectrum allows the band’s music and practices to be a model not just for young female country music fans, but young female music fans everywhere.
APPENDIX

APPENDIX A WIDE OPEN SPACES ALBUM COVER
APPENDIX B *FLY* ALBUM COVER

![FLY Album Cover](image-url)
APPENDIX E HOME ALBUM COVER
APPENDIX H TAKING THE LONG WAY ALBUM COVER
Radical Chicks

They criticized the war and were labeled unpatriotic. Now THE DIXIE CHICKS are back, betting their careers on a whole new style. Is America ready?

BY JOSH TYRANGIEL
American Recordings and Johnny Cash would like to acknowledge the Nashville music establishment and country radio for your support.

Johnny Cash “Unchained”
WINNER BEST COUNTRY ALBUM
Thanks to those who made a difference - you know who you are.
APPENDIX K SHUT UP AND SING US POSTER
APPENDIX L SHUT UP AND SING CANADIAN POSTER

FREEDOM OF SPEECH IS FINE,
AS LONG AS YOU DON'T DO IT IN PUBLIC.
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