Limitations of Genre: Women in Country Music from the 1960s to the Present

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the careers of female country artists who have moved between popular music genres as crossover artists. In the 2010s female voices all but disappeared from country radio, and women's professional opportunities were limited: it is therefore not surprising that women would leave country to participate in other genres. Yet they do not all leave unequivocally: some have strategically blended country with other styles, shifting the boundaries between American popular music genres. Although sellers and buyers of music often treat musical genres as fixed and separate categories, the practice of music-making may draw on multiple categories, and artists make their own purposeful use of the categories. Beyond consideration of musical marketing categories, this dissertation is an intersectional project that considers gender and race together with critical attention to the ways in which whiteness should be rendered audible and visible within the scope of popular music. This dissertation examines five different case studies of female country artists over a seventy-year period who have all worked at the edges of country music, whether it be through stylistic choices within the format, by bringing new audiences to the genre, or by creating a space for themselves outside of the genre.

Dedication

To my father, Wilson Hughes (1946-2017), who passed away before I began this project, for never saying a word when I blasted The Chicks and Taylor Swift through my Walkman CD player (and later iPod) on family road trips through the Southwest and morning drives to school.

Acknowledgments

I am, without a doubt, a fan of all the women whose music make up this document. I am inspired by their canny and fierce advocacy for themselves in an industry and world where women are still, in 2022, not equal. That I have spent the better part of the last four years listening and singing along to some of my favorite songs by my favorite artists for research is something my teenage self never could have believed.

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"Taylor Swift on Tour: Embracing Whiteness, Growing Up," in *Taylor Swift: The Songs, The Star, The Fans*. ed. Kate Galloway, Christa Bentley, and Paula Harper (Routledge, in progress).

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Review of Stephanie Vander Wel's *Hillbilly Maidens, Okies, and Cowgirls: Women's Country Music, 1930-1960*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2020. *Journal for the Society of American Music* 16, no. 4 (May 2022).

Fields of Study

Musicology: major field

Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies: Graduate Interdisciplinary Specialization

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Sociologist Stuart Hall writes that popular culture is rooted in "the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people."[1] Music is perhaps the most ubiquitous element of popular culture: we hear songs on the radio while driving, or as background sound for shopping or housework. A particular song may take a person back to feeling fifteen years old after just a few notes. Although popular music can be a deeply personal experience for listeners, it is also a billion-dollar industry. The commercial categories through which music is marketed direct individuals' experiences, meaning that a consumer's emotional connection to a song or artist and their understanding of what that music is also form an essential part of how the business of music functions. It is therefore worth our while to understand these connections: the links between the micro (individuals' relationships to songs) and the macro (the industry's crafting of those experiences).

Historic patterns of racial inequity have determined the boundaries of musical categories and the allegiances of listeners to those categories. Listeners and industry executives alike use these categories (called genres) to denote different kinds of music and to describe the stylistic markers that define each kind. They also use these categories

[1] Stuart Hall, "Why is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no. 1-2 (1993), 2.

as if they were inherently tied to specific racialized social groups; but there is nothing inherent about ties of this kind, developed by recording and radio industry executives for specific social and commercial purposes. When listeners choose to identify with a genre category, the often implicitly declare an affection not only for the sound, but also for everything that category stands for. This includes a specific set of social and political values. While this is certainly true for many genre categories, these relationships are particularly strong within the culture and discourse of country music.

This dissertation is built on two main interventions that illuminate the work of country music as a genre and women's role within and around the genre. First, I take a critical approach to the issue of genre in popular music as I describe how genres, or musical marketing categories, uphold structural racism within the popular music industry. Second, I make an intersectional intervention by describing the ways in which gender exclusion has encouraged women to push against the rigid and racially defined conventions of country music. I focus specifically on how whiteness has defined the genre of country, but also how the use of whiteness as a norm has made it difficult for people to recognize country as a racialized music. That country is perceived as white has limited the participation of musicians of color in the genre; this perception has also shaped how the genre's sound has been developed and marketed over the decades. In examining the issues of gender and race that pervade American popular music in the past and present, I seek to illuminate what country music is and how its limits are defined. Because the industry which forms the genre has long served to cultivate a racial mythology, understanding the boundary cases helps us understand what messages

country music has conveyed, and what implicit social norms govern the industry's practices.

The case studies within this dissertation investigate the career paths of female country artists who have moved out of country music as crossover artists. Women in the industry have experienced neglect and harassment, leading many to leave country music for other genres. Yet they do not all leave unequivocally: some have strategically blended country with other styles, shifting the boundaries between genres. Although sellers and buyers of music often treat genres as fixed and separate categories, practices of music-making frequently draw on multiple categories, and artists make their own purposeful use of the categories. When artists change categories, their reasons for doing so can show us the limits of the category they left behind; and when they operate on a boundary between categories, we can sometimes watch music critics or industry executives working to maintain the integrity of the categories.

The musical style choices of women who work in and around country music have disrupted and realigned the limitations of genre. From Brenda Lee's rockabilly crossovers to Taylor Swift's conspicuous departure from country to pop, women working at the edges have made stylistic and promotional choices that challenge rigid definitions of genre. Opportunities for bending genre have changed over time: Patsy Cline succeeded in the Nashville country industry and on pop charts in the 1950s because her "country flavor was not too strong," but later female artists faced blacklisting by radio executives and fans for breaching the community standards of country radio.[2] Loretta Lynn's "The Pill"

[2] Jolie Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music*

and Jeannie C. Riley's "Harper Valley PTA" include progressive takes on women's sexual expression, but both songs were deemed inappropriate for country radio even though they carried the audible markers of the country music sound.

More recent artists have struck a different sort of balance. Much of Carrie Underwood's music is stylistically aligned with country or pop-country and does not make any overt social or political commentary. Over the span of her career, however, she has regularly added just enough pop production into her releases, allowing them to appear not only on country music stations, but also on Top-40 and Adult Contemporary radio. In the early 2000s, female country artists were careful about political statements and affiliations present in their music and in their public images, often cultivated through social media. Several artists defied the industry by continuing to mix country with other genres and to test the limits of political speech as they built their careers. In the 2010s Kacey Musgraves used styles associated with country, but also included 1980s-inspired disco on her 2018 release *Golden Hour*; and Kalie Shorr's country release *Open Book* (2019) included nods to pop-punk and emo of the early 2000s. Unlike Underwood, whose image had been carefully crafted to appear apolitical, both Musgraves and Shorr have made more explicit political statements in support of progressive politics. Even when female artists have succeeded under the stylistic and behavioral limitations imposed by the industry, their careers have remained marked by conflicts that enforce genre boundaries in social and musical terms, revealing those limitations.

(Nashville, TN: The Country Music Foundation Press & Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 116.

Race, Radio, Gender, and the Historical Formation of Genre

Country music is one of the oldest forms of commercial music. Musical categories, marketing categories, or genres are elusive, but they are also central tools in the commodification and sale of popular music. These categories and the people who control them have traded on white supremacist and gendered ideologies since the inception of country music as a commercial art form, and the boundaries of the genre have been shaped by the "musical color line" operating within the music industry.[3] Distinctions of musical genre have been tied to the historical formations of race and gender throughout the existence of the music industry in the United States. The development of genre and radio are connected to how the United States obfuscated race to erase or silence black participation and contribution to various popular music forms. Here I build upon the work of Karl Hagstrom Miller, Eric Nunn, Diane Pecknold, Jennifer Lynn Stoever, Eric Weisbard, Andrew Mall, Tressie McMillan Cottom, and David Brackett to examine genre, radio format, and musical style, revealing how the musical color line has informed practice.

[3] Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2-11; David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019); Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Kyle Barnett, *Record Cultures: The Transformation of the U.S. Recording Industry* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020); and Jennifer C. Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

As a mode of categorizing different musics, popular music genres were first codified in the early twentieth century, functioning as a way to market music. Genre formation is complex: musical style and genre are permeable, affording blending and market movement, but genre's permeability is attached to other ideologies. Historically the formative categories of popular music include race music, old-time music, and pop or mainstream music. In the 1920s "mainstream" referred to Tin Pan Alley tunes produced in New York City that were marketed toward a mostly white audience. As David Brackett has described in *Categorizing Sound*, these three categories (race, old-time, and mainstream music) "formed the poles between which a great deal of popular music in the United States has circulated since the 1920s."[4] Brackett explains that the creation of the recorded music industry resulted in musical categories that were "enshrined in institutional practices—from radio formats, production categories, and journalistic and fan discourse all the way to the graphic interface of iTunes—that have had a profound effect on the circulation of music."[5] Categories seemed essential to the process of defining particular sorts of music that could be sold to particular sorts of people, and it is within these categorizations of music and sound that artificial separations based on demographic markers like race and class come to be enshrined within US popular music.

One of the most consequential artificial separations within popular music is the cordoning off of Black musical styles from the American mainstream. As Karl Hagstrom Miller writes in *Segregating Sound*, a great deal of southern music written, recorded, and

[4] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 25.
[5] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 25.

performed between the 1880s and 1920s shared common musical traits—but because racialized groups were defined as separate in the United States, musical practices were "reduced to a series of distinct genres associated with particular racial and ethnic identities."[6] Music developed along what Miller calls a "color line," where the blues were defined as African American and rural white southerners performed what would come to be called country music—even if these two musical genres shared audible features.[7] Miller describes music listeners as identifying music less through "*what* one hears" and more through "*how* one hears—how one crafts a sense of oneself through the process of attributing meaning to sound."[8] Southern African Americans were attracted to Tin Pan Alley tunes and sang square dance calls as well as spirituals and the blues, but their participation in a broad variety of musics did not fit into the "folkloric paradigm" set out by scholars in the late nineteenth century, in which specific kinds of music were attributed to specific groups of people. Thinking with Miller, genre constructions are based upon inherently flawed groupings, and a person's identity—their race, class, gender—is not the only factor in understanding their musical world.[9] The historical formation of genre serves as a tool of white supremacy—it is not just that the categorization causes harm, but also that people in and around the music industry use the

[6] Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 2.
[7] Here Miller draws upon W. E. B. Du Bois's use of the term "color line," first coined by Frederick Douglass in the late nineteenth century: W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1903, 1989).
[8] Here Miller is using ethnomusicologist Steven Feld's idea of "feelingful activity": listeners experience music through multiple intersecting ideas and associations. Miller, *Segregating Sound,* 17.
[9] Miller, *Segregating Sound,* 17.

categories to diminish or erase anything that seems not to belong in them. Because the categories were based on race, artists of color were not acknowledged if they played outside the bounds of their assigned categories within popular music genres.

Examples of this erasure can be seen through the historical practices of academic folklore studies, a discipline that thrived on the study and categorization of music according to demarcated groups. According to Miller, the "musical color line" was drawn when music industry and racial segregation together "orchestrate[d] a sonic demarcation that corresponds to the corporeal distinctions emerging under Jim Crow."[10] When the blues and country records of the 1920s were issued, they were categorized and deemed authentic according to the racial groupings acknowledged as true by folklorists. Miller's description of musical form and content perpetuating racial violence aligns with the way historians outside music studies contextualize the Jim Crow era. Performance practices were grouped according to genre designations: these included race records that were associated with musical practices defined as black, old-time or "hillbilly" music associated with musical practices defined as white, and mainstream music intended to be purchased or consumed by white people.[11]

Radio programming (what musical acts or recordings were played) in the 1920s reflects a consciousness of the musical color line. Miller describes the industry's enforcement of racial divisions within musical categories as designed to remove African

[10] Miller, *Segregating Sound,* 3.
[11] Texts that discuss this process include Eric Nunn, *Sounding the Color Line: Music and Race in the Southern Imagination,* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2015); David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound;* Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Miller, *Segregating Sound.*

American influence and participation in the creation of commercial American popular music so that it would appeal to white listeners. A national radio industry emerged in the United States by the 1920s, supported by listeners who had first begun as an amateur broadcasting practice around 1914. This audience was interested in programs broadcast from distant locations and grew into a wider audience with interest in specific and specialized programming.[12] Early national broadcasts were designed to give information to listeners: for instance, radio delivered the US Department of Agriculture market reports on agricultural prices for rural listeners. After national informational broadcasts would end, there might be music—but those same listeners were unimpressed by other national programs from cities like New York. Susan Smulyan explains that "early broadcasters sought a white, urban, middle-class audience and provided the entertainment to keep such people tuning in," but this entertainment did not necessarily appeal to listeners in rural areas.[13] Programs geared toward a rural audience featured "hillbilly music" rooted in "white and African American folk traditions" instead of Tin Pan Alley tunes, and hillbilly music eventually became part of the most popular programs on early radio. At first radio stations programmed randomly, allowing anyone who wanted to stop by the station to perform on their broadcasts. Later, the success of fiddlers and string bands "surprised early stations," leading radio stations to reconceptualize their audience as regional rather than national, especially in the Midwest and South.[14] As Smulyan

[12] Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting 1920-1934* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 11-20.
[13] Smulyan, *Selling Radio,* 22-23.
[14] Smulyan, *Selling Radio,* 23.

notes, this regional approach led to the development of "barn dances" featuring country music performances. Sprouting up across the Midwest and Southeast, radio stations such as WDAP in Fort Worth, Texas, WLS in Chicago (The National Barn Dance), WSB in Atlanta, and WSM in Nashville (which later became the Grand Ole Opry) were among the first to feature country radio beginning with WLS in January 1923.

What constituted country music or "hillbilly music" in the 1920s at the advent of radio had already gone through substantial stylistic shifts to become an amalgamation of African American musics, folk song of British origin, and varying commercial forms such as vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley songs, and minstrelsy. Many stations "banned music they considered 'black' from the airwaves" even though "both African American and White listeners were familiar with the southern white music that became popular radio fare."[15] This racial division of music was an effort to avoid alienating white listeners who might object to hearing African American performers on racist grounds. Radio, as the first mass medium in the United States, became a conduit for expressing mass culture—but one made specifically to serve white Americans. Several federal laws, including the Federal Radio Act (1927) and Federal Communications Act (1934), allowed the country's broadcasting system to become "network dominated and advertising driven."[16] In discussing barriers created by the commercialization of radio networks for African Americans, William Barlow notes that "racial barriers minimized black involvement in

[15] Smulyan, *Selling Radio,* 24.
[16] William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 26.

broadcasting during the time of the industry's greatest growth and prosperity."[17] African Americans thus had very limited possibility to obtain jobs in the radio industry and had less access to radio as performers or executives. Barlow describes how national corporations like NBC and CBS instituted "what amounted to a Jim Crow policy with respect to the employment and portrayal of African Americans...the few African Americans working in radio [in the 1920s] were the musicians, comics, and entertainers sporadically heard on the network airwaves."[18] But for the most part these Black performers portrayed characters demanded by white entertainers who were familiar with blackface minstrelsy.

The development of radio is central to what country music became in the 1920s and how it functions today. Inequities in the music industry and in particular country music developed in tandem with country radio. The rise of country music on the radio (and the rise of radio in the United States) came about through the Barn Dance programs such as the National Barn Dance (NBD) based at WLS in Chicago, which was first broadcast in April 1924. The NBD was not the first of its kind—it is likely that some content and the format was copied from the Barn Dance at WBAP in Fort Worth—but it became "extraordinarily influential and enduring."[19] The popularity of the program was due in part to the rising (but unequal) presence of radios in homes: 82% of homes in the United States owned a radio, but there were disparities in radio ownership among rural

[17] Barlow, *Voice Over,* 26.
[18] Barlow, *Voice Over,* 27.
[19] Chad Berry, "Introduction: Assessing the National Barn Dance," in *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance*, ed. Chad Berry (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 1-2.

communities, with only 50% of farm families in the Midwest owning a radio, and just 10% in the South.[20] Although common public perception tends to assume that the audience for country music was primarily in the Southern part of the United States, country music was popular and broadcast across the nation.[21]

Gender is another limiting category for participation in the country music industry; and this effect has been exacerbated for female artists of color by the prioritization of whiteness in the music industry. In the early stages of radio programming, radio's content was rooted in live performances where the indelible presence of female musicians shaped the content and practices of the commercial country music industry. In the early days of barn dance radio, in particular the NBD, female performers were essential to the creation of the sought-after white nostalgia that listeners desired. During the 1920s and 1930s, WLS's radio programming represented an idealized American culture where "the gendered images barn dance performers portrayed reinforced the male-breadwinner ethic just as it was under substantial attack by the Great Depression."[22] As more women were forced to seek work outside the home, radio used women to portray traditional gender roles, allowing listeners to imagine and idealized rural southern experience. The radio industry was relatively unaffected by the Depression

[20] Berry, "Introduction: Assessing the National Barn Dance," 3.
[21] Patrick Huber challenges the rural southern myth in *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 4-7.
[22] Kristine M. McCusker, "Patriarchy and the Great Depression," in *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance*, ed. Chad Berry (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008): 154.

in the 1930s: due to its "burgeoning popularity," women who worked in radio had stable jobs.[23]

Stephanie Vander Wel has argued that music exceeds and complicates "other cultural forms as it takes an active role in creating fluid and multiple interpretations of historical and social processes that concern the formation of social categories."[24] Vander Wel's words highlight that the country industry—marketing, radio, record labels, etc.—can place performers into categories; and that at the same time, musical performances sometimes exceed the categories, cross between categories, or blur the boundaries. Just as these categories can be used to *create* opportunities for some artists, the example of radio shows how they can be used to *limit* opportunities for others, especially women.

Vander Wel explains that early barn dance radio reinforced class distinctions by emphasizing musical divisions between highbrow (classical) versus lowbrow (vernacular) musics. At the same time, radio programming altogether was a mixed bag: the NBD offered a range of styles, from hillbilly and old time music to classical performances and Tin Pan Alley tunes, many of which were performed live during broadcasts. WLS framed this mixing of styles as a form of nostalgia: Vander Wel argues that radio claimed to represent both past and present, "as if the modern methods of radio transmission could effectively pull music from a bygone era, predating the rise of modernity and mass consumerism."[25] Within this framing, country music had a particular role to play as a

[23] McCusker, "Patriarchy and the Great Depression," 158.
[24] Stephanie Vander Wel, *Hillbilly Maidens, Okies, and Cowgirls: Women's Country Music, 1930-1960* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 6.
[25] Vander Wel, *Hillbilly Maidens,* 28.

genre that was intended to ease the disruption of social norms and gender roles that resulted from economically driven dislocation and migration in the early twentieth century. Kristine McCusker's work on barn dance performer Linda Parker describes how women were used to shape the foundations of country music: whether as performers or characters in songs, women were the centerpiece of a cultivated nostalgic tradition that highlighted whiteness.[26] Even though women were secondary to male cast members, the feminine presence became a tool to sell the format to more people. During this early history of country radio, women's morality became attached to the genre because women played the role of caretaker on various programs, and the actors' real-life roles as wives and mothers were frequently used to market those same radio shows. In the case of NBD performer Lulu Belle, her "private roles of wife and mother" were highly publicized even though the characters she portrayed were more fluid and wide-ranging.[27] Importantly, these two white performers were able to negotiate their white femininity into secure roles on barn dance radio. Both Lulu Belle and Linda Parker relied on racist minstrelsy and vaudeville performance styles to reflect racist, classist and sexist social norms, especially in depression-era broadcasts.

According to Diane Pecknold, as people migrated to the cities in seek of work during the Depression, commercial hillbilly music was an important way to connect those people to their rural roots, even as it also helped urban people imagine they still lived in rural America. In Pecknold's words, hillbilly music was

[26] Kristine McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008).
[27] Vander Wel, *Hillbilly Maidens,* 43.

> embraced as a marketing vehicle by the emerging broadcast advertising industry...cited as an example of the deleterious potential of mass media by radio reformers, and rebuffed as a cultural irritation that symbolized the problematic nature of southern migrants in the minds of established residents of the urban north and west. Paradoxically, in spite of being patently pastoral, hillbilly music often represented unsettling forces of technological, industrial, and class change between 1920 and 1940.[28]

Pecknold shows how hillbilly music was a "creature of radio" even though its earliest commercial potential is linked to recording.[29] Country radio codified what counted as country music as the format became an outlet for white working-class performers and audiences of southern origins, who were "typecast as hillbillies."[30]

Throughout the twenty-first century, however, a disconnect between musical genre and radio format has exacerbated racial and gender-based inequities. Genre refers to both the stylistic traits of a particular musical marketing category, and to the economic potential of the category itself. By contrast, radio format refers to the range of styles, sounds, advertising, and artist connectivity that makes up a particular radio station's sonic boundaries. And, as Eric Weisbard writes, "radio as *format* plays a central role in the definition of country, a commercially driven mediation of identity that works against applying an artistically driven musical *genre* definition."[31] In other words, country format

[28] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 14.
[29] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 15.
[30] Eric Weisbard, "Country Radio: The Dialectic of Format and Genre," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music,* ed. Travis Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 230.
[31] Weisbard, "Country Radio: The Dialectic of Format and Genre," 229.

radio, and the people who shaped that format, have dictated the boundaries of the genre even though the format may be driven by commercial, not musical, concerns. Format is an economic concern of radio, and genre a means of selling a particular set of sounds often with little concern for stylistic ingenuity or variation. The relationship between genre, a nebulous collection of discernible musical styles associated together, and radio format, which was dictated by potential for advertising sales, exacerbated gender, race, and class-based divisions as the music industry grew through the mid-point of the twentieth century.

Commodifying Country Music for the Modern Era

The modern country music industry, including record labels and country radio, maintained continuities with pre-World War II programming values even as the recorded music industry changed after the war. Country was a peripheral marketing category with little impact on mainstream popular music markets: the biggest transformations were happening in other parts of the industry. During the 1940s mainstream music meant pop recordings mostly produced in New York City that were most often made for and by white people. Race records were another peripheral category whose relationship with the mainstream diminished through the 1940s as African American musical traits such as improvisation in songwriting and performance had less impact on recordings marketed as mainstream pop.[32] By the 1950s, however, niche categories like rockabilly and eventually

[32] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound,* 184.

rock 'n' roll became much more popular. Those same African American musical traits regained popularity. Jocelyn Neal describes this moment as filled with a "sense of radical newness and excitement as old boundaries were shattered and a reckless, teen music invaded the public imagination."[33] For the country industry, this shift toward radical newness was slower to take hold. There was increased "recognition" of how demographic markers segmented audiences for certain genres. However, part of a genre's success in the 1950s was determined by single-genre radio formatting. This meant that country music had to achieve a higher status in relation to pop, rockabilly, or rock 'n' roll music stations.[34]

Country music had little crossover or mainstream appeal during this period. Country music was considered low-brow or low-class music, and it was still marketed in similar ways to the barn dance radio programs, targeting rural Southern audiences or southern transplants living in Northern or Midwestern states. The system of country music production and artistic development based in Nashville, Tennessee, was, as Diane Pecknold writes, "the closest equivalent to Tin Pan Alley to survive the midcentury passage to fully realized mass culture."[35] Industry participants forcefully and skillfully framed country music as music made by and for white people as the industry developed throughout the 1950s. Perhaps the most important factor in racialized genre formation can be traced to the "history making" of institutions like the Country Music Association

[33] Jocelyn Neal, "'Nothing But a Little Ole Pop Song': Patsy Cline's Music Style and the Evolution of Genre in the 1950s," in *Sweet Dreams: The World Of Patsy Cline,* ed. Warren R. Hofstra (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 130.
[34] Neal, "'Nothing But a Little Ole Pop Song'," 130.
[35] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 66.

(CMA). Through the production of a history grounded in "a synthesis of commercialism and tradition," the story of country music that the CMA created "became a powerful means of popularizing the genre's past and of making it more palatable to the intellectuals and academics who had persistently denigrated country music."[36] The CMA's history-making project created a united vernacular and popular history for the country format as they formed the Country Music Foundation and Hall of Fame. These enterprises helped to sell a history of country music shaped by early white hillbilly music and barn dance radio programming that emphasized it as a "pre-commercial tradition"—that is, a heritage music. The CMA sought to interest "middle- and upper-class cultural reformers" in this music, intending to bolster country's economic potential while downplaying the intense commercialism of the genre.[37]

Despite the stereotypes of hillbilly and old-time music as rural, backward, and blue-collar represented through barn dance radio, the genre of country had always been a money-making enterprise guided by its commercial potential. Coated in veneers of authenticity and class-based marketing strategies, commercial country music was intended to be perceived as made by and for white people, minimizing the ongoing contributions made by many black musicians to the format.[38] In *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South,* Charles Hughes presents the story of the country-soul triangle—musicians and record labels working between Muscle Shoals,

[36] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 169.
[37] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 169.
[38] Andrea Williams, "If Country Music Wants to Reckon With Its Racism, Look Deeper Than the Band Names," *Vulture,* June 12, 2020. https://www.vulture.com/2020/06/essay-lady-antebellum-lady-a-new-name-country-music-racism.html.

Alabama, Memphis, Tennessee, and Nashville, Tennessee—and how the musicians in this triangle "became pivotal actors in the larger trajectory of U.S. racial politics in the twentieth century."[39] Hughes details the lives of musicians who performed many different styles of music. He argues that despite claims of utopian interracial cooperation in southern studios, triangle musicians showed that these claims and assumptions were intensely racially complex.[40] For example, in 1968 Janis Joplin, a white female rock singer, performed at Stax records, and as Hughes reports, Joplin "claimed that 'being black for a while will make me a better white.'"[41] Joplin's reaction to her performance at a studio known for Black southern soul recordings and an interracial cadre of studio musicians puts herself at the center. Hughes uses it as an example of how "white-centered rhetoric" framed national audiences' understanding of southern soul.[42] This white-centered rhetoric is but one way that Black music became part of an interracial musical idiom that downplayed the contributions of Black musicians.

Recording practices within the country-soul triangle show that interracial activity within recording studios did not preclude music's being sold as a racial commodity; country and soul have been sold as different genres regardless of how they inform each other stylistically. As I will argue throughout this dissertation, there is often a divide between how music has been sold via marketing categories, which inform listeners' and musicians' perceptions of genres, and the style of music an artist is actually producing. If

[39] Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 3.
[40] Hughes, *Country Soul,* 4.
[41] Hughes, *Country Soul,* 67.
[42] Hughes, *Country Soul, 67.*

we approach genres and artists' movement between genres with this understanding, we can see that labeling music as "white" involves both ignoring certain musical features and pretending that the music comes from a single folkloric source rather than a roiling mixture of blended and re-blended genres. In order to offer a more equitable telling of these music histories, I call critical attention to the social uses of genre in a way that allows for stylistic blending and hybridity. A more just story of American popular music would begin without race-based genre associations, and it would explain interracial processes of musical creation and the extensive Black presence in American popular music without falling into the trap of genre, which has locked musicians into race-based categories and perpetuated structural racism in the music industry.

In addition to questions of race and racism in the music industry, and their deep presence in country music history, this dissertation draws attention to how gender is at play within narratives of genre formation. Considering the historiography of country music scholarship, gendered narratives have been prominent at least since Bill C. Malone published his seminal history of country music in 1968.[43] Malone's was the first attempt at a full history of US country music. Jada Watson has explained out that Malone created a "narrative binary for country music historiography" where men in the country industry

[43] Bill C. Malone, *Country Music USA*, 3rd edn. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), especially chapter 9, "The Reinvigoration of Modern Country Music, 1960-1972," 269-321. Malone's text recently served as the basis for Ken Burns's PBS documentary *Country Music,* released in spring 2019. For a critique of this film and the white narrative of country music history as seen in Malone's and Burns's work see Travis Stimeling, "It's Time to Stop Promoting the White, Working-Class Cliché of Country Music," *100 Days in Appalachia,* July 1, 2019. https://www.100daysinappalachia.com/2019/07/its-time-to-stop-promoting-the-white-working-class-cliche-of-country-music/.

were "associated with 'public work' and commercial success," while women were "tucked away in domestic, administrative and (musically) supporting roles—despite the fact that women were often the musical innovators on stage."[44] Kristine McCusker has indicated that country historians have done a disservice to female performers. She describes past historical work as "superficial and simplistic" because it did not account for the range of lived experiences of women on stage, seeing women only within the misguided and inaccurate middle-class ideology of the early nineteenth century where women were constrained to "separate spheres" from men's.[45] This historical understanding of women in country music directly informs the gender disparity on country radio that persists to the present day. Watson outlines the historiography of women in country music, criticizing "radio programmers' control over country music narratives" which have "den[ied] women (and other marginalized groups) a range of subject positions that are made available to their white, male counterparts."[46] Watson identified the most important element in today's suppression of women's voices: the country music industry has "employed a strict quota system for female performers," limiting their airtime and their potential for success within the genre regardless of what their music sounds like.[47]

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[44] Jada Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Song Chart, 1996-2016," *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 5 (2019): 541. Watson refers to Kristine McCusker's essay on gender and country music: Kristine McCusker, "Gendered Stages: Country Music, Authenticity, and the Performance of Gender," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music,* ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 355-373.
[45] Kristine McCusker, "Gendered Stages: Country Music, Authenticity, and the Performance of Gender," 6-7.
[46] Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Song Chart, 1996-2016," 541.
[47] Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Song Chart, 1996-2016," 541.

The early history of women in country music, especially their central performance roles on barn dance radio, remains a formative antecedent for the role of women in country music today. The format projects a decided white and masculine identity, offering few women substantial access to build careers. The inclusion of women in country music's history has been a recuperative move that aligns broadly with the work of women's history in musicology and related humanistic disciplines. My own work is deeply indebted to the work of music scholars, historians, and journalists who have conducted extensive research tracing the stories of female country performers and explaining these women's contributions to the genre. Since the early 1990s female country performers have been increasingly studied by scholars of country music.[48] My work focuses women as the subjects of case studies but approaches this work through an intersectional reading of gender and race simultaneously to understand genre and the musical in-betweens or crossings among genres.

[48] See, among others: *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004); *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016); Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014); *Sweet Dreams: The World of Patsy Cline*, ed. Warren R. Hofstra (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Leigh H. Edwards, *Dolly Parton, Gender, and Country Music* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2018); Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music 1800-2000* (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation Press & Vanderbilt University Press, 2003); and Lydia Hamessley, *Unlikely Angel: The Songs of Dolly Parton* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

Intersectionality and a "Thick History" of Genre

This dissertation takes an intersectional approach, relying on a wide range of theoretical approaches. I work with primary source materials and journalism, provide extensive analysis of audio and visual recordings of live and studio-produced music, and include observations of my own experiences as a concertgoer and fan. This range of scholarly approaches is shaped by Black feminist thought as I approach music, performers, and the music industry through the lens of intersectionality where race, class, and gender are considered simultaneously.[49] This work is shaped by feminist music studies, which have worked to disrupt the "objectivist traditions" of the musicological discipline.[50] In this work I think alongside Maureen Mahon and many other feminist music scholars who "attend to power dynamics present in the music genre cultures" where female performers participate at the intersections of race, gender, and genre.[51] Because race and gender have been formative concerns throughout the development of popular music in the United States, and remain key issues today, these concerns cannot be set aside in studying the music. My feminist approach stems from bell hooks's definition of feminism, as "the movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation and sexual oppression" which must take into account how "the present is shaped by colonial

[49] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1992): 1244.
[50] Marcia J. Citron, "Feminist Approaches to Musicology," in *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives in Gender and Music*, ed. Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 28.
[51] Maureen Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 16.

histories including slavery, as central to the exploitation of labor under capitalism."[52] To this end, my own positionality within the work should be clear: I am a white woman, working to name and disrupt narratives of whiteness within country music, country music studies, and popular music studies.

Importantly, because I am white my work *is not* Black feminist in nature, but the praxis of my work is guided by principles of Black feminist thought. Race, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham writes, is like gender and class in that it "must be seen as a social construction predicated upon the recognition of difference and signifying the simultaneous distinguishing and positioning of groups vis-à-vis one another."[53] Higginbotham goes on to explain that "race is a highly contested representation of relations of power between social categories by which individuals are identified and identify themselves."[54] In considering race in popular music studies, one must account for how race shapes social categorizations (such as genre) and how these categorizations are positioned in relation to one another. It is in this vein that I approach the study of genre through a lens of crossover, or where musical categorizations are contested, through case studies of songs by women artists in the industry. Building on Higginbotham's insights, we should expect that genres, as social categories, reflect the power relationships that are lived out in all aspects of society. Writing about Higginbotham's framing of race, Jennifer C. Nash points to the need to "fundamentally reimagine the very categories that

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[52] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (London: Pluto, 2000), 33. See also Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 5.
[53] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 253.
[54] Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," 253.

form the basis of scholarly inquiry and political activism."[55] Extending this conception of race to country music studies is crucial. The concepts of intersectionality developed in Black feminist scholarship can help us to reimagine categories, in this case musical genres, by affording space for scholarly inquiry and political activism in music to discuss the simultaneous impacts of race and gender.

This analysis also requires considering popular music genres through their "industrial function": performance and product are shaped by decisions that are made by players at all levels of the recorded music industry.[56] My understanding of musical categories relies on sociologist Jennifer Lena's definition of genre: popular music genres are "systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that bind together industry, performers, critics, and fans in making what they identify as a distinctive sort of music."[57] This conception of genre directly attends to the interconnected interests of business, creative practices, and participatory fan experiences that are necessary parts of a holistic understanding of popular music. It is also especially important to understanding the country music industry because country is at once a national and international popular music, but it is also a musical scene located in Nashville, Tennessee—meaning that economic and creative interests are centrally located even within broadly interconnected

[55] Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 8.
[56] Kyle Barnett, *Record Cultures: The Transformation of the U.S. Recording Industry*, 8.
[57] Jennifer C. Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 7. Jocelyn Neal has also usefully written about genre in the way: see Neal, "'Nothing But a Little Ole Pop Song'," 130.

commercial networks.[58] By approaching genre in this way, where economic and musical concerns are attended to simultaneously, I disrupt the musicological impulse to focus on musical content at the expense of the material socio-cultural stakes of popular music, particularly as artists of color and women experience those stakes differently. Instead, I offer what Lena describes as a "thick history," moving past "great man" or "genius narrative" accounts of music history to instead consider the importance of "collaborative links between skilled practitioners."[59] That is to say, I aim to produce a history that considers sound and style alongside the structural economic interests of the music industry. My intersectional, "thick history" approach to genre affords a historically informed view of women's participation in country music, and allows us to see how the various activities that constitute the genre—including performance, production, marketing, and more—have limited opportunities for female performers.

Invisibility, Whiteness, and Gender

In a discussion of Western European classical music, Loren Kajikawa identifies "laudatory terms" like "masterwork" or "traditional" as "racially exclusionary statements of value" with respect to a Western classical canon that has historically been made up of

[58] Jada Watson productively describes the country industry's "geo-cultural" identities and why Nashville figures so centrally in discussions of the country genre in her essay "Geography and Country Music: Constructing "Geo-Cultural" Identities," *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 95-115.
[59] Lena, *Banding Together*, 2-3.

white European male composers.[60] Embedded within an understanding of the racial frame of a Western classical music is the prioritization and privileging of whiteness as a category which goes unmarked and often unnamed. Kajikawa draws upon the research of legal scholar Cheryl Harris, who identifies a "'property interest' in whiteness" within US legal practice. Harris finds that "whiteness and property have been mutually dependent concepts from the nation's founding."[61] Kajikawa productively extends Harris's concept, noting that "whiteness itself became a form of property: *an ownership of the ability to own.* Thus, the possession of whiteness had significant material benefits and social advantages."[62] The material and social advantages of whiteness in US popular music abound, woven into the fabric of the recorded music industry and underpinning patterns of radio formatting since the early twentieth century. George Lipsitz explains the historical support for structures of white supremacy: according to Lipsitz, Euro-Americans' "refusal *to* see the humanity of people of color" has been more present than "the color differences that Euro-Americans *did* see."[63] Put another way, colorblindness—a refusal to acknowledge how whiteness is privileged—upholds white supremacy. Kajikawa and Lipsitz's framing of how and why whiteness is privileged, and the

[60] Loren Kajikawa, "Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in U.S. Schools and Departments of Music," in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness Across the Disciplines,* ed. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, George Lipsitz, Daniel HoSang, and Luke Charles Harris (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2019): 106.
[61] Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1707-1791. Quoted in Kajikawa, "Possessive Investment in Classical Music," 106.
[62] Kajikawa, "Possessive Investment in Classical Music," 163.
[63] George Lipsitz, "The Sounds of Silence: How Race Neutrality Preserves White Supremacy," in *Seeing Race Again,* in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness Across the Disciplines,* ed. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, George Lipsitz, Daniel HoSang, and Luke Charles Harris (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2019): 25.

colorblindness of US popular culture history form the starting point for my own intervention; whiteness must be problematized and named as part of country music history.

Often, narratives about progress in country music are focused on single issues devoid of intersectional considerations: the case has been made that gender inequality is improving (the women's issue in country music) or that LGBTQ+ people are better accepted now, with an implicit argument that if there is progress for one group it must mean there has been progress for all.[64] This is false. A truly liberatory practice of addressing structural inequity comes in the form of a collective, a feminist movement which begins from a place of intersectionality so as to "offer an account of how power works."[65] In an industry marked by structural racism, white women country artists have historically faced prejudice, but they were still afforded many more opportunities than their Black counterparts. My feminist approach to women in country music requires encountering and naming whiteness in an industry and field of academic study where colorblindness has shaped histories and lived experiences for *all* participants in the country industry. To do so, this work *necessarily* frames encounters of race and gender simultaneously. Lipsitz reminds us that "many of the key mechanisms of white racial rule in US history achieved determinate racist effects without ever having to declare racist

[64] Andrea Williams, Interview with historian Amanda Martínez, "Country Music Almanac 2022: Learn the Past, Know the Present," *Nashville Scene*, January 20, 2022. https://www.nashvillescene.com/music/coverstory/country-music-almanac-2022-learn-the-past-know-the-present/article_9f61d4a0-7891-11ec-9a99-efd87af32fcb.html.
[65] Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 5.

intent."[66] The colorblindness of the mainstream country music industry has done just that—maintained a white racial rule, maintained white supremacy—without explicitly talking about race because whiteness is assumed, and Blackness is erased. By naming whiteness and centering it explicitly within serious discussion of racial and gender inequity, the full spectrum of material and lived experiences within the country music industry is made apparent. In part, the unmarked whiteness of country music today is a result of country music's racist origins, where colorblindness shaped a marketing category initially intended to be made by and sold to white people; to date, few non-white country artists have been able to sustain careers in the music industry. The case studies in this document listen for both whiteness and gender to understand how the invisibility of whiteness shapes commercial country music. Central to this work is a critical approach to how white feminism has shaped gender equity efforts in the country music industry and in country music scholarship. I follow feminist scholars such Rafia Zakaria and Kyla Schuller in approaching white feminism as a tool of individual uplift and empowerment which ignores and belittles structural inequities.[67] Importantly, this approach to white feminisms aligns with a critical understanding and engagement with how whiteness itself operates in the country industry, and in country music scholarship.

Country music was shaped through projects of colorblindness which afford whiteness the privilege of being defined as normative. Indeed, so was the US popular

[66] Lipsitz, "The Sounds of Silence," 26.
[67] Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021); Kyla Schuller, *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021).

music industry as whole. Jennifer Lynn Stoever argues that we should adopt listening practices in which whiteness is critically encountered. She asks us to recognize that "dominant listening practices discipline us to process white male ways of sounding as default, natural, normal, and desirable" while "alternate ways of listening and sounding" are marked as both "aberrant," whether "excessively sensitive, strikingly deficient, or...both."[68] Whiteness is "notorious for representing itself as 'invisible'—or in this case, inaudible (at least to white people)."[69] The invisibility and inaudibility of whiteness is key to understanding how white representation in culture often represents "people" rather than "white people" specifically. According to sociologist Tressie McMillian Cottom, attending closely to how these lines are drawn allows us access to the "long history of interracial cultural making in every single genre of music," including country music.[70] Hearing the sonic color line, hearing the segregated sound of popular music, means listening for how race and gender have been used to create barriers between genres in order to maintain demarcations between social groups—even in cases where musicians on both sides of the demarcation were deploying similar styles.[71] Using this understanding of whiteness, I argue for a critical re-examination of how we understand and discuss popular music genres. Listening for the invisibility of whiteness in country

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[68] Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening,* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 12.
[69] Stoever, 12. Here Stoever quotes from Richard Dyer's seminal work *White*, which investigates how whiteness is made invisible in visual media like film and television. See Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
[70] Tressie McMillian Cottom, "Reading Hick-Hop: The Shotgun Marriage of Hip-Hop and Country Music," in *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music,* ed. Mark Allan Jackson (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 239.
[71] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line,* 23.

music is an intentional move to hear how racial and gender-based inequality is present within the industry.

Crossover and Musical Boundary Creation

Informed by observations of historical and present-day genre formation, this project focuses on crossover: the movement of artists or their musics between genres in the popular music industry. Genres, or musical marketing categories, have functioned as a political tool that upholds societal inequities based on race and class. I turn to the idea of musical crossover as a way to connect and contrast the politics of genre with the sonic parameters of music as it is performed, regardless of or even in spite of the genre formations people apply to the music. How crossover has been defined has changed over time. In the 1950s through the early 1970s, crossover meant that an artist had success both in a niche market (like country, R&B, or jazz) and in the mainstream popular music market. Importantly, this success was characterized by an individual *artist* having popularity in multiple markets. This definition of crossover is discussed extensively in Chapter 1, which follows the career of rockabilly and country recording artist Brenda Lee.

By the 1970s, crossover came to be determined by an individual *song* having success and achieving popularity in multiple markets. Andrew Mall describes post-1970s crossover as

> niche music that achieves commercial success in a larger market. Within music industries, this is indicated by an artist moving up the ranks of a niche or genre-

> specific chart (such as the Christian, classical, country, jazz, Latin, or R&B charts) and then 'crossing over' to a more mainstream chart, such as the *Billboard* Hot 100 singles chart.[72]

Though Mall's discussion is focused on the Christian music industry, his description holds true for country music. This form of crossover most closely resembles what occurred in the country industry during the 1970s, but there is a historical tradition of country crossover dating back to the origins of the commercial genre. Chapters 3 and 4 of this document work within Mall's understanding of post-1970s crossover in which individual songs rather than an artist's entire persona may move from a niche or genre-specific chart to a mainstream chart.

Central to understanding the importance of crossover to country music, particularly by the early 1990s, is the impact of technological changes in music and sales tracking on the popularity of country music. By the early 1990s, with the use of SoundScan technology to automatically calculate popularity of songs via sales and radio airplay data, the music industry had begun to account for multiple mainstreams.[73] These technological changes and accompanying changes in practice, which are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, afforded niche markets like country or R&B the possibility of simultaneous success within their niches and on mainstream charts. Success of this kind bolstered the economic viability of a niche musical market. Put another way, as the

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[72] Andrew Mall, *God Rock Inc.*: *The Business of Niche Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 195.
[73] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 314; N. Anand and Richard A. Peterson, "When Market Information Constitutes Fields: Sensemaking of Markets in the Commercial Music Industry," *Organization Science* 11, no. 3 (May/June 2000): 275.

processes of crossover came to benefit individual songs, a niche market like country became more profitable. Yet, as Chapter 3 illustrates, not all gatekeepers in the country industry were pleased with the mainstreaming of the genre.

The maintenance of a genre concept in country music is further complicated by sub-genre designations such as "pop-country," "country rock," or "neo-traditional." Sub-genre designations have literal meaning—pop-country is just country music that displays some musical traits of pop—and they tend to specify musical features brought together within an individual song or by an artist that had previously been located within a specific musical genre. "Country rock," for example, refers to music of the late 1960s through the 1970s which featured a blend of country and rock 'n' roll musical styles (for example, the Eagles' "Take It Easy" from 1972).[74] But "country rock" also points specifically to a marketplace and industry based in southern California that supported groups who were making "country rock" songs. At the same time, musicians in the Southern part of the United States were producing a similar musical blending between country and rock 'n' roll, working within slightly different local markets and earning the sub-genre moniker "Southern Rock" (like the band ZZ Top's song "Beer Drinkers & Hell Raisers" from 1973).[75] Often in country music these sub-genre designations have been used by gatekeepers within the industry who want to label a certain song or artist as more or less acceptable; by naming a song as part of a sub-genre, they are describing it as potentially less "country," less solidly tethered to the unmarked genre. This kind of

[74] The Eagles, "Take It Easy," *Eagles* (Asylum Records, Warner Music Company, 1972).
[75] ZZ Top, "Beer Drinkers & Hell Raisers," *Tres Hombres* (Warner Records, 1973).

labeling is a key way that boundaries are created through the construction of country music as a genre. Much in the same way "crossover" has had different meanings over time, so too have the uses of sub-genre designations changed.

This document focuses mostly on country crossover to the mainstream, and as such deals frequently with the designation of "country-pop" or "pop-country."[76] My intended meaning when using this term remains consistent; when I use the phrase "country-pop" I am referring to country music which features elements of pop or mainstream musical style or production qualities. While this basic meaning of "country-pop" or "pop-country" has not altered over time, specific stylistic features of both country and pop music have shifted.[77] The term country-pop has been inconsistently applied, and with different intended meanings, to country music over the last eighty years. More often than not, as is shown in my case studies of Faith Hill, Kelsea Ballerini, Kacey Musgraves, and Taylor Swift, country-pop or pop-country are used to belittle or devalue country music with pop or mainstream influence. This devaluation is itself a way of establishing the boundaries of the genre: the country-pop music of female country performers has most frequently been devalued by participants in the country industry. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, when country-pop music by female performers like Faith

[76] I have found no clear use of either country-pop or pop-country. Both mean the same thing and are used interchangeably throughout journalism. Music scholar Jocelyn Neal productively uses "country-pop" in her chapter on Shaina Twain, one of the only pieces of musicological scholarship on country-pop or pop-country music: Jocelyn R. Neal, "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft: Shania Twain's Crossover Appeal," in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: Critical and Analytical Essays,* ed. Walter Everett (New York: Routledge, 2008), 285-311.
[77] Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville, TN: The Country Music Foundation press & Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 4-5.

Hill, Shania Twain, or Taylor Swift crossed over to the mainstream market and achieved success on pop charts, critics and industry insiders described them as "sellouts" or said that they had "abandoned" country music.

Male artists who release pop-country sounds have not faced the same backlash. For example, the production and sounds of Kenny Chesney's song "All The Pretty Girls" from 2017 are remarkably similar to those of Taylor Swift's hit single "Mine" from 2013. Both tracks feature steady rock-influenced drum and rhythm guitar patterns, and they share sonically similar guitar riffs and keyboard parts. Both songs make the same aesthetic claims to country music, most obviously through subtle vocal twang. The songs make claims to pop production through the prominent use of electric guitar, reminiscent of early 2000s pop-rock styles heard in groups like Green Day or Panic! At the Disco. In 2013 Swift was marketing herself firmly as a country artist, but "Mine" achieved crossover success on mainstream charts and the album was dubbed "pop-country perfection" by *Billboard*.[78] Chesney's release four years later, a hit single from his album *Cosmic Hallelujah*, was received purely as "country," with no sub-genre moniker.[79] Even Chesney's duet with pop-rock star Pink, "Setting the World On Fire," was still called "country music" in reviews.[80] The range of reception to Swift's music versus Chesney's

[78] Brittney McKenna, "Why Taylor Swift's 'Speak Now' Is Her Best Album," *Billboard,* November 8, 2017. https://www.billboard.com/music/country/taylor-swift-speak-now-best-album-8030047/.
[79] Nolan Feeney, "Kenny Chesney's 'Cosmic Hallelujah': EW Review," *Entertainment Weekly,* October 28, 2016, https://ew.com/article/2016/10/28/kenny-chesney-cosmic-hallelujah-ew-review/; Ashley Wolf, "Review: Chesney Surpasses Expectations on 'Cosmic Hallelujah'," *The Ithacan,* November 13, 2016. https://theithacan.org/life-culture/review-chesney-surpasses-expectations-on-cosmic-hallelujah/.
[80] Wolf, "Review: Chesney Surpasses Expectations on 'Cosmic Hallelujah'."

illustrates how musical crossover, and specifically country-pop sounds, are received differently based on the artist's gender. Through this study of crossover I aim to craft a "thick" rather than "thin" musical history of women in country music.[81] By framing discussion of music and sound through questions of crossover, I avoid essentialized discussion of genre. To that end I emphasize the in-between spaces of musical style and blending to prioritize artistic creation and fan experience alongside the institutional, structural limitations of genre within the popular music economy.

Case Study Methodologies

This dissertation is organized into four chronological case studies that build upon the theoretical foundation outlined in this introduction. With an understanding that country music is a collection of various styles of music framed through a racially coded and gendered definition of genre, each case study builds an understanding of processes of crossover, ultimately concluding that crossover and reactions to it illuminate the gendered and racialized boundaries surrounding various musical categories. A historically informed view of women's participation in country music helps us to see clearly the state of the industry today. Through use of archival materials and style analysis, the first chapter follows the career of Brenda Lee, a rockabilly star and one of the first (and very few) child star country artists. Lee, who has been inducted into both the Rock and Roll and Country Music Halls of Fame, was at the peak of her career during the late 1950s and

[81] Lena, *Banding Together*, 2-3.

early 1960s, at a moment when country music was coming to be a more cohesive commercial music. The bulk of scholarship about Lee describes only the earliest part of her career in the early 1960s when she was best known as a rockabilly artist. From the early 1970s she was more closely associated with the Nashville Sound and country-pop styles that frequently crossed to the pop market. This chapter builds on the minimal existing scholarship, assessing Lee's autonomy and inviting a critical engagement with Lee as an artist who was branded as "crossover" from the earliest part of her career. This chapter also describes Lee's musical output from the 1970s and 1980s, probing how the idea of "crossover" hindered Lee's career as the music industry shifted toward more solidified and impermeable genre designations in the 1970s. This assessment of how genre works also forms the basis for discussion of later artists in subsequent chapters.

The "why" of women's stylistic blending is explored in chapter 3, which describes the insider/outsider dynamic of country music industry in the 1990s and early 2000s. The 1996 Telecommunications Act deregulated ownership of stations, resulting in mass consolidation of station ownership and centralization of programming. Changes in radio formatting and decreased radio airplay for female artists resulted in fewer opportunities for female country artists within the country industry by the early 2000s.[82] In this environment, a small number of female country artists, including Shania Twain, Faith Hill, and The Chicks (then the Dixie Chicks), found success in country and pop markets with music that appealed to a wide listener base. Female artists' music tends to find more crossover success because it is marketed as "pop-country," or country music

[82] Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Song Chart," 542.

with pop characteristics. This leads to a cyclic exercise in marginalization: women cross out of country because they are marginal there, but marketing their music in other categories only increases the limitations placed on their participation in the country marketplace. One such example is Shania Twain's *Up* (2002), which was released in three different versions, one each for country, pop, and world music. These pop-country songs like Shania Twain's "You're Still the One" (1998), Faith Hill's "This Kiss" (1999) or Carrie Underwood's "Before He Cheats" (2005) showcase the expansive popularity female country artists found in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This chapter weaves together telecommunications, radio, and record industry histories to understand the rapid technological and policy changes that occurred in the recorded music industry throughout the 1990s Through a case study of Faith Hill's career, analysis of her crossover sounds and reception within the industry begin the work of understanding the 1990s country industry and women's participation in it.

Chapter 3 also identifies the cost to female artists who alienate country radio and the country recording industry: the threat of exclusion. Perhaps the best-known example of country radio blacklisting artists occurred when Natalie Maines, lead singer of The Chicks (then known as The Dixie Chicks), made a negative comment about former president George W. Bush at a London concert in 2003.[83] Harsh blowback from the country music industry followed: The Chicks' successful singles from their record *Home* (2002) were pulled off the radio, and Maines herself received death threats. The punitive

[83] Gabriel Rossman, "The Dixie Chicks Radio Boycott," in *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells us About the Diffusion of Innovation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 59-70.

response to Maines's comment has since that time effectively limited the expression and behavior of female country performers, as artists have treated The Chicks' story as a cautionary tale. The Chicks' blacklisting from country radio reinforces the strict social guides for women in country music, illustrating that it is not just sound and style which are used to limit female country performers' access to the country music industry.

Chapter 4 carries the discussion to the present day, focusing on current popular country artists Kacey Musgraves and Kelsea Ballerini. The current landscape of country music remains limiting for women and frequently excludes their contributions. Kacey Musgraves won the Grammy Album of the Year award for *Golden Hour* but was not nominated in similar categories at the various country music awards programs. This denial of recognition is but one example of a double dismissal: dismissal of an artist because she is female and dismissal of music that pushes the boundaries of the genre. Musgraves's 2018 release features breathy arrangements of instruments traditionally heard in country music like pedal steel and banjo, combined with drum machines and heavy synth reminiscent of disco-pop. This nuanced blend of styles and relatable songwriting garnered Musgraves an audience far beyond those who listen to the male-dominated and stylistically narrow country radio, where male artists deliver processed hip-hop grooves or songs about partying, drinking beer, and objectifying their girlfriends. Female artists who engage with country music are producing sounds and songs that move beyond the tightly controlled sonic parameters of country radio. Their music tells stories in musically creative and engaging ways without sounding like yet another piece of

"boyfriend country."[84] As a result, industry executives may declare them to be "not country enough" and limit their airtime, which further limits their opportunities in the market for that genre. Like the chapters that precede it, this chapter relies on analysis of reception in journalistic sources, as well as analysis of music and performance; but it also incorporates accounts of my own concertgoing experiences in 2019 and 2021 to help build an understanding of female country performers' styles and personas in this era.

Chapter 5 returns to an individual artist. This chapter examines Taylor Swift's career from the start of her work in country music in 2006 to the release of her 2020 album *folklore,* with specific attention to her musical transition from country to pop in 2014 with the release of *1989.* Swift's career as a country-pop artist who turned into a Top-40 pop star has broken records and shifted musical and artistic priorities for subsequent female country artists. The general narrative about Swift that pop music journalists have cultivated polices the boundary of country music: Chris Willman, Jon Caramanica and Lizzie Widdicombe all separately belittled or questioned Swift's songwriting credentials, accused her of betraying country music, or presented her musical autonomy and success in a condescending manner. Willman claimed that she was writing "non-serious" country music because her audience consisted largely of young women.[85]

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[84] Tom Roland, "'Boyfriend Country' Brings Sensitivity to the Genre – And to the CMA Ballot," *Billboard,* November 11, 2019. https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/country/8543442/boyfriend-country-sensitive-songs-trend-cma.

[85] Chris Willman, "Princess Crossover" *New York Magazine,* October 4, 2010. https://nymag.com/arts/popmusic/features/68796/; Jon Caramanica, "My Music, MySpace, My Life," *New York Times,* November 7, 2008. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/arts/music/09cara.html.

Focusing on Taylor Swift and how she continues to cross between genres allows us to see clearly the gendered boundaries of country music. This focus also illuminates the careers of female country music stars who have followed Swift in walking the line between pop and country.

Swift's career in country was cultivated carefully by Swift and her team in the wake of The Chicks's ban from country radio. Swift's decision to leave the genre and the country industry with her release of an all-pop album in 2014, titled *1989*, was understood as abrupt. Yet the stylistic and publicity moves that she made in order to transition away from the country music industry show us how genre works both socially and musically. Central to my understanding of Swift is the transformation of her attachment to her white, youthful innocence as a country artist into a retrenched white feminism as an adult pop artist. From 2006 to 2012, Swift's music featured progressively more pop production elements as she moved closer to pop radio. Even though her deliberate break with country radio and the industry did not come until the release of her fifth studio album, *1989* (2014) Swift clearly set up the transition on *Red* (2012). This release contains elements of electronic dance music and flashy pop production on songs like "We Are Never Getting Back Together," alongside Swift's trademark ballads like "All Too Well," which featured acoustic instrumentation that was stylistically closer to country music. The chapter ends with a brief survey of Swift's recent pop releases and political statements, assessing how Swift's pop persona, configured through her whiteness, afforded her a position of privilege within the music industry that might not have been possible had she remained a country artist.

Whereas the case studies in chapters 3, 4, and 5 are all focused on white female performers and issues specifically related to the intersection of gender bias and white privilege, the conclusion turns to racism in country music through examination of Beyoncé's performance with The Chicks at the 2016 CMA awards, Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road," and Black country artist Mickey Guyton's long tenure in the Nashville industry prior to her debut album release in 2021. Calls for gender equity in country music have been framed by an individualist white feminism, leaving out non-white members of the country community whether through lack of opportunity or through the dismissal of Black people's historic contributions to the development of country music.[86] Guyton has been called "too pop" by her own label, even as white male country artists like Sam Hunt have released best-selling tracks influenced by pop and hip-hop such as "Body Like a Back Road" (2017).[87] Guyton's career stands in contrast to the careers of white female artists discussed throughout this document, not because her musical output is different or her skills less sharp, but because as a Black woman her participation in the genre of country has been hindered by social exclusion.

This document centers musical and cultural-economic analysis of the country music industry to illuminate how structural inequities based on race and gender are maintained. To that end the case studies of this document look at different time periods,

[86] Karen Pittelman, "Another Country: On the Relationship between Country Music and White Supremacy—And what We Can Do About it," *Medium,* December 17, 2018. https://medium.com/@Pittelman/another-country-80a05dd7fc15.
[87] Jewly Hight, "Is Country Music Finally Ready for Mickey Guyton?" *Los Angeles Times,* April 9, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-04-09/mickey-guyton-country-singer.

artists, particular modes of stylistic blending, and industry level concerns to expand our understanding of the country music industry. Each chapter contributes to the ever-expanding body of feminist musicological discourse, include additions to the sparse musicological work on each artist. Most importantly, this dissertation prioritizes crossover and movement within and between musical genres. It is my intention that this dissertation should serve was a starting point for understanding how an intersectional and historically informed approach to the study of musical genres expands our knowledge of popular music sounds and the business that makes them.

Chapter 2. Brenda Lee: A Case Study in Country Crossover, 1950 – 1980s

Known in 2022 as the "unofficial mayor" of Nashville, Brenda Lee's career narrative has been shaped in large part through her status as a child star.[1] Lee was a powerhouse from her earliest days, with an impressive voice and an ability to sing songs that evoked themes far beyond her years. From her early performances of Hank Williams's "Hey, Good Lookin'" in 1952 at seven years old to the release of her first original single, "I'm Sorry," with Decca Records in 1960 at age sixteen, Lee developed a striking public persona as a teenage rockabilly star.[2] In the long career that followed Lee has shown considerable staying power: at the cusp of adulthood she transitioned from rockabilly to the string-laden Nashville Sound, then later to the country-pop aesthetic of the 1970s and 1980s.

This chapter investigates how Brenda Lee's career developed in relation to different stylistic manifestations such as rockabilly, the Nashville Sound, and rock 'n' roll. Lee rose to fame in the late 1950s at the peak of the rockabilly era, a time when the idea of crossover (moving from one genre to another) was considered normal within the

[1] Jonathan Bernstein, "The Life of Brenda Lee, the Pop Heroine Next Door," *Rolling Stone,* February 20, 2018. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/inside-the-life-of-brenda-lee-the-pop-heroine-next-door-205175/?fbclid=IwAR2QfHNlmPS-nZmjP0ydQ6_94dtEzdI8ekiWjnt2KHGM1-4Af7DXb4HMiWU.
[2] Paul Kingsbury, liner notes to *Brenda Lee "Little Miss Dynamite" Box Set* (Bear Family Records, 1995).

popular music industry. As rockabilly became less popular in the early 1960s, giving way to the Nashville Sound era, Lee negotiated the stylistic connectivity of rockabilly, country and western, rhythm and blues, and country-pop stylings within a more heterogeneous mainstream music market that would become less welcoming of crossover artists like Lee by the 1970s.

Lee provides a good starting point for understanding crossover and genre movement from a country music perspective because her career relied on blended genres from her youth to adulthood and because she had difficulty sustaining her career after the music industry stopped prioritizing genre crossover. According to David Brackett, during the early days of rock 'n' roll (or rockabilly), record label executives "encouraged media writers to think of the crossing of music-categorical boundaries as the transgression of social categories" in ways that had not been as typical before the 1950s.[3] Prior to the 1950s, musical marketing categories were designated based on social categories like race and class with particular music being made for and by a particular audience.[4] The idea of crossover became a part of industry discourse beginning in the 1950s, when artists would have songs move to the mainstream pop charts from niche genres like country or rhythm and blues. It is important to recognize that crossover of the 1950s resulted from new styles such as rhythm and blues, rockabilly, and rock 'n' roll gaining a broader mainstream audience—not from the tightly controlled radio and record label

[3] David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 281.
[4] The historical formation of genre, or musical marketing categories, is discussed in the introduction.

maneuvering that established genre boundaries in subsequent decades. As Brackett writes, the idea of "crossover" rose to common parlance within the industry during 1971-72, and had gained "everyday ubiquity" by the mid-1970s.[5] By the 1970s, if an artist was loyal *enough* to one genre (like country music) they could easily be snubbed by the mainstream pop charts because genre categories came to be shaped by radio formatting practices and musical styles.[6]

Brenda Lee's career shows how a country-to-pop crossover in the 1960s was shaped by marketing positioning rather than stylistic associations. Lee's career demonstrates how crossover had initially allowed music to slip through the cracks of racialized genre barriers, only for those barriers to become more firmly entrenched by the 1970s. Following this thread of genre solidification, the case study of Lee's career in the 1980s affords insight into how the changing processes of genre crossover had material consequences for an artist like Lee. Her performance on the eleventh season of the music television program *Austin City Limits* offers a key example of how Lee repositioned herself as a legacy artist, looking back to the rockabilly era and as a pop and country artist.

[5] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 281.
[6] Eric Weisbard, *Top-40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 2-3.

The Crossover Potential of Rockabilly

The term "rockabilly" is often used interchangeably with "rock 'n' roll" to describe new popular music styles that fused country and western styles with rhythm and blues that were created during the 1950s and 1960s. The formation of rockabilly, and later rock 'n' roll, grew out of a massive socio-political shift in US society following World War II. As Michael Bertrand has written, "rock 'n' roll owed its existence to the earlier dissemination and endorsement of rhythm and blues," which had occurred rapidly within the "segregated South, where black as well as white teenagers began to seek R&B recordings in the late 1940s and early 1950s."[7] Brenda Lee was one such teenager, a white consumer and performer who was part of the trivialized young adult market segment of rockabilly and rock 'n' roll fans. These fans were billed as "a homogeneous audience of white middle-class youths flaunting a superficial rebellion" framed against the "musical and social establishment" of record label and radio executives.[8] Rockabilly in particular is known for its associations with the stylistic blending of country and R&B sounds. Craig Morrison identifies the earliest appearance of the word rockabilly in an edition of *Billboard* from June 23, 1956 which described Ruckus Tyler's "Rock Town Rock": "Tyler is still another rockabilly warbler with a good beat, tremulous tone and hackneyed material built around the word 'rock'."[9] These initial reviews of rockabilly also point to early Elvis Presley records as having crossover potential in their likelihood

[7] Michael Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 20.
[8] Bertrand, *Race, Rock, and Elvis,* 61.
[9] Craig Morrison, *Go Cat Go! Rockabilly Music and Its Makers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 2.

to appeal to multiple markets: "Presley is a potent new chanter who can rock over a tune for either the country or the r. & b. markets."[10] The potential for an artist's output to be viable in multiple markets was central to how crossover functioned in the 1950s and 1960s.

Brenda Lee is an artist who, much like Presley, would be claimed both by the country music and rock 'n' roll industries. Lee was mentioned briefly in Bill Malone's *Country Music U.S.A.*, originally published in 1968.[11] Malone focused on her musical output during the late 1950s through the 1960s, presenting her as a rockabilly performer "comfortable with both country and black music."[12] In *The Music of Black Americans: A History,* Eileen Southern describes rock 'n' roll much as Malone does: "a fusion of rhythm 'n' blues, pop, and country-and-western elements," noting that although it became a "largely white-artist music later called rock," Black artists contributed to its initial development.[13] Describing Black artists who were part of this musical moment, Southern cites Fats Domino and Chuck Berry as two figures who were "acclaimed...rock 'n' roll poets," writing their own music that white artists would later cover, maximizing profits for record labels and leaving little for the Black originators.[14] By contrast, Malone defines the term "rockabilly" as the successful fusion of "'rocking' black music and

[10] Morrison, *Go Cat Go!*, 3.
[11] Bill C. Malone and Tracey E.W. Laird, *Country Music U.S.A.: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Austin, TX: University of Austin Press, 2018), 292.
[12] Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.: 50th Anniversary Edition*, 292-293.
[13] Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 2nd edn. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 505.
[14] Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 2nd edn., 506.

'hillbilly' music," negating the ways white artists appropriated Black musical idioms for profit.[15]

White artists' appropriation of elements associated with African American performance styles characterized US popular music in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Such appropriation is most evident in cases where white rock 'n' roll or rockabilly artists covered Black artists' music: Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right" (1954) versus Elvis Presley's more popular version released the same year is a ready example.[16] Rockabilly does have a more complex role than just being synonymous with rock 'n' roll. Robynn Stilwell describes the emergence of rock 'n' roll "as an umbrella term for a number of southern regional styles—including jump band blues, New Orleans rhythm and blues, Texas Swing, even Cajun two-step."[17] Within this mix, Stillwell describes rockabilly as the "most strongly associated with this moment," and as "a short-lived style that is rife with contradictions."[18] Rockabilly's "contradictions" stem from its being a "rural, blues-based music...considered 'black' in style" that became associated with racialized stereotypes of rural, lower-class "white trash." As Stilwell notes, these stereotypes had just become popular in US culture for the first time.[19] It is within this range of contradicting styles that a young Brenda Lee would begin her career.

[15] Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.,* 293.
[16] Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 2nd edn., 506.
[17] Stilwell, "Vocal Decorum," 58.
[18] Stilwell, "Vocal Decorum," 58-59.
[19] Stilwell, "Vocal Decorum," 59.

A Young Brenda Lee

Brenda Lee got her start in the music business by winning the talent portion of the Conyers Elementary School (located in Conyers, Georgia) Talent Show in 1951.[20] Although Lee had been hoping to win the beauty portion of the pageant because it carried a cash prize, her win in the talent portion opened doors for Lee to begin performing on regional radio and television programs around her native Georgia home. The music Lee sang during this early portion of her career was shaped by her youthful musical experiences listening to *The Grand Ole Opry* on Saturday evenings: each week her family looked forward to hearing country star regulars such as Ernest Tubb, Roy Acuff, Minnie Pearl, Red Foley, and Eddie Arnold.[21] Lee went on to hold a regular spot on country variety program *The Ozark Jubilee*, where she famously played the Hank Williams tune "Jambalaya," her first hit. As a child star, Lee was best categorized as a country singer, if only because it was through the country industry that she became a recording artist. Championed by Red Foley at a gathering of disc jockeys in Springfield, Missouri in May of 1956, Brenda Lee signed a contract with Decca Records on May 21st of that year.

Following her record deal, producer Owen Brady and manager Dub Allbritten decided to have Lee record an album of hillbilly and rhythm and blues standards. This was at once a move to transition Lee from child star to the mainstream music market

[20] Brenda Lee with Richard Oermann and Julie Clay, *Little Miss Dynamite: The Life and Times of Brenda Lee* (New York: Hyperion, 2002), 10.
[21] Lee, Oermann, and Clay, *Little Miss Dynamite*, 7.

while she was a teenager, and to ensure that she would be taken seriously within a country recording scene dominated by adult performers.[22] Her standards album, entitled *Grandma, What Great Songs You Sang!,* featured Bessie Smith's "St. Louis Blues" (1925), Sophie Tucker's "Some of These Days," (1927), and Bing Crosby's "Pennies from Heaven," (1936) among other older, standard tunes. This was Lee's first effort to record more mature repertoire.[23] Lee would continue recording standard tunes, remarking in her autobiography that the standards "would be good airplay because they were known songs, they were known hits."[24] Echoing this statement, Paul Kingsbury remarks in liner notes for a boxed set of Lee's early releases that she "didn't want to record songs that wouldn't stand up to a lifetime of touring."[25] Lee's interest in career longevity likely stemmed from her days as an economically vulnerable child star who was hoping to maintain a career within the music industry however she could. Most of her career planning followed the trajectory of Judy Garland, although Lee's musical influences trended closer to blues and country and western, with influences such as Mahalia Jackson and Hank Williams.[26]

After *Grandma, What Great Songs You Sang!,* Lee released her first collection of original songs on a self-titled album in 1960. *Brenda Lee* included the track "Sweet Nothin's," written for Lee by rockabilly artist Ronnie Self. The teenaged Lee creates a

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[22] Robynn J. Stilwell, "Vocal Decorum: Voice, Body, and Knowledge in the Prodigious Singer, Brenda Lee," in *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music,* ed. Laurie Stras (London: Routledge, 2011), 58.
[23] Brenda Lee, *Grandma, What Great Songs You Sang!* (Decca Records, 1958).
[24] Lee, quoted in Kingsbury, liner notes to *Brenda Lee "Little Miss Dynamite" Box Set,* 42.
[25] Kingsbury, liner notes to *Brenda Lee "Little Miss Dynamite" Box Set*, 45.
[26] Stilwell, "Vocal Decorum," 74.

sense of intimacy in the opening of the song when she responds to a whispering male voice: "uh-huh honey." This quiet opening sets up what becomes a grooving and growl-heavy song. Lee appealed to a white mainstream audience because she was white, singing music in styles that recall African American vocal techniques like her signature growl and frequent pitch bending. These features fit naturally within the song and are an example of how styles, in this case rockabilly, moved between musical categories—genres—that were shaped by racial and social markers. With Lee's remarkable vocal precision and compelling delivery, she made the song believable; in true country singer fashion she drew the listeners into her story, creating some of what Richard Peterson would describe as "fabricated authenticity," a feeling of truth and attention that only exists within the boundaries of a song.[27] I emphasize "Sweet Nothin's" here because it was one of Lee's first original songs to hit the mainstream music market, and because it is an example of a rockabilly tune that allows us to compare Lee with other young rockabilly artists.

Consider, for example, Connie Francis's hit "Stupid Cupid" (1958) and Lee's "Sweet Nothin's" (1960). Both songs have stylistic features of rockabilly with an up-tempo beat, vocal hiccups reminiscent of Buddy Holly's signature tic, and a groove bass line propelled with a strong back beat—a nod to the R&B influence often overlooked in rockabilly music—and a saxophone solo in the bridge of the song. Both songs include smooth harmonies from backing singers. But unique to Lee's "Sweet Nothin's" is her

[27] Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 7.

vocal growl, present in most of her recordings in this style, and indicative of African American musical styles. Although Lee's and Francis's releases are stylistically similar, Lee aligned herself within the country industry by recording in Nashville and including older country tunes on her albums like "Jambalaya (on the Bayou)." These gestures toward the Nashville country music establishment have remained important for artists since the 1960s who have worried about alienating tastemakers within the industry.

Another artist who released similarly blended music was Ray Charles. His commercially successful album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* (1962) is a prime example of the stylistically shifting foundation of genres like country music, rockabilly, and rhythm and blues, and how the industry—in Charles's case the country music industry centered in Nashville—had final say over what was "in" or "out" of the genre, often along racial lines.[28] Diane Pecknold describes how carefully the country music industry handled this album: the Country Music Association (CMA) both "embraced and excluded the album...[working] a special kind of alchemy that transformed a record most obviously about the porousness of racially marked musical boundaries into a record that commented primarily on class and religion."[29] Charles used what Pecknold describes as his "individual eclecticism" to approach the "shared roots and continuous exchanges between musics that were racially coded as "black" and "white."[30] Like Brenda Lee's "Sweet Nothin's," Charles's *Modern Sounds* incorporates rhythm and

[28] Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2007), 82.
[29] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 82-83.
[30] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 85.

blues and country styles, a blend of sounds that would eventually become known as southern soul.[31]

Charles's cover of Hank Williams's "Hey Good Lookin'" is a key example of how these styles were mixed. Pecknold notes that Charles kept Williams's combination of Black musical styles intact, using a swing big band for his accompaniment, "acknowledging the fundamental interconnections between rhythm and blues and country."[32] Brenda Lee did not record "Hey Good Lookin'," but her version of another Hank Williams tune, "Jambalaya (On The Bayou)" (1960), embodied a similar mixture. Her up-tempo version retained the slightly swung rhythm of Williams's original but included a driving bass line and saxophone accompaniment, leaning closer to how Charles incorporated black musical idioms in his version of "Hey Good Lookin'." Yet, because both songs were Hank Williams covers, in singing them both Lee and Charles were also deliberately acknowledging and participating in the country industry in Nashville. Lee's version of "Jambalaya" was released as part of her first album containing original music, *Brenda Lee* (1960). This album contained the tune "Dynamite," a rockabilly tune intended for the pop market of the early 1960s. "Dynamite" is a brisk and blends Lee's signature growl with a backing string section in a high register—balancing the presence of mainstream pop idioms (the strings) with rhythm and blues styles (Lee's vocal production). "Dynamite" contrasts with Lee's

[31] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 85.
[32] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 94.

rendition of "Jambalaya (On The Bayou)," which was meant to ingratiate her with the Nashville country scene by making reference to popular past artists like Hank Williams.

Although Ray Charles and Brenda Lee had different career trajectories, both combined elements from black and white musical genres. Yet the two worked under different constraints defined by their race and gender roles, particularly within the country music industry. Lee, as a product of late 1950s rockabilly, was making music that participated in both black and white racial codes, much like Charles's *Modern Sounds*, but because Lee was young and white she did not have to negotiate this blending of styles as a racialized process. Lee's race and youth shaped her interactions within the country music industry, where the use of African American musical idioms was common, but only deemed acceptable or promotable when coming from a white performer a trend which continues in the country industry to this day.

When Charles released *Modern Sounds,* the country industry was in a pivotal moment; rock 'n' roll had taken some valuable radio airtime away from country music. The industry would respond by developing a new image as a genre representing white middle-class Americans, while still maintaining racial divides among genres.[33] Pecknold describes the balancing act the country music industry, in particular the Country Music Association (CMA), underwent in order to be seen as both traditional and modern. Following World War II, the recording industry in Nashville shifted their business model to cultivate a different type of audience. [34] The country industry wanted to cultivate a core

[33] Pecknold cites the Country Music Association's (CMA) embrace of the album as a strategy for showing that the CMA had a "mainstream" position on race in *The Selling Sound,* 91.
[34] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 66.

demographic of white, blue-collar middle class Americans rather than be seen as a music associated with "backward hillbillies or ignorant hayseeds."[35] For artists like Brenda Lee who began their careers within the Nashville music industry but were a part of the rockabilly craze, this transitional period within the country industry made it difficult to maintain a steady career within the country or pop markets.

During the mid-1950s Lee was rooted within the rockabilly scene, still doing guest spots on *The Ozark Jubilee* along with touring extensively in a group with fellow rockabilly teen stars.[36] Lee's music and her youth are key examples of the contradictions Robynn Stilwell describes within the rockabilly genre. Rockabilly was seen within the country industry as both "'infantile' and highly sexualized," reinforcing the racialized patterns that shape genre boundaries such as Ray Charles's interactions with country music.[37] The rockabilly set Lee performed during her tween and teen years contained music that "was considered 'black' in style," but she was white in appearance, and her presence in the genre disrupts its hypermasculine placement within rock and country music history.[38] In Lee's 2002 autobiography, she recalls her 1958 touring season when she was performing a "fast-paced rockabilly set" that was popular with the younger audiences who made up Lee's fan base.[39] In discussing this particular tour, Lee emphasized that she traveled in separate cars from her tour counterparts, and that although they all got along and talked about whatever the latest hot song on the charts

[35] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 83.
[36] Lee, Oermann, Clay, *Little Miss Dynamite,* 44.
[37] Stilwell, "Vocal Decorum," 59.
[38] Stilwell, "Vocal Decorum," 59.
[39] Lee, Oermann, Clay, *Little Miss Dynamite,* 44.

was, Lee was a country girl and the rest of her rockabilly tour mates were not.[40] This contradiction shows how Lee took care in crafting her image. Lee built a successful career with rockabilly performances; but by the time she told her story in the autobiography, she saw a need to maintain some distance from rockabilly to secure her continuing connection to country. The balancing act was possible in part because of Lee's status as a child and teen star, which gave her an aura of innocence, but her image would change as she grew up, and for Lee, her family, and manager Dub Allbritten, a long career was the goal.

Brenda Lee and the Nashville Sound

Until the 1950s, the Nashville music scene had been a relatively small and overlooked part of the broader landscape of the music industry.[41] Country music became a centralized commercial force in Nashville in the late 1950s, a product of the post-World War II record label boom in that city. Travis Stimeling describes the emergence of the Nashville Sound in the mid-1950s as a moment when "country record producers and other Nashville music industry executives were forced to save country music, which faced a rock and roll 'onslaught.'"[42] One of the ways the industry hoped to gain more popularity was by marketing country music toward a middle-class demographic. This was done through emphasizing the traditionalism of country music as "closely associated with

[40] Lee, Oermann, Clay, *Little Miss Dynamite,* 45.
[41] Stimeling, *Nashville Cats: Record Production in Music City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 56.
[42] Stimeling, *Nashville Cats*, 117.

the aggressive performance of whiteness" and aligned with the racism present more broadly within American society.[43] The perpetuation of conservative political affiliations of country music was carried out by country industry executives engaged in a negotiation between acknowledging stylistic markers that made music "country," and working to secure a place for country in the mainstream market then dominated by rock 'n' roll and pop.[44] The Nashville Sound era coincided with the decline of honky-tonk and rockabilly in the late 1950s, just as country music was working to "de-stigmatize" itself to become a successful commercial genre.[45] Artists producing music during this period include Patsy Cline and Chet Atkins. Their music was known for being "soft and inoffensive," often with no noticeable twang in their singing, and often including a string orchestra and smoother pop vocal groups within their arrangements.[46]

Where rockabilly might have been a successful fusion of styles, it bears repeating that this fusion of styles was still operating within the "racialized and classed logics of the twentieth-century US popular music industry."[47] In describing the early Nashville Sound era of the late 1950s, Travis Stimeling notes that "the music of black artists and rural white artists were treated as idiosyncratic "Others" to a popular mainstream that reached a demographic that transcended socioeconomic and geographic—but not

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[43] Diane Pecknold, "Making Country Modern: The Legacy of Modern Sounds In Country and Western Music," in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 82.
[44] Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation Press & Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 62.
[45] Jensen, *The Nashville Sound*, 62.
[46] Craig Morrison, *Go Cat Go! Rockabilly Music and Its Makers*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 112.
[47] Travis Stimeling, *Nashville Cats*, 118-119.

gender—boundaries."[48] In considering crossover, the racial logic of market categories is doubly apparent. As Stimeling describes, crossover appeal was identified as "one of the markers of great success, especially from the 1950s onward."[49] If a song had market potential in multiple categories there would be greater financial benefits for artists, record labels, and most especially music publishers.[50] An artist like Brenda Lee working within the Nashville industry should be understood as being at once an artist with crossover (and therefore financial) potential, but also be understood within the Nashville Sound era. Lee's discography demonstrates that this musical moment was not a homogeneous collection of sounds; rather, her work demonstrates a "remarkable heterogeneity of musical styles." [51] This mix demands that we consider the differences among individual styles beyond the political connotations of broad genre categorizations.

Brenda Lee's music from this period illustrates the early 1960s as a moment of transition for country music, and the popular music industry more broadly. Lee worked with well-known Nashville Sound producer Owen Bradley, and she recorded songs resembling those of other stars like Patsy Cline and Faron Young, who also had success on the pop and country charts.[52] Paul Kingsbury aptly describes this early portion of Lee's career as a "flirtation with country music" with a "pronounced emphasis on ballads and standards."[53] Kingsbury's description of Lee does not attest to the stylistic diversity I

[48] Stimeling, *Nashville Cats*, 119.
[49] Stimeling, *Nashville Cats*, 119.
[50] Stimeling, *Nashville Cats*, 119.
[51] Stimeling, *Nashville Cats*, 121.
[52] Jensen, *The Nashville Sound*, 80.
[53] Kingsbury, Title, 5.

have described, but he does note that Lee was the "best-selling female in popular music," noting that though Lee was moving between genres (country to pop) and releasing albums in different styles (rockabilly and the Nashville Sound), this formula was working, at least for the early 1960s.[54]

Lee's popularity between 1960 and 1962 was shaped in large part by songs styled in the Nashville Sound, such as her hit single "Sorry," released in 1960. This ballad, like "Sweet Nothin's," contains mature themes for the then sixteen-year-old singer. On "Sorry" we hear lush string arrangements and Lee's voice alternating between powerful vocalizations and softer spoken sections that give the impression Lee is speaking to a lover. Lee aligned herself with the Nashville Sound by recording albums on Nashville's Music Row with the session players dubbed "the A-Team."[55] Her hit song "Dum Dum," from her fifth studio album *All the Way* (1961), is another example. "Dum Dum" is a mid-tempo tune marked by a smooth rhythm section that dilutes the rock 'n' roll tendencies still audible in Lee's call and response vocals or the saxophone solo in the bridge. Lee's transition to material with mainstream musical features was an ongoing investment in her career longevity. By 1961 Lee and manager Dub Allbritten had set their sights on Hollywood and intended to both move Lee away from the youthfulness and unruly nature of rock 'n' roll and transition her to an adult performer by age seventeen in 1962. Remarking on this period in her 2002 autobiography, Lee describes a profile about

[54] Kingsbury, Title, 5.
[55] For information on the "A Team," see Travis Stimeling, "The Musicianship of the Nashville Cats," in *Nashville Cats: Record Production in Music City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 62-116.

her in *Esquire*: the tone of the piece was "condescending... about [her] youth." Lee noted that the article did point out that she was making $300,000 a year and "quoted Decca's New York promotion executive Lenny Salidor as saying that the label was eager to disassociate me 'from the stigma of rock 'n' roll.'"[56]

Lee's turn to adulthood came in the form of a move to Los Angeles as Lee and her management attempted to transition her to film work, which they considered a fitting avenue for adult stars. Lee was not a born actor and her silver screen debut was a flop. From her short-lived film career Lee made the jump to supper-club performances, a type of production that showcased her skills as a singer who loved to perform. She left the county fair stages and moved into "elite showrooms and elegant supper clubs" in late 1961, learning the art of pacing and staging from Dick Barstow, whom Lee credited with connecting her to her emotions and presenting lyrics in a relatable way.[57] Yet, by the mid-1960s Lee was falling out of step with the music industry. Her single releases in 1965, including "Too Little Time," were the first in six years not to appear on any popularity charts.[58] Rock music was becoming more popular and centering social issues more squarely. The country industry was capturing a growing segment of the market, but it was also pursuing a more sequestered style leaning away from pop and crossover releases. The country music industry in Nashville made a concerted effort to align the

[56] Lee, Oermann, Clay, *Little Miss Dynamite,* 115.
[57] Lee, Oermann, Clay, *Little Miss Dynamite,* 125.
[58] Music from this period of Lee's career is not readily available today. Most streaming services only offer her albums from the late 1950s to 1964, then anthologies, holiday re-releases, and Lee's gospel records from the 1990s onwards. Some lower-quality recordings from Lee's releases between the mid-1960s to the 1990s can be found on YouTube.

format of country music with that of Top-40 radio stations.[59] This meant that artist and record labels producing records were attuned to the styles popular on different radio formats. Although the country industry resisted the appearance of country's commercialism, by the mid 1960s it was clear that the listeners of country music had become a sellable commodity.

Brenda Lee had risen to fame during a period of time when the country music industry was working to cultivate the blend of commercialism and traditionalism that was a "powerful means of popularizing the genre's past and making it more palatable" for both academics and intellectuals who had "denigrated country music," and a radio industry that had not seen how the music might appeal to their consumers.[60] The political maneuvering of country music into a profitable commercial radio format translated to the stylistic shifts within the format indirectly through pressure to maintain sales and popularity through radio airplay. Lee's career had thrived on blending popular music genres, but as the country industry became more focused on producing music in a particular identifiable style, her opportunities for success dwindled. The rough career transition Lee experienced during the early 1970s serves as a key example of how shifts in genre-based musical categorization dictated by industry can impact an artist's career.

[59] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 159-164.
[60] Pecknold, *The Selling Sound,* 169.

1970s, Career Stagnation, and Crossover

For all the fame she had garnered in the decade prior, Lee's career stagnated during the 1970s. Lee's career had effectively functioned as crossover since she began recording music in the late 1950s, but the 1970s proved difficult because the music industry (radio, record labels, music writers) had begun creating firmer barriers between genre categories. As Lee continued to move between genres, creating music situated between genres and later between different radio formats, the new rigidity of genre in the 1970s made it difficult to market her music. Lee's work during this period helps shape a nuanced understanding of how the idea of "crossover" had changed between the 1950s and the 1980s.

As country music and rhythm and blues were practiced in the 1950s and '60s, crossing over to mainstream pop was an accepted part of their genre designations. Patsy Cline, who was a country recording artist during the 1950s and 1960s, saw success on the pop charts while still maintaining close ties to the country industry. Country music industry figures found Cline's pop appeal acceptable because the "country flavor was not too strong."[61] In this period it was common practice for artists to record music that would appeal to a wide range of audiences, and sell in multiple marketing categories. This afforded artists like Lee or Patsy Cline stylistic license and opportunity for mainstream success: their songs appealed to a mainstream audience because their music was not

[61] Jensen, *The Nashville Sound,* 116.

"too" country.[62] The balancing act of sounding "too country" or "not country enough" to maintain an identity within the genre became more difficult during as the 1960s went on.

By the 1970s crossover was framed around particular songs becoming popular with mainstream audiences, rather than entire genres (like rock 'n' roll or R&B) moving to the mainstream. Thus, just as boundaries were tightening around particular genres, what it meant to cross over became designated by specific musical characteristics as identified by record labels and radio which allowed a country or rhythm and blues song to have mainstream success. How one actually gained mainstream success, however, was complicated. For an artist from a smaller musical category like country or soul to have mainstream success, they needed to be separated from the demographic and social components of their genre. For country artists, crossing into pop music meant letting go of hillbilly personas associated with backwardness and conservatism; for soul music, crossing over often meant relinquishing attachments to the Black Power movement or other forms of Black activism. Historian Charles Hughes describes this phenomenon as seen in the career of Black country artist Charley Pride, describing the "balancing act" that soul and country musicians made when it came to talking about race.[63]

Beyond the genre categorizations that came from record labels, radio formatting also played a role in defining what it meant to cross over during the period of industry transition beginning in the late 1960s. Eric Weisbard describes the shift to emphasis on

[62] Eric Weisbard, "Country Radio: Format and Genre," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (City: Oxford University Press, 2017): 236.
[63] Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South,* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2015): 132.

radio formatting as a rise in a wide variety of identity-based radio *formats* where a set of songs was matched with people, by contrast with *genres* which focused on "matching a set of songs with a set of ideas."[64] The rise of format or identity-based radio in the early 1970s meant that there was little flexibility for music to move between formats, or to be placed in two or more different formats. For an artist like Lee, who was working in and around country music as part of the Nashville industry, having songs move to different radio formats, regardless of genre, became more difficult. Formats were directed to a specific audience, which lead to the assumption that an artist could not succeed with a range formats, and therefore audiences. Singer-songwriter Dolly Parton, a predecessor to Brenda Lee, offers a successful example of cultivating a radio format. Within the genre and format battle of the late 1960s, Parton positioned herself squarely as a country artist, not attempting to garner a wider audience or find a place within Top-40 radio programming practices.[65] She "applied the country format's mix of pop stylings and homey authenticity aggressively, taking both to extremes" as she pushed against Nashville's expectations where radio programmers were searching for a more balanced blend of pop and authenticity akin to the Nashville Sound.[66] Important to understanding

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[64] Eric Weisbard, *Top-40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 13-14.

[65] Top-40 radio typically refers to the most popular songs on radio, as dictated by radio popularity charts through platforms like Mediabase or trade publications like *Billboard*. Since the 1970s, radio programming has been based on popularity charts and typically relies on standardized playlists for song selection. For information on how this has functioned within the country music industry see Weisbard, "Country Radio: Format and Genre," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 229-247; Jada Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Song Chart, 1996-2016," *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 5 (2019): 538-560.

[66] Weisbard, *Top-40 Democracy*, 77.

Parton, however, is that she was "determined...to actively pursue country music rather than Top 40."[67] By not doing crossover sounds in the 1960s and staying true to the expectations of the country format, Parton was able to secure airplay within that format in the 1970s in ways that Lee was not able to as a crossover artist.

Crossover in the 1970s looked more rigid than it had in the previous two decades, and it was dictated more closely by the particular direction of a crossover, especially for country artists. Because of race-based ideologies around particular genres, white southern vernacular music was seen as "reactionary" or backward, and R&B was seen as a "vanguard genre."[68] David Brackett described the possibility of crossover as more present for country and R&B, but the directions that songs within those genres could go had changed in the 1970s. Describing this process, Eric Weisbard notes that "R&B was ripe for crossover *into* Top 40 if it succeeded with blacks" but that "a country hit, like Parton's "I Will Always Love You," was presumed to be of no pop interest [to radio] and would be played only on country radio stations. Country pop-crossover...meant crossover *out of* adult pop (MOR/AC) [middle of the road/adult contemporary] to country listeners."[69] In essence, country radio became an Adult Contemporary format, with tight genre boundaries.[70] To paraphrase Weisbard: country music was still pop music, even though it had put up barriers around what the genre meant and by what criteria an artist could be included—but not all pop music was country music.[71]

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[67] Weisbard, *Top-40 Democracy*, 78.
[68] Weisbard, *Top-40 Democracy*, 87.
[69] Weisbard, *Top-40 Democracy*, 87.
[70] Weisbard, *Top-40 Democracy*, 110.
[71] Weisbard, *Top-40 Democracy*, 110.

In her 2002 autobiography, Lee described herself during the early 1970s as demoralized and frustrated. Writing specifically about the fall of 1972, Lee discusses how charts had become more specialized, saying "you were either rock or soul or country. I didn't know where I belonged. I got real discouraged with the business...I was at a crossroads. I thought maybe it was time to rest, time to rethink my music. I was musically adrift."[72] Lee's releases from the 1970s only expanded the wide range of stylistic choices she had been a part of in the 1960s. Her album *Memphis Portrait,* recorded in Memphis and released in 1970, is a great example. The liner notes trace Lee's career through her work in Nashville and New York, offering Memphis as the next logical step. One example of the versatility of style that is seen on *Memphis Portrait* is Lee's cover of the J.C. Fogerty song "Proud Mary," first recorded by the band Creedence Clearwater Revival and popularized by Tina Turner. Lee's version is in keeping with R&B influences present in other versions of the song; the sound of the organ ensures that it feels less like a country song and more like a pop radio tune of the time. Immediately following "Proud Mary" on the album was Lee's version of "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man," written by Chips Moman and Dan Penn, popularized by Aretha Franklin. Lee's performance on this track draws the listener in through carefully controlled dynamic phrasing. She presents a steady crescendo throughout the song, which ends with powerful vocals mirroring the increased volume and size of the instrumental accompaniment.

The liner notes for *Memphis Portrait* describe the album as "[showcasing] the artist she is today, with all her elusive, fast-changing emotions and total awareness of

[72] Lee, Oermann, Clay, *Little Miss Dynamite,* 199.

everything happening on the music scene around her."[73] The notes make reference to Lee's famous "I'm Sorry" (1960) and "Coming on Strong" (1966), but explain her new music as a "move in new directions," acknowledging that Lee had always been able and willing to work within a wide range of styles.[74] Lee's subsequent recordings continued to present songs in a broad range of styles. Her 1973 release, *New Sunrise*, included "My Love" by Paul McCartney, along with a sultry version of Stevie Wonder's "You Are the Sunshine of My Life."[75] Arranged with smooth strings swelling along with the backing vocals, Lee's "You Are the Sunshine of My Life" created a sense of intimacy even through the driving drum pattern; the up-tempo rhythm section seems to contradict the way Lee's vocals move around the words in a lyrical, ballad style.

New Sunrise begins with Lee's renditions of pop and R&B hits, then moves more clearly into country with the fifth track of the A side, "Wrong Ideas."[76] This song begins with a rhythm section emphasizing the downbeats, and a slide guitar gliding atop the arrangement between phrases, clearly evoking country music idioms. The six tracks on the A side of *New Sunrise* strike a balance between different styles. This balance continues on the B side, which opens with a Merle Haggard song, "Everybody's Had The Blues," leaning heavily on country stylings with a more pronounced vocal twang and string band arrangement, and closing with the song "Something For a Rainy Day," written by Ronal McCown, that tends more toward pop stylings with orchestral backing.

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[73] Brenda Lee, *Memphis Portrait*. (Decca Records, DL 75232, 1970). Liner Notes.
[74] Liner notes to *Memphis Portrait.*
[75] Brenda Lee, *L.A. Sessions*, (MCA Records, MCA-2233, 1976).
[76] Lee, *L.A. Sessions.*

It may have been that Lee just did not have a song good enough to hit on the mainstream radio charts. The fact that what it meant to "crossover" had changed from broader categories to individual songs is certainly a contributing factor to Lee's lack of success during this period.

Lee has been described as a "crossover" artist in the early portion of her career, and that was still true of the music she recorded over the 1970s. Although she was certainly capable of recording music in a wide range of styles, because access to radio airplay was now dictated by fitting solidly within a genre, Lee's form of crossover was no longer viable. *Memphis Portrait* and *L.A. Sessions* provide examples of the progress of Lee's career: toward country, and eventually gospel music as seen in her 2007 release *Gospel Duets with Treasured Friends*. With no access to radio, Lee's new work sold poorly. Lee began to transition her career to that of a "legacy" artist, with a focus on past hits rather than present-day achievements.

The 1980s: Reshaping a Career

Lee's 1986 performance on the eleventh season of Austin City Limits (ACL), a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) program, helps us see how Lee maintained her career by cultivating attention to her past work. ACL's programming was varied: along with Brenda Lee, other artists scheduled for the same season included The Grateful Dead, Loretta Lynn, Reba McEntire, Ronnie Milsap, and ZZ Top. As Tracy E. W. Laird has documented, the show has always worked to bring different styles together, showcasing the broader landscape of American popular music even as the music industry was

working to divide audiences between race, class and region.[77] Though Lee's performance on ACL was one small episode in her long career, it provides insight into how she balanced her role as country recording artist and an original rockabilly star.

The printed program for the broadcast describes Lee as "having what it takes, 'it,' in this case, is the talent and savvy to roll with the punches of the ever-changing music business."[78] Highlighting her youth at the start of her career, the program notes describe Lee as "warm, ... down-to-earth," still within the "mainstream of the music industry" and standing "head and shoulders with country music's best."[79] This blurb, which seems like an adaptation of MCA Records' press materials from 1985, also emphasizes that Lee had been a crossover artist even before the term was coined.[80] This reiteration of Lee being a "crossover" artist, or having "crossover" sounds in her music, has been central to how Lee is defined as an artist. At the same time, in these materials Lee was described as part of the mainstream music industry only in relation to country music. This description strategically highlights Lee's country music roots, opting to secure her reputation within one genre. Country music is slightly more hospitable to older female performers than mainstream pop, and country has made space for women categorized as legacy artists through various lifetime achievement awards, ongoing invitations to awards programs, and support for religiously affiliated albums.

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[77] Tracey E.W. Laird, *Austin City Limits: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 28-29.
[78] Austin City Limits, "Sweethearts of the Radio" paper program with performer biographies, October 28, 1986, box 29, folder 15, ACL/KRLU collection, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archive.
[79] ACL, "Sweethearts of the Radio."
[80] ACL, "Sweethearts of the Radio."

The setlist and setlist drafts for this television appearance focus on Lee's relationship to country music and situate her legacy status.[81] Drafts of the setlist for Lee's ACL program reveal that she moved from a few introductory tunes, to a "hit medley" of her own songs, to her first major single, the ballad "I'm Sorry." These songs were followed by the option to present two of her novelty Christmas hits, "Jingle Bell Rock" and "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree."[82] A section called "Yesterday Once More" would include songs like "Tutti Frutti" and "Johnny B. Goode" by Little Richard; "Only You," "Rip It Up," and "Great Balls of Fire" by Jerry Lee Lewis; and "Rockin' Robin" and "Can't Help Falling in Love With You," originally recorded by Elvis. The last two songs on the draft setlist were more traditional country tunes: "Peace In the Valley" and "I'll Fly Away."[83] In the several drafts of this program that were available in the Austin City Limits files at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, this general structure holds. Each draft began with a medley of Lee's hits from the 1960s and early 1970s, included a section entitled "Yesterday of Tomorrow," then featured a combination of rockabilly songs from the 1950s and 1960s. A subsequent "requests" section was slated to feature four songs, and then the nearly 50-minute set was to close with classic country tunes.

This combination of music emphasizes the diverse range of Lee's repertoire and also points to the type of career in the music industry, especially in the country music

[81] A recording of the program has not been available.
[82] Set list for ACL taping, 1985/6, box 29, folder 16, ACL/KRLU Collection, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archive.
[83] Set list for ACL taping, 1985/6.

industry, she was cultivating for herself in the 1980s. An earlier press pamphlet from MCA records, used in the late 1970s and early 1980s, described Lee as having turned toward country music. At the same time, the pamphlet also avoided associating her too closely with one genre, instead emphasizing that she "[does not] want to leave out any audience" and stating that "the sophistication of recording techniques and the bridging of musical gaps will enable her to have a mass appeal."[84] While Lee's resistance to being classified into one single genre is common for artists, that Lee or her management voiced these concerns over genre designations at this mid-point in her career indicates that the shift in genre designations and boundaries that had occurred beginning in the 1970s was still a factor. With the sidelining of Lee's music from the 1970s and 1980s in mind, I understand her 1986 performance on the eleventh season of ACL as Lee shifting her music career from that of a current artist to that of a legend within the music industry.

Brenda Lee was in her forties when she filmed ACL in 1986 and had been working in the music industry nearly as long. Most often Lee's career is framed through her work in the 1960s: indeed, her music from that decade is readily available on streaming platforms today. This period of her life is probably prioritized for access today because her releases from the 1960s were the most successful. Yet Lee continued to release records in regular succession throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. In addition to those discussed above, these included *Brenda* (1973), *Brenda Lee Now* (1974), *Sincerely* (1975), *Even Better* (1980), *Take Me Back* (1980), *Only When I Laugh* (1981),

[84] MCA Publicity document for Brenda Lee, 1985, Richard Ochs Collection, box 7, folder 91, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archive.

and *Feels So Right* (1985). None of these releases earned lasting success comparable to that of her work in the 1960s. Most of Lee's albums from the 1970s and 1980s are only available on used vinyl or cassette tape, and none are readily available on streaming platforms.

Brenda Lee's performance on ACL shows how her music has been appreciated and situated in relation to various musical styles over time. Twenty-five years removed from her first record release in 1960, Lee sustained her career as someone in the stylistic middle, walking the line between country and everything else. Since the 1980s Lee has gone on to release several compilation albums of her greatest hits, and a few more recent gospel recordings. In the final chapter of her autobiography, Lee describes all of the memorabilia from her extraordinary career she has in her attic, and notes that "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" always makes the holiday season busy for her. This novelty song, originally released in 1961, returns to the top of popularity charts nearly every year, ensuring Lee's continued presence in pop culture.[85] Lee is also a regular fixture in the Nashville music scene: she has lived there for sixty years and is often described as "Nashville's unofficial mayor" because "everyone in town has a Brenda Lee story" ranging from grocery store and airport encounters to lunchtime autographs.[86] Lee's career and her success serve as a remarkable case study for better understanding how country music interacts with genre boundaries and barriers. As an artist who rose to fame as a young rockabilly turned pop and country star, Lee's musical career is a plain example of

[85] Jonathan Bernstein, "The Life of Brenda Lee, the Pop Heroine Next Door."
[86] Bernstein, "The Life of Brenda Lee."

how much the music industry changed between the late 1950s and the 1980s. In country music and other genres the consequences of artistic, musical consolidations within industry-created barriers meant that particular voices have been limited or even eliminated, reducing the potential for diverse musical production.

Lee's early success as a pop artist was shaped as much by her whiteness and youth as by her talent. Her declining popularity is an example of how country music has demanded stricter genre loyalty from its artists since the 1970s. Following these industry and genre changes through Lee's career allows us to build a more critical understanding of how the fault lines of genre are formed within the country industry. Country music has continued to afford priority access and opportunity to white male performers, and subtly punishing artists who stray from the prescribed boundaries of the narrow stylistic range of the country format most often seen in radio programming. Lee's career from the 1950s through the 1980s occurred during numerous adjustments within the recorded music industry. Her career offers a starting point for understanding exactly how female artists negotiated the country music industry, which formed around limiting and discriminatory lines based on race and gender. In the next chapter I continue the chronology of limiting practices within the country industry by turning to technological and industry level changes that occurred in the country music market in the 1990s.

Chapter 3. "Boom" for Country, "Bust" for Women: Country 'Crossover' in the 1990s and 2000s

Country format radio (and the genre as a whole) reached an all-time high number of listeners in 1993. The newfound success of country music was tracked in part through technical changes in popularity chart tabulation such as *Billboard's* use of Nielsen Soundscan—a tool for calculating sales of recorded music—starting in 1991.[1] As music scholar Joli Jensen has explained, these changes to data collection seemed to indicate that the country industry was becoming more and more profitable. As such, country music gained "respectability" or "full citizenship" alongside other genres in the music business.[2] Prior to the 1990s, country music was a "niche" genre, which interacted minimally with mainstream pop music markets. These changes early in the 1990s resulted in high visibility for the genre and apparent success by the mid-point of the decade. Those who were watching the industry's progress were excited about the growth of the market for country music early in the 1990s. Within a decade, though, country music saw a dramatic

[1] N. Anand and Richard A. Peterson describe the "SoundScan Revolution" in their 2000 article, noting that although SoundScan founders Mike Fine and Mike Shallet did not initially intend SoundScan's tracking of point-of-sale data to compile music charts, SoundScan became a useful technology in *Billboard*'s compilation and tracking process; N. Anand and Richard A. Peterson, "When Market Information Constitutes Fields: Sensemaking of Markets in the Commercial Music Industry," *Organization Science* 11, no. 3 (May/June 2000): 275.
[2] Joli Jensen, "Taking Country Music Seriously," in *Popular Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 187.

decrease in popularity and profitability. The "boom" in country music was short-lived: music sales fell to $14.6 billion in 1999, dropping another $2 billion by 2002.[3]

As Jensen describes it, this "commercial boom" and bust affected perceptions about country music's role in the industry.[4] The mainstreaming of country music was not well received by all. Some within the country industry, particularly those attached to an older version of country music that seemed untouched by mainstream influences, cited technological developments "to *criticize* the contemporary country music scene, rather than to offer additional explanations of country music's success."[5] This was, perhaps, a move to uphold a particular version of country music's authenticity. Country music was still defined in reference to its past: artists paid lyrical or stylistic homage to artists who came before, and they pointed to traditions that aligned the genre with southern roots, traditional values, and perceptions of whiteness. Because country music was also a commercial product, though, those concerns conflicted with the priorities of business, where greater earnings were the priority.[6]

It is not surprising that this period of industry change sparked new efforts to define what country music was. From the 1990s to the present day, the term

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[3] Jensen, "Taking Country Music Seriously," 183; Jocelyn R. Neal, "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft: Shania Twain's Crossover Appeal," in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: Critical and Analytical Essays*, ed. Walter Everett (New York: Routledge, 2008), 288-289.
[4] Jensen, "Taking Country Music Seriously," 184.
[5] Jensen, "Taking Country Music Seriously," 187.
[6] Sociologist Richard A. Peterson coined the term "fabricated authenticity" to describe the constructed nature of commercial country music; Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 7; see also Richard A. Peterson, "The Production of Cultural Change: The Case of Contemporary Country Music," *Social Research* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1978): 294-295.

"contemporary country" has been used interchangeably with "mainstream" or "radio" country, referring to country music's widely popular styles which change year to year.[7] Critics of contemporary country's mainstream success were quick to point out that the popularity of performers like Garth Brooks and Shania Twain with a broad listening public in the mid-1990s was "detrimental to the music" and would "hasten its predicted downfall."[8] Looking back on this moment nearly thirty years on, these fears over a general decline in the popularity of country music were unfounded. The genre is one of the most popular and profitable segments of the US recorded music industry.

Central to journalists' claims were "assumptions about genre and generic boundaries": according to Jensen, writers portrayed country music as a successful, "distinct, historically defined style" by judging whether a given release resembled music that came before, or not.[9] It is then unsurprising that the politics of being "in" or "out" of country music would revolve around genre-based inclusion. Yet, because genres are nebulous marketing categories more defined by social demographics than by style markers, country music of the 1990s became a locus for conflict about what social demographics such as age, race, and gender, could or should participate in the marketing category.[10] Jensen's discussion, which included data analysis of frequently used terms in country music journalism, describes the arc of the conversation about the genre of

[7] Phoebe Hughes, "From Bros to Gentlemen: The Problem of Consent in Contemporary Country Music," in *Whose Country Music? Genre, Identity and Belonging in Twenty-First Century Country Music Culture,* ed. Jada Watson and Paula Bishop (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2022).
[8] Jensen, "Taking Country Music Seriously," 187.
[9] Jensen, "Taking Country Music Seriously," 184.
[10] The historical formation of genre is discussed in Chapter 1.

country in this period of change. Writers first expressed surprise that country was becoming so popular; then asked questions like "why now?" at the mid-point of the decade; and finally questioned the "consequences" of the boom.[11] Jensen's analysis of this coverage provides an important starting point for considering the array of changes—big and small—that occurred in the country industry throughout the 1990s.

The story of country music through the turn of the twenty-first century is complicated; the industry had many moving parts with connections that are not always apparent. This chapter offers a path through the large- and small-scale shifts within the country industry that shaped the experiences of female artists. These issues were not unique to the country industry; rather, they were a symptom of widespread socio-political and technological changes that altered the recorded music and radio industries. Technological changes like the rise of digital music consumption, along with the increase in CD prices, led to new business practices in the recorded music industry. Radio, too, changed quickly as the 1996 Telecommunications Act altered the business climate for radio conglomerates and incentivized new ways of thinking about radio formats. For country performers, these technological and policy changes refigured how they accessed mainstream audiences—those beyond the typical country markets—to gain higher profits. The relationship between radio and country music has long been important to the genre's development: the demands of radio have shaped the criteria (both stylistic and demographic) for success in the genre.

[11] Jensen, "Taking Country Music Seriously," 183.

Some of the biggest names in country music during the mid-to-late 1990s, including Faith Hill and Garth Brooks, had crossed over from country music: they were well known to the public because of their appeal to the mainstream music market. Garth Brooks was touted as having "wide demographic appeal" and a "family image" appropriate to a range of audience members: Brooks succeeded as a touring act and received a great deal of airplay for individual songs.[12] By contrast, female artists' crossover successes were met with pushback from the country industry: critics and industry insiders alike denounced female crossover efforts as abandonment of the country industry or the genre of country.[13] Crossover songs, generally defined as songs appealing to more than one marketing category, are part of the crossover process where a single song moves from a niche marketing category (like country music, R&B, rock) to a mainstream pop/Top-40 marketing category. In-industry criticism of country's growth and its potential mainstreaming led to a heated climate for female country crossover in which the threat of public criticism discouraged women from crossing over to pursue success in mainstream pop. At the same time, implicit rules for female artists' participation in the country radio format made it difficult for them to stay in the genre because it created an inhospitable working environment. Country's "full citizenship" in the music business, with growth in the genre increasing profitability, should have increased the ability of a wide range of people to participate in the industry—but this was

[12] Chris Waddell, "Country Biz Loses as Garth Tours End," *Billboard* 112, no. 43, October 21, 2000.
[13] Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 246.

not the case. The changes to the industry only made women's relationship with country radio and music journalism rockier: these transformations created greater conflict for women who tried to cross into mainstream markets.

This chapter weaves together the technological, economic, and stylistic concerns of 1990s country by considering country crossover and women's participation in the genre. Faith Hill's career during the turn of the twenty-first century is a key case study in this chapter: Hill's work demonstrates the appeal and limitations of country crossover and shows us how female country performers balanced success in pop and country music while facing tremendous criticism from all sides of the country industry. By contrast to Hill's comparative success, The Chicks reveal how punitive the country industry can be to those who do not conform to its political requirements. In the wake of 9/11, The Chicks' slow fall from favor became a precipitous drop after lead singer Natalie Maines made a political statement critical of US President George W. Bush at an international tour date in 2003. The Chicks' subsequent ban from country radio and blacklisting from the Nashville country music establishment ushered in an era of cautious, mandated discretion for women in country music that would have a lasting impact on their choices in managing their careers.

Country Music's "Boom" and "Bust"—A Result of Crossover?

For female artists, the possibility of innovation and change presented new opportunities. At first, amid the industry's growth, commentators began to proclaim historic success for female artists in the genre, with a sense of hope that equity might be

achieved.[14] In the final chapter of *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music* by Mary Bufwack and Richard Oermann, the authors speculated about the increasing popularity of women artists with pop audiences: "Could country fans be so different from their pop counterparts?"[15] Bufwack and Oermann quote Liberty Records President Jimmy Bowen, who made an enthusiastic prediction:

> the women of country music are going to be coming forwards and five years from now you'll see a party there...Women are going to get a chance to...Take charge of their music...Women haven't sold in the past because men told them what to sing. But when a woman like Reba [McEntire] gets control, it changes...When that happens, they...reach the female consumer.[16]

This sentiment was shared by music journalists and critics writing about country music throughout the mid-to-late 1990s. In 1997 country journalist Chet Flippo described a "women's revolution" in country music and critic James Dickerson called 1998 the start of a "revolution" for women in popular music.[17] Dickerson quoted Brenda Lee on the trend of women's expanding presence in the music industry: "I think the longevity is there for the women...What's happening is no fluke or overnight thing. Women are taking more control of their careers and they are having a say in the business."[18] Dickerson's

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[14] Chet Flippo, "Women's Work," *Billboard* 109, no. 39, September 27, 1997.
[15] Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music 1800-2000*, (Nashville: The Country Music Foundation Press & Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 551.
[16] Bufwack and Oermann, 551.
[17] Chet Flippo, "Women's Work"; James Dickerson, *Women on Top: The Quiet Revolution That's Rocking the American Music Industry* (New York: Billboard Books, 1998).
[18] Dickerson, *Women on Top: The Quiet Revolution That's Rocking the American Music Industry*, 10.

"revolution" acknowledged women's participation in all aspects of the music industry, from artists to those behind the scenes at record labels, including A&R personnel and executives. The "Year of the Woman" named in 1997 and the "revolution" named in 1998 aligned with the perceived "boom" of country music, in particular the growth of the industry in the mid-1990s.[19]

One woman who found considerable success in this moment during the mid-1990s was Shania Twain. In describing Shania Twain's rise to fame, Jocelyn Neal identifies Twain's first release, *The Woman In Me* (1995), as being "wrapped in the most iconic elements of country's stereotyped identity: denim, leather chaps, a cowboy hat, and, on the inside cover, a big-haired, red-headed artist with a Palomino [horse]."[20] Neal also notes that these visual features were very like Garth Brooks's visual appeal: Neal describes similarities between their album covers that position Twain as participating in the heart of mainstream country music. These visual elements of Twain's first release were accompanied by typical country music sounds with driving drum patterns, fiddle, and pointed contemporary musical influences through the use of electric and slide guitar. Twain's method of songcraft, in collaboration with rock producer Robert John "Mutt" Lange (who was married to Twain between 1993 – 2010) shaped modes of country-pop songwriting and crossover that would have a lasting impact on the country industry.[21] Twain's successes with country-pop, and Twain's and Lange's blending of country sounds, refigured the sonic boundaries for female success in the country industry. The

[19] Joli Jensen, "Taking Country Music Seriously," 184.
[20] Neal, "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft: Shania Twain's Crossover Appeal," 288.
[21] Neal, "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft," 308.

up-tempo track "Any Man of Mine," from *The Woman In Me*, one of Twain's most successful songs, seems ready-made for a stadium tour with a recurring stomp-stomp clap rhythm emphasized by drums and Twain's replicated vocalizations of "uhh" throughout the song.[22] This stadium rock-inspired opening is heard with fiddle in the background during the verses, but it is dropped in the choruses, where we hear a driving duple metric pattern accompanied by slide guitar and electric guitar. These transitions between half-tempo stadium rock with fiddle backing and more brisk chorus sections all retain clear associations with country music, reinforced by the visual elements that place Twain firmly within the genre. Twain's *The Woman in Me* (1995) and her follow up release of *Come on Over* (1997) solidified her position as the queen of country-pop and one of the top-selling artists in country music (and the US pop music markets in general) by the late 1990s.[23]

Other artists, such as Faith Hill, would take up Twain's country-pop sounds in the late 1990s and into the early 2000s. Yet, for all the market potential and stylistic expansion that Twain offered, her achievements were "underscored by charges of lack of authenticity...a disregard for tradition, and an overt act of selling out."[24] Twain's participation in the "boom" of country music in the mid-to-late 1990s was mediated by the industry bluster about loss of "authenticity" to the "sellout" crossover sounds Twain popularized. These artists bore the brunt of the critiques of mainstreaming from within

[22] Neal discusses this particular song in detail, noting the cultural signification of the stomp-stomp-clap pattern, in "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft," 298.
[23] Neal, "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft," 288.
[24] Neal, "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft," 288.

the country industry. These critiques were strikingly hypocritical: in them a billion-dollar industry criticized itself for increasing its own audience and therefore its profit. Ultimately the business of country music, like any business is driven by profit. Reading between lines of economic considerations versus apparent socio-political reactions, the industry's impulse to partition the county genre was guided by racial and gendered markers disguised as acceptable or unacceptable musical sounds. While all of the internal genre politics surrounding gender and race were occurring within country music, female musicians—specifically white women—were finding unprecedented success outside of the country industry. As Jada Watson has noted in her study of gender representation on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart "despite strong years in 1999 (34.1%), 2005 (31.9%), and 2008 (33.8%), women consistently comprise only 25% of the charting artists, dropping to 15.6% in 2014 and 13.6% in 2016, as the number of men rises."[25]

Given that women comprised so small a percentage of the music charts, it is unlikely that the precipitous decline in music sales—down nearly $12 billion between 1999 and 2002—could be the fault of female crossover artists.[26] Yet, artists like Shania Twain and later Faith Hill who were creating country-pop were accused of disrupting the "musical essence" of country music in the 1990s, which industry insiders believed was the cause of decreased fan appreciation for crossover sounds.[27] What is less clear, however, is if the decline in sales, and the 10% drop of country's market share in overall

[25] Jada Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016," *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 5 (2019): 546.
[26] Neal, "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft," 289.
[27] Here Neal is describing general criticisms of Shania Twain, and country-pop generally in the 1990s. Neal, "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft," 288.

music sold was a consequence, as Neal postulates, of "the country audience seemingly tiring of country-pop sounds."[28] Neal's argument about the shift in country audience's taste is complicated by technological shifts—including major changes to telecommunications policy, and digital music sales—which occurred in the late-1990s. In order to understand why perceived "booms" and "revolutions" for women in the popular and country music industries did not succeed, it is important to understand these changes to technology and public policy.

The 1996 Telecommunications Act and Radio in the '90s

The 1996 Telecommunications Act was the first "major rewrite" of telecommunications law in the United States since the 1934 Telecommunications Act.[29] With precedents set both in the 1934 Act but also the 1927 Radio Act, the 1996 Act was driven by the desire of Bell Operating Companies to provide content and be conduits for an "information age."[30] The 1996 Act considered the interests of Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs) in providing local and long-distance telephone services. Legislators also put into place new regulation of broadband internet access, cable and network television access, and computing interests, and they adjusted radio regulations. Companies involved in broadcasting (air transmission), and specifically broadcast radio

[28] Neal, "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft," 288-289.
[29] Charles B. Goldfarb, ed., *Telecommunications Act: Competition, Innovation, and Reform* (New York: Novinka Books, 2006), 8; Patricia Aufderheide, *Communications Policy and the Public Interest: The Telecommunications Act of 1996* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 8.
[30] Aufderheide, *Communications Policy and the Public Interest*, 37.

(terrestrial radio), were concerned about how digital technology had changed the marketplace—as customers adopted a variety of kinds of on-demand music delivery systems, legacy broadcast companies did not want to lose their control of the market. According to Patricia Aufderheide, the 1996 Act gave "substantial" protections to "the largest players in both broadcast and cable without demanding any renewed or increased public obligation and accountability."[31] In other words, monopoly control of media and communication was codified into law to prioritize the continued earning power of telecommunications corporations.[32]

A major result of the 1996 Act for radio was the deregulation of station ownership, resulting in mass consolidation of station ownership and centralization of radio programming. Before 1996, individual stations had made their own programming decisions. Following the Act, three large conglomerates acquired nearly all radio stations in the United States and began centralizing playlists for regional markets. One such beneficiary was Clear Channel (now known as iHeartMedia), which has been the largest radio company in the United States since the late 1990s: Alex Foege writes that Clear Channel owned the most stations and produced the most earnings.[33] Clear Channel

[31] Aufderheide, *Communications Policy and the Public Interest*, 78.
[32] Populations most affected by this legislation (whom broadcast corporations were purporting to support) were poorer people in rural and urban areas, typically majority black and brown communities. Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez reported on this phenomena in relation to Latin music, which in the late 1990s was the "fastest-growing segment of the U.S. market." See: Alisa Valdes-Rodriquez, "Latin Music: Bigger Than Reported?" *Los Angeles Times*, December 10, 1999. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-dec-10-ca-42356-story.html.
[33] Alec Foege, *Right of the Dial: The Rise of Clear Channel and The Fall of Commercial Radio* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008), xii.

increased profits by consolidating station ownership and centralizing programming.[34] The company's business model took a top-down approach: as Clear Channel purchased more radio stations in various regional markets, its executives eliminated local general managers and programming directors. This consolidation resulted in programming and advertising supervised by a few individuals who were either brought in by Clear Channel or hired from within an existing station or regional marketplace. The primary concern in designing program content—deciding what music, talk shows, and news programs got played—was whether that content would sell advertising, since advertising was Clear Channel's main business.[35] Programming consolidation led to the use of voice-tracked DJs across the country. A DJ could record a segment with an artist in Los Angeles, and have that same segment played on-air in different markets after the addition of references to "local haunts, news events, and the weather" to give the impression that a DJ was actually present in the market where their voice was heard.[36] From the early 2000s, voice tracking practices became commonplace. With the consolidation of station ownership, programming was dictated by what might sell not just in a local market, but across a regional or national one.

Another consequence of the consolidation efforts undertaken by radio companies like Clear Channel was the centralization of format programming. Format refers to the limited collection of content listeners hear on a given station. Format helps to determine

[34] Foege, *Right of the Dial,* xii.
[35] Foege, *Right of the Dial,* 156-158.
[36] This particular anecdote is about a station in Boise, Idaho but, as Foege notes, this practice was employed by Clear Channel in numerous locations. See Foege, *Right of the Dial,* 158.

the station's identity within its market: for instance, a station might specialize in "adult contemporary," "country," or "oldies." Until the market consolidation of the later 1990s, individual stations could have their own playlists of songs within their format: record labels and artists would strive to get their song on a station's playlist. After the 1996 Act, each radio conglomerate determined playlists for each format, to be shared among the stations the corporation owned. This consolidation drastically decreased the number of possible playlists a song could be added to: songs that were not chosen by a few corporations would not receive airtime.

With the reduced number of playlists came a narrower framework of criteria for what songs would be included on a specific radio format. In the case of radio programming, format refers to the parameters for what content is selected for play on a particular type of radio station. A musical genre—a nebulous collection of musical styles associated together—does not necessarily correspond directly to a radio format, which dictates the content of a specific commercial product.[37] On a mainstream or Top-40 radio station these parameters would include the top songs on popularity charts (a criterion determined in turn by record label marketing, radio airplay, record sales, and more recently streaming data). A radio format includes music that fits particular parameters of musical style or particular sounds radio programmers believe will do well, i.e. sell advertising slots and attract listeners.[38] In the country radio format, the social parameters

[37] Eric Weisbard, "Country Radio: The Dialectic of Format and Genre," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis Stimeling (New York: Oxford, 2017): 229.
[38] Gabriel Rossman, *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us About the Diffusion of Innovation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012): 101.

of genre convention determine radio formatting.[39] The artists and sounds that are prioritized by country radio can be identified through musical style markers—what sounds are popular in the genre of country music, which change over time—but these priorities also include social demographic markers like gender and race. It is therefore unsurprising that in a moment of consolidation in the radio industry, programming became less inclusive and more focused on demographic groups that radio executives would sell well regionally or nationally. Given that profitability of the radio station (rather than programming content) was a top priority for radio conglomerates, just a few people's estimates of what listeners wanted quickly became standard across large networks of radio stations.

Key figures in shaping the commercial product of country radio are radio programmers, who decide what songs to put on playlists, and therefore what songs are aired on the radio, based on their assumptions about listener preferences. These assumptions about listener preferences may be arbitrary rather than grounded in data about what listeners prefer: they are frequently based on racist, classist, and sexist understandings of the parameters of country music as a genre.[40] Radio programmers who have consistently prioritized white male artists have done so on the basis of claims that this demographic is demanded by the listeners to the country format. In an interview with country singer and LGBTQ activist Chely Wright, who rose to fame in the 1990s, journalist Marissa Moss quotes Wright's reflection on the "rules" of country radio.

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[39] Rossman, *Climbing the Charts,* 116.
[40] Weisbard, "Country Radio," 229.

Talking about female country artists of the 1990s, Wright stated that "The thing that took us down was those hard-and-fast rules about how many women could be played on the radio."[41] Moss goes on to describe these rules, most notably that "women were intentionally programmed not to be played back-to-back, one woman an hour, if that."[42] Moss also notes that even if programming appears to be based on data, the underlying data collection methods likely show a bias: "software that turns bias, racism, and sexism into computer commands, if not by the estimated 90% of radio executives and program directors who were male and white."[43] As one example of this informal set of programming "rules," Moss highlights Steve Warren's guidebook *The Programming Operations Manual*, explaining that Warren claims his manual has been purchased by over four thousand broadcasters.[44] Warren's *Operations Manual* includes the statement that "women [don't] want to hear women" on the radio. Moss emphasizes that this principle is a "complete fabrication," unsupported by data.[45] Warren advocates for an intuitive brand of radio programming and proclaims a dislike of qualitative market research. Whether or not his approach is as influential as Moss suggests, that country radio formats are dominated by white, male artists suggest that thinking along these lines

[41] Marissa Moss, *Her Country: How the Women of Country Music Became the Success They Were Never Supposed to Be,* (New York: Henry and Holt, 2022), 14.
[42] Moss, *Her Country*, 14.
[43] Moss, *Her Country*, 14.
[44] Steven Warren describes the program manual on his website: https://stevewarren.net/the-programming-operations-manual/; Cited in Moss, *Her Country*, 15.
[45] Moss, *Her Country*, 15.

has taken root in radio programming throughout the United States.[46]

In similar fashion to Steve Warren, radio consultant Keith Hill discussed in a 2015 interview for radio industry publication *Country Aircheck* how female artists "factor into" country radio formatting. In the interview, Hill described programming practices he first began using in the late 1990s, which closely resemble the principles outlined in Warren's manual:

> If you want to make ratings in Country radio, take females out. The reason is mainstream Country radio generates more quarter hours from female listeners at a rate of 70 to 75%, and women like male artists. I'm basing that not only on music tests from over the years, but more than 300 client radio stations. The expectation is we're principally a male format with a smaller female component. I've got about 40 music databases in front of me and the percentage of females in the one with the most is 19%. Trust me, I play great female records and we've got some right now; they're just not the lettuce in our salad. The lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban and artist like that. The tomatoes of our salad are the females.[47]

Gender-based disparities have long been present in country music. As Jada Watson has explained, Keith Hill's statement reproduces existing inequities: Hill argues for his

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[46] Warren has self-published parts of this original release on his website. His description of his style of programming can be seen under the heading "Random Writings." https://stevewarren.net/the-programming-operations-manual/.

[47] Jada Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016," 538; Watson quotes Keith Hill, "Interview with Russ Penuell," *Country Aircheck* 449, May 26, 2015. https://www.countryaircheck.com/pdf_publication/Issue_449%20-%20May%2026,%202015.pdf.

approach "based on 40 years in radio programming" and his statement is "concerned with balance, but centers on profit and ratings."[48] For Hill, programming is a careful balance of song tempo, song codes (i.e. the level of "twang" present in the vocal), star to non-star ratio, and gender representations to keep listeners tuned-in to a station. As Watson rightly concludes, "the first two categories speak to musical elements of a song, the latter two code artists based on their industry status and biological/socio-cultural differences."[49] Hill claims that his method of programming was based on his own industry marketing tests in the late 1990s (whose methods are unclear) along with the unsubstantiated belief that female audiences prefer male artists. Such beliefs about audiences have long circulated through the country radio industry and formed the basis for decision-making about what music would be included on playlists.

In effect, the quota system Hill describes strictly limits the space available to female artists on country radio.[50] As Watson's research shows, throughout the entire history of country format radio there has been a staggering lack of female and artist of color representation on country radio. And women are excluded now because they have been excluded in the past. *Country Aircheck* publisher Lon Helton has remarked that "since the 1960s program directors have been telling people not to play two women back to back" because there have been fewer hit songs by women, not because of sexism.[51] Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how there could have been "hits" by women on country

[48] Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016," 539.
[49] Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016," 539.
[50] Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016," 556-557.
[51] Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016," 539.

radio if the general business practices do not include playing women on country radio, for radio was one of the main ways in which fans could become familiar with the music. Though women had never been represented in the format at the same rate as men, beginning in the late 1990s, their presence shrank still further. The adoption of focused programming practices (such as Keith Hill's quota system) accelerated with the consolidation of the radio industry, and country radio in particular institutionalized gender and race disparities in its programming practices. The "rules" Chely Wright described, including not playing two female artists back-to-back and not playing more than one or two female artists an hour, started the precipitous decline of women artists on country radio in the late 1990s.

Industry Disruptions and New Modes for Success

Touring was one component of the 1990s music boom. In country, concert promoter Ben Farrell, speaking in 2000, attributed the spike in success in the mid-1990s specifically to Garth Brooks. The president of Lon Varnell Enterprises, a concert promotion business, Farrell explained that the avenues for success laid out by Brooks stem from a "wide demographic appeal" and his ""family" image...spurred his box-office success."[52] Farrell went on to note that "[Brooks] drew people from 6 to 50 [years old], country fans, the clean-cut family people, the contemporary people...They poured in to

[52] Waddell, "Country Biz Loses as Garth Tours End."

see him in droves."[53] Brooks, however, announced his final tour in 2000, and attention turned to other artists who were able to draw audiences on the same scale.[54] This new set of tours for 2001 included acts like Shania Twain, Faith Hill and Tim McGraw as a duo, and The Chicks (formerly the Dixie Chicks) who followed Brooks and George Strait as top box-office draws for country music.[55] In an industry where there had previously been only six different headliners (including Brooks) who could "consistently draw more than 6,000 people a night," tour management companies and record labels shared concerns over the sustainability of the country touring industry.[56] Label executives looked to up-and-coming acts and major scheduled tours from late 2000 and into 2001, including The Chicks' tour for *Fly* and McGraw/Hill's *Soul2Soul* tour. Industry executives hoped these acts would have the same broad appeal as Brooks might to bring out fans of country music, and other styles. In order for artists to attract large numbers of fans when they toured, their music would need to have crossover success, bringing in fans of pop music as well as country. Yet, for all the potential that these female up-and-coming touring acts had, touring revenues saw a steep decline beginning in 1999, with a gross income down 16% and attendance down 28% by 1998.[57] Touring, regardless of the potential for new acts in the early 2000s, saw a continued decline in profitability leading to questions of

[53] Waddell, "Country Biz Loses as Garth Tours End."
[54] Waddell, "Country Biz Loses as Garth Tours End."
[55] Waddell, "Country Biz Loses as Garth Tours End."
[56] Ray Waddell, "Is Country Music At a Turning Point? New Faces Revive Tepid Tour Scene," *Billboard* 112, no. 22. May 27, 2000.
[57] Waddell, "Is Country Music At a Turning Point? New Faces Revive Tepid Tour Scene."

whether particular artists (like women) or sounds (like crossover) were financially viable within the country marketplace.

In tandem with the consolidation of the radio industry, and changes in the profitability of touring, patterns of music distribution from record labels to consumers also changed, in part because of the rise in digital music sales in the late 1990s. Writing about music production, Richard Burgess notes that prior to 1999 "the primary sources of revenue for producers were an advance against a royalty on physical goods" because physical sales of CDs "dominated the market" even as vinyl "retreated to a single digit percentage of sales."[58] Whereas radio corporations saw major changes to their modes of operation throughout the late 1990s, causing them to adjust their programming strategies, the role of the record label remained fairly consistent. Throughout the twentieth century and to the present day, record labels remain the biggest industry player in the production of new music.[59] The majority of this influence comes from distribution, meaning the infrastructure through which recorded music gets to consumer outlets like radio or record stores.

The changes in revenue for music producers due to the rise of internet purchasing were a symptom of a much larger shift for record production and sales in general. Prior to the decline in physical sales, writes Lee Marshall, record labels' control of distribution placed them in a "strong position" because they controlled the "distribution not just of

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[58] Richard James Burgess, "Producer Compensation in the Digital Age," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Music Production,* ed. Simon Zagorski-Thomas and Andrew Bourbon (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2020), 64.
[59] Lee Marshall, "The Recording Industry in the Twenty-First Century," in *The International Recording Industries,* ed. Lee Marshall (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 64.

their own releases but also those of many independent labels."[60] This arrangement resulted in major record labels making money on all components of their catalogue, including listings from independent labels.[61] As digital sales increased and the online music market emerged at the turn of the twenty-first century there was a "period of instability in the recording industry" that resulted in label consolidations.[62] Revenue dropped from $21.3 billion in 2000 to $7.2 billion in 2015, resulting in major changes to how record labels do business.[63] Economic strains created further "alteration in the social conditions" that ultimately led to a homogenization of songs and artists. This homogenization served to manage potential economic risk in an industry that was already risk-averse.[64] The tendency to produce more and more music according to winning formulas is particularly apparent in country music: when one type of song or concoction of styles had been proven to sell, the country industry became less willing to take chances on new sounds or styles.

Record labels' response to declines in touring and record sales revenue in the 2000s was to change artist contracts through what came to be called the 360˚ deal. Key provisions of these new 360˚ deals include channeling revenue to record labels and artists from the artist's "other money-making activities, including recorded music, publishing,

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[60] Marshall, "The Recording Industry in the Twenty-First Century," 64.
[61] Marshall, "The Recording Industry in the Twenty-First Century," 64.
[62] Marshall, "The Recording Industry in the Twenty-First Century," 65.
[63] These numbers are based on the 2019 dollar value, with Skaggs pulling from the RIAA numbers in 2020; Rachel Skaggs, "How 360˚ Deals Homogenized Country Music," in *Whose Country? Genre, Identity and Belonging in Twenty-First Century Country Music Culture,* ed. Jada Watson and Paula Bishop (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2022).
[64] Skaggs, "How 360˚ Deals Homogenized Country Music," 2.

merchandising, licensing and branding opportunities, and touring income."[65] 360˚ deals were devised as a way to mitigate the industry's risk of monetary losses within the popular music industry, including touring. As Rachel Skaggs has documented, these new contracts were intended to "recoup some of the revenue lost with the decline of recorded music sales and limit labels' uncertainty about returns to the career-building work they do for artists."[66] Although income percentages of 360˚ deals are not readily available, as record sales declined, touring became a more and more important component of artists' income portfolios. Record companies started to take a cut of touring profits through these deals as an additional source of income to adjust for losses of revenue related to record sales. In this environment there were incentives for artists to cross over to pop because the mainstream pop markets had increased financial incentives. Yet, discourse within the country industry had begun penalizing certain artists—especially women—for going after mainstream pop markets. What becomes clear is that female artists, particularly those who were making pop-country with crossover potential, were blamed for the decline in industry profit regardless of the fact that their music offered the industry opportunities for increased profit.

Success and Forced Failures of Women's Crossover in the 2000s

The country industry began to increased its policing of women's crossover efforts to ensure increased profit within the genre. In the early 2000s, popular female country

[65] Skaggs, "How 360˚ Deals Homogenized Country Music," 5.
[66] Skaggs, "How 360˚ Deals Homogenized Country Music," 5.

crossover artists with broad cross-market appeal were among the first to be ostracized by the country industry. The decline of female performers' acceptance by the country industry in the early 2000s was precipitous, even as female artists began to have greater success via crossover.[67] Due in part to changes in radio programming where "the radio programming quota system [had] placed women in a vulnerable position within the industry," performance opportunities for female performers became scarcer.[68] Jada Watson is right to point out that women were, and still are today, "further penalized for releasing songs with too much crossover appeal, for feminist lyrical messaging, and for their political beliefs."[69] Although Watson, music journalists, and other music scholars have frequently described these issues of crossover appeal, feminist messaging, and artists' political speech as separate factors that have diminished artists' potential for success within the country industry, I contend that these issues are interconnected. When the industry has dismissed female musicians, more often than not all three of these factors have been at play, though it is often crossover that is given the blame to avoid statements that are explicitly sexist. A song that had potential to "cross over" or succeed in a mainstream market faced criticism because it was not "country" enough, or because the artist was not "loyal" enough to the genre; while both male and female artists faced these criticisms, they seemed to only stick to female performers.

One artist who had substantial mainstream success releasing pop-country albums

[67] Phyllis Stark, "Country Women Lose Hit Magic: Boom Turns to Drought For Even Top Acts," *Billboard* 115, no. 27, July 5, 2003.
[68] Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016," 554.
[69] Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016," 554.

at the turn of the millennium was Faith Hill. Beginning with her success following the release of *Breathe* (1999) Hill received criticism from within the country industry, including radio programmers, label executives, and music critics who have controlled how country music is presented. Hill and other female artists like Shania Twain were penalized for taking opportunities to grow their careers beyond the scope of country music. At the crux of the controversy over Hill's crossover success is how crossover itself was received by the country industry in the late 1990s. There was an ongoing debate within the country industry between "country traditionalists" or those who supported a "neo-traditional" country sound versus those who supported or released music that was in the pop-country or crossover sound spectrum. Faith Hill had a sustained career in the country industry throughout the 1990s, but her success peaked in 1999 with the release of her fourth studio album, *Breathe,* that followed Shania Twain's country-pop pattern.[70] This album, which has been certified eight times platinum (sold over eight million copies), and won Country Album of the Year at the 2000 Grammy awards was one of Hill's best-selling albums of her career. Following the success of *Breathe* as a country record with crossover appeal, Hill and fellow country artist husband Tim McGraw had their highest-grossing tour together in 2000 with *Soul2Soul.* Yet Hill ran afoul of critics in the country industry who believed she had strayed too far from a "traditional" country sound. At the heart of this criticism was the accusation that Hill (and by extension Twain) were "too pop." [71]

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[70] Jocelyn Neal discusses similarities between Twain and Hill's releases in "Country-Pop Formulae and Craft," 288, 297.
[71] Jim Gerome, "Road Thrill," *People,* August 21, 2000.

In an interview with Chris Willman in December of 1999, prior to the *Soul2Soul* tour, the success of Hill's *Breathe* was acknowledged, but Willman pointed out that while some in the country industry embraced the album, others did not. A Nashville publication, the *Tennessean,* described *Breathe* as "a distinctly un-country album," and Chris Willman, writing for *Billboard,* noted that there was "no effort made to adhere to any country-music guidelines or standards."[72] Willman described these reviews of *Breathe* as "churlish"; they show clearly the genre politics of the debates between country traditionalism versus embracing mainstreaming and crossover sounds of the late 1990s. Hill's *Breathe* became a scapegoat for country traditionalists discontent with the mainstreaming of country music and how the genre had changed (become more popular) between the mid-to-late 1990s. Country traditionalists did not like that country's authenticity was being challenged by increased popularity, and they did not want the genre associated with new fans who were drawn to mainstream sounds. But instead of commenting on these issues directly, they commented instead on the artist's lack of *musical* qualifications. It was easier to sustain an argument that new crossover sounds were bad, or not real country than to discredit the potential *economic* growth that Hill's crossover successes brought to country music or insult the new fan base. Country music is, after all, a business.

For her part, Hill was frustrated by country traditionalists. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly,* she remarked:

I couldn't go out and make a pop record if I tried. And I couldn't go out and make

[72] Chris Willman, "About Faith," *Entertainment Weekly,* December 10, 1999.

> a traditional country record, either, because I'm inspired by too many things…there will be people who don't like the new album because they're fans from my first couple of records. But [*Breathe*] is nothing that isn't me.[73]

The previous albums Hill named in this article certainly fell closer to what country traditionalists would be comfortable with. Hill (and country music generally) had not appealed to a mainstream market in the early 1990s. For example, "Wild One," a hit from Hill's debut album *Take Me as I Am* (1993) fits into a more traditional country soundscape, with plunking piano chords, a straightforward drum rhythm and present mandolin, fiddle, acoustic guitar, and steel guitar lines. These albums include less pop production, which in the early 1990s might have included use of early synthesizer and drum machine technologies. *Take Me as I Am* fits well into the landscape of what other female country performers, such as Trisha Yearwood, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Jo Dee Messina, and Martina McBride, were releasing at the time. By contrast with Hill's previous albums that had clearer musical ties to country music, the country industry narrative about *Faith* (1998) and *Breathe* (1999) was that she had sold out to country-pop, because these albums included songs that appealed to a pop market as well as the country fan base.

One of Hill's most famous songs, "This Kiss," was a single release from *Faith* (1998) that had massive crossover success. The first track from *Faith*, "This Kiss," is an up-tempo country-pop track. The song opens with a drum pick-up before strummed guitar and an electric guitar melody enters, counter-balanced by a backing slide guitar to

[73] Willman, "About Faith."

add country flavor. This love song, which uses kisses between the narrator and subject in the song to represent a positive and respectful relationship, sets up an album of well-crafted love songs which retain the same blend of country-pop stylings. An important feature of the album is Hill's alto voice with a subtle vocal twang. Where *Faith* has a cohesive production style that is clearly country-pop, *Breathe,* released just a year later in 1999, is much more stylistically varied. The titular track "Breathe" is another country-pop ballad, and "The Way You Love Me" retains the successful up-tempo pop features of "This Kiss" (and the same lyrical themes). Other songs on *Breathe* indicate more clearly Hill's alignment to the country industry. This can be seen with "Bringing Out the Elvis," a more aggressive track with dissonant guitars hitting on the back beat and a growling and forceful vocal performance from Hill. The rockabilly sonic references and lyrical nods to Elvis Presley help to bolster Hill's country affiliations because these cross-genre musical references were more acceptable (i.e. used by male artists) rather than the female-coded pop signification. Looking at both albums from the late 1990s holistically, it would seem that Hill tried to counterbalance how far towards the crossover market she had gone on *Faith* by providing more country references on *Breathe*.

Concerns over pushing the country format "too far" are an example of what Eric Weisbard describes as the "tensions...within the Nashville 'community'," which are a "complicated construction" based on "local and multinational business concerns that intersected with creativity."[74] During the early 2000s a disproportionate number of female artists sought pop success (or, at least, they sent songs to pop radio) because

[74] Weisbard, *Top-40 Democracy*, 246.

marketing more broadly gave them opportunities to further their careers beyond country music. In an August 2000 article with *People,* Hill was interviewed while on the *Soul2Soul* tour with her husband Tim McGraw. The authors of the *People* article, Jim Jerome and Beverly Keel, noted that Hill "filled a crossover void" after Shania Twain stopped releasing new music and both saw dwindling country sales in the early 2000s.[75] Jerome and Keel pointed to Hill's various mainstream performance events, including performing on a VH1 special, "Divas 2000: A Tribute to Diana Ross," singing the national anthem at the Super Bowl in 2000, and her performance as a "last-minute" replacement "for a spaced-out Whitney Houston at the Academy Awards."[76] Comparisons to Twain's career, and the boundaries around country music that Twain pushed, continued throughout this article: Hill noted that she was gladly walking down paths paved by Twain's success as a crossover artist.

Twain and Hill and their labels negotiated the delicate balance to release songs that country radio would play but also maximize a song or album's potential for crossover success on mainstream pop radio. Shania Twain's label president Luke Lewis (Mercury/Nashville) said around 2003: "we don't want to wreck a career just because we want to maximize a record. Shania's concerned about it, too. But at some point it becomes unfair to an artist to say, 'We're not going to get as much exposure as possible, because we might piss off some people at Country.'"[77] Lewis's comments illustrate the

[75] Jerome, "Road Thrill."
[76] Jerome, "Road Thrill."
[77] Luke Lewis's interview quoted in Eric Weisbard, "Country Radio: The Dialectic of Format and Genre," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 241.

tricky balance female artists who have success in multiple formats struggle with to maintain a relationship with country radio. His sentiment was shared by Mike Dungan, CEO of Capitol Nashville, who criticized female artists for making "very, very pop records" that had "finally pushed the [country radio] format too far in that direction."[78] Hill and Twain's careers also show the cost of alienating country radio, or just for seeking opportunity outside of the country industry: when a woman steps too far out of bounds, she does not get to be "country" anymore.

There has been a statistical decrease in the success of female artists on country radio, with a marked decline from the mid-1990s to the present day: though male artists have been represented consistently on the radio, female performers have seen a gradual decline.[79] Faith Hill's career through the turn of the millennium begs the question of whether she would have seen continually dropping sales and even poorer reception in country markets had she continued producing albums. In 2005, Hill took a break from recording new music as a solo artist, and she has not released original music as a solo artist since.[80] Faith Hill's most successful album releases throughout her career prior to the recording hiatus come from the years 1999 to 2005, with three releases spread over the six-year span. *Breathe* (1999), *Cry* (2002), and *Fireflies* (2005) all reached number

[78] Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, 246.
[79] Watson, "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016," 546.
[80] Hill has released new music with husband Tim McGraw, but no solo albums; Hill/McGraw have also continued touring together; Angela Stefano, "Tim McGraw and Faith Hill Reveal Co-Headlining 2017 Soul2Soul Tour," *The Boot*, October 6, 2016. https://theboot.com/tim-mcgraw-faith-hill-tour-2017/.

one on the *Billboard* US country and all genre album charts.[81] Yet Hill was one of only a handful of female artists who sold a lot of records during this time period; the hope for a "boom" in country music had extended to female performers, but in the end the "boom" only assisted the majority white male performers whose music was not criticized in the same ways female crossover was.

Faith Hill's success as a female country performer encompassed mainstream activity as a touring artist, consistent record sales, radio airplay, and commercial licensing and brand deals: Hill was a CoverGirl beginning in 1999.[82] Her successes, however, were tempered by the lack of consistent presence of female artists in the country industry. Where Faith Hill experienced positive reception to some of her work in the early 2000s it is important to recognize that negative reception was loud from within the country industry. Criticism was framed around the music, but the reality of Hill's experiences and the steady decline of female participation in the industry paint a different picture. Male artists' work and their country credentials were not questioned in this way. Garth Brooks (who regularly received crossover airplay) ceased to have regular country hits in the 2000s, but this was only because he retired from recording and touring in 2001.[83] Within the shifting landscape of radio programming and the "boom" in country music during the 1990s, increased policing of genre loyalty came from stalwarts in the

[81] For Faith Hill's discography see Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faith_Hill_discography.
[82] Staff writer, "This Day in 1999: Faith Hill Becomes a Cover Girl Spokesmodel," *KOBE radio,* April 8, 2020. https://kboeradio.com/this-day-in-1999-faith-hill-becomes-a-cover-girl-spokesmodel/.
[83] Weisbard, "Country Radio: The Dialectic of Format and Genre," 241.

country industry.

Women Lose in Country Music

Female country trio The Chicks (formerly the Dixie Chicks) were one of the most popular country acts and were stylistic opposites to the country-pop artists who cultivated careers as crossover artists in the late 1990s. Their music was far removed of the country-pop styles of crossover artists like Faith Hill, Shania Twain. The trio's 1999 release *Fly* featured songs with a loping honky-tonk feel, reinforced by the ever-present fiddle played by Martie McGuire and the vocal twang of Texas born lead-singer Natalie Maines. Musically, the Chicks were doing everything right to be successful in country music: nothing was "too pop" like Hill, no one had "abandoned" the country industry like Shania Twain did by releasing multiple versions of an album.[84] In 2002 The Chicks released a massively successful bluegrass-inspired album titled *Home.* The following year while touring for this album Natalie Maines made a now infamous statement denouncing then President republican George W. Bush, stating that they (The Chicks) were "ashamed the President of the United States [was] from Texas."[85] This comment led to the abandonment of The Chicks by country radio, CD burning parties lead by right-wing groups in the United States, and a rapid decline of The Chicks career as their music was all but dropped from country radio after they had been one of the most popular groups of all time. Reaction to Maines's comment came from two sides: the country industry

[84] Flippo, "Women's Work."
[85] Rossman, *Climbing the Charts,* 59.

(including radio, record label executives, fellow artists) and fans. The fan reaction was fueled in large part by a particular type of nationalistic political ideology that gained force in the United States following 9/11. Jason Mellard identifies the start of the boycott with WTDR-FM in Alabama, stating that the boycott was surprising in part because The Chicks had been one of the "most popular acts of the past year (2002)."[86]

The complicated political manifestations of country music revolve around a particular version of conservatism attached to values of traditionalism that are a part of how country music has sold itself since the 1950s. Mellard aptly describes this moment as such: "The resulting media storm [from the boycott] derailed The Chicks' careers' at least in the short term, and drew lines in the sand that resonated throughout the early twenty-first century."[87] This public presentation of country music's political affiliations, particularly in the early twenty-first century, had profound impacts on what it meant to participate in the genre, especially if you were a woman.

Where critiques of artists like Faith Hill were focused on musical style as a way to disqualify her participation in the format, The Chicks fared differently. When The Chicks were abruptly removed from country radio in 2003, the fact that the country industry was more concerned with issues beyond what music sounded like became glaringly apparent. Country music's politics became attached to "a gung ho position on both the War on Terror and the Iraq War (with war advocates seeing the latter as a front on the former)."[88]

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[86] Jason Mellard, "'These Are My People': The Politics of Country Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music,* ed. Travis Stimeling (New York: Oxford, 2017), 473.
[87] Jason Mellard, "'These Are My People': The Politics of Country Music," 473.
[88] Rossman, *Climbing the Charts,* 68.

This brand of nationalism and patriotism can be seen through songs such as Alan Jackson's "Where Were You When the World Stopped Turning" (2002) that specifically references the events of 9/11, Toby Keith's "Courtesy Of The Red, White And Blue (The Angry American)" (2002) or Kenny Chesney's "Freedom" (2002). Members of The Chicks received death threats, and response to their statements were taken to a level far beyond mere public criticism of their actions. The Chicks were described as "sluts" or "traitors" in opposition to male artists who make anti-war statements.[89] Both radio and country music journalism believed that The Chicks moved too far away from who industry perceived as the steady fans of country music who "most likely voted for President Bush in the last election."[90]

The brief comment Maines made on a stage in London in 2003, while making plain that only certain types of political comment and affiliation were acceptable within the country industry, also became a cautionary tale for female artists whose careers were only just starting. As journalist Marissa Moss has detailed, female country artists such as Maren Morris, Taylor Swift, Kacey Musgraves, and Mickey Guyton were teenagers just beginning to perform publicly on the yodeling, Opry, and local circuits in the early 2000s. These female artists, who would rise to the top of the country industry, entered it in the mid-2000s with the caution to not "get Dixie Chicked."[91] The rules in country music do not apply equally; female performers were told by industry insiders to "shut up

[89] Lesley Pruitt, "Real Men Kill and a Lady Never Talks Back" *International Journal on World Peace* XXIC, no. 4 (December 2007): 88.
[90] Here Pruitt quotes Clear Channel Radio programming manager Alan Sledge; Pruitt, "Real Men Kill." 91.
[91] Marissa Moss, *Her Country*, 51.

and sing," to not speak out about politics, wear anything provocative, or question established industry practices like access to radio airplay.[92] Male artists could speak out about politics: male duo Brooks & Dunn endorsed George W. Bush in 2004 and performed at campaign events. They could wear tight-fitting jeans and t-shirts, and never had to question radio programming because male artists made up over 40% of number one songs on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart in 2004.[93] Their place on country radio was secure. One of the most impactful consequences of The Chicks' ban from country radio and their blacklisting from Music Row in Nashville was the forced discretion for female artists that created limits on political speech. It made plain that there were different rules female artists had to play by. It did not matter how popular a woman's music was, or even what it sounded like; if she was not going to play by the arbitrary, movable rules for being a country artist that favored white male participation, she was out.

Short "Boom," Nowhere to Go

In a 2003 piece for *Billboard* titled "Country Women Lose Hit Magic: Boom Turns to Drought For Even Top Acts," Phyllis Stark wrote that country music's "iron attachment to...the men's club...appears to be making a comeback."[94] As part of this piece, Stark interviewed WMZA Washington, D.C. assistant program director and music

[92] Moss, *Her Country*, 51-52.
[93] Moss, *Her Country,* 51; Watson "Gender on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart," 549.
[94] Phyllis Stark, "Country Women Lose Hit Magic: Boom Turns to Drought For Even Top Acts," *Billboard* 115, no. 27. July 5, 2003.

director Jon Anthony. Speaking about the new "feminine void" on the radio, Anthony remarked:

> It could be the whole 'crossover' thing finally catching up to some of them. Those that made a deliberate attempt to find new fans outside of country music—Faith Hill, LeAnn Rimes, Shania Twain, Lee Ann Womack—seem to be those who are suffering the most. The research has been consistent with these artists in that their gold catalog still tests very well...But the [core country listeners] just aren't buying their new sound anymore...The Dixie Chicks really could've been the No. 1 everything if they would just stop alienating so many fans with their bellyaching...The feminine void wouldn't be so vast if they weren't putting country radio [programming directors] in so many sticky situations.[95]

The "sticky situations" and poor selling "new sounds" of crossover acts reflect the idea that country listeners wanted, according to Anthony, a more "traditional sound."[96] This *Billboard* article also offers a chart of female country hits (number of songs that went number one and hit the top ten) between 1998 and June 2003 based on Nielsen (Soundscan) data. The number of songs by women that went to the top ten dropped by nearly two-thirds from 1998 to 2002, and dropped by half between 2001 and 2002.[97] The forces at work in this sharp decline in female hits were both the perception of artists like Faith Hill and Shania Twain as "sellouts" (a photo of Hill in this article is captioned

[95] Stark, "Country Women Lose Hit Magic."
[96] Stark, "Country Women Lose Hit Magic."
[97] Stark, "Country Women Lose Hit Magic."

"Royal Sellout?") and a change in what radio programmers believed audiences wanted. In line with the traditionalism versus mainstream arguments of the mid-1990s country "boom," a post-9/11 country music seemed to lean this more 'traditional' sound that did not include pop-country styles, or leave room for artists who crossed over to mainstream markets. There were very few women working in a narrow range of acceptable behaviors. No one wanted to be "Dixie Chicked" or labeled a "sellout" like Faith Hill.

Following the boycott of The Chicks, and Hill being labeled a "sellout," there was a void in country crossover sounds in the mid-2000s that would eventually be filled by savvy artists like Carrie Underwood. Winner of the fourth season of *American Idol* in 2005, Underwood was billed as a "country-leaning" singer. She followed up her *Idol* win with her debut album *Some Hearts* (2005), which was marketed toward both country and pop/mainstream audiences.[98] Underwood's label at the time, Arista Nashville/J Records (a division of RCA) aimed to capitalize on Underwood's *Idol* success and her country chops, releasing songs to country and pop radio formats and lining up appearances with both country music and mainstream outlets.[99] Underwood succeeded where Hill had failed just a few years prior. The *Idol* winner's entry to country music showed keen awareness of how the industry had changed in the early 2000s. Underwood represented herself as a country artist steering clear of taboo topics (like politics) in order to sustain her career. Likely due in part to her placid public persona, Underwood's first single from her debut album, "Inside Your Heaven," peaked at number 1 on the *Billboard* Hot 100

[98] Ray Waddell, "Some Hearts" *Billboard* December 3, 2005. 117 no. 49.
[99] Deborah Evans Price, "Underwood Aims for Crossover: Labels Partner to Target Country, Pop Radio With Different Singles," *Billboard* 117, no. 27. November 19, 2005.

(which tracked airplay and sales) in June 2005. *Some Hearts* was met with a warm reception from country and pop critics and fans shortly thereafter.[100] Throughout the early portion of her career following her *Idol* win, Underwood worked hard to get her country credentials. She made frequent apologies for her "'unconventional route'" to country music success" via *Idol* and frequently spoke about the importance of the country community and her country music fans.[101] These comments were meant to reaffirm her identification as a country artist who makes country music. A headline following Underwood's first country single, "Jesus, Take the Wheel" read: "Country Radio Idolizes Underwood."[102] "Jesus, Take the Wheel" is a country ballad, with Underwood's powerful voice and vocal-twang layered over soaring strings including a fiddle line and slide guitar. The song was clearly a country track, and with a message centered around believing in a higher power, faith, and hope for a better future. The song would fit the more "traditional" sounds and impactful themes that D.C. DJ Jon Anthony said female artists lacked in his 2003 interview with *Billboard*.[103]

Although Underwood might have entered the country industry in a (then) unconventional way via *Idol*, the way she negotiated the politics of crossover was astute and contributed to a sustained career as a country artist with mainstream appeal. One of

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[100] Brittany Hodack, "Carrie Underwood's Debut Album 'Some Hearts' Turns 10," *Forbes*, November 13, 2015. https://www.forbes.com/sites/brittanyhodak/2015/11/13/carrie-underwoods-debut-album-some-hearts-turns-10/?sh=74539507a77c.
[101] Molly Brost, "Post-Dixie Chicks Country: Carrie Underwood and the Negotiation of Feminist Country Identity," in *The Politics of Post-9/11 Music: Sound, Trauma, and the Musical Identity*, edited by Brian Flota, (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), 164
[102] Wade Jessen, "Between the Bullets: Country Radio Idolizes Underwood," *Billboard*, 117, no. 45, November 5, 2005.
[103] Stark, "Country Women Lose Hit Magic."

Underwood's first crossover successes was "Before He Cheats," from *Some Hearts* (2005) but Underwood did not allow a pop remix of the song meaning both pop and country radio got the revenge song's country arrangement with fiddle, steel guitar, and Underwood's ever-present twang.[104] With music being made to appeal to both pop and country markets, but a public persona intended to woo the country industry, Carrie Underwood secured herself as a crossover artists in ways those who had come before her had not been able to sustain.

The early 2000s were a "pivotal moment," but they were not "perpetual bliss" as might have been hoped in 1997 when Chet Flippo declared the "Year of the Woman."[105] As this chapter has shown, many changes within the music industry (radio consolidation, steep decline in record sales, changes in music consumption) altered the foundation of the country industry as popularity of the genre expanded. Yet all hope was not lost. The women of '90s country, including the popular-but-criticized female crossover artists, retained immense popularity and helped inspire the next generation of female country singers. Lauren Alaina's 2018 single "Ladies in the '90s" pays homage exclusively to female artists, with the chorus blending lines from Deana Carter's "Strawberry Wine" (1996), "Feel Like A Woman" (1997) by Shania Twain, several Britney Spears songs, and "Cowboy Take Me Away" (1999) by The Chicks.[106] Beyond the lyrical references to older hit songs, Alaina also alludes to a particular nostalgia for actually hearing female country artists on the radio. The line "turn the dial and find me / some Strawberry Wine,"

[104] Weisbard, *Top-40 Democracy*: 246; Wade Jessen, "Country Radio Idolizes Underwood."
[105] Faith Hill "This Kiss" *Faith* (Warner Bros. Nashville, 1998).
[106] Lauren Alaina, "Ladies in the '90s – Single" (UMG Nashville, 2018).

references Deana Carter's hit song from 1996, but also alludes to women having a larger presence on country radio during the 1990s.[107] The nostalgia present in Alaina's song lyrics is for both for the songs female artists were releasing—empowering tracks about love and sexuality that celebrated female autonomy, and that women had an identifiable presence within the country industry and on country radio.

In the next chapter I turn to female artists in the 2010s who, like Alaina, were inspired to make country music by the ladies of the '90s. Unlike Underwood, whose career began immediately following the fall of the '90s women, artists like Kacey Musgraves and Maren Morris left behind the careful politicking forced upon artists like Underwood after The Chicks were banned and Faith Hill and Shania Twain were all but forced out of the industry limelight. As a result female artists have necessarily charted their own paths within the industry, since the structures and systems (radio format, programming practices, paths to record deals, types of songs prioritized) support, almost exclusively, white male artists.

[107] Alaina "Ladies in the 90s."

Chapter 4. Alternate Paths: Women's Country Music of the 2010s

The November 15, 2021 edition of country radio trade publication *Country Aircheck* included a recap of the 2021 Country Music Association (CMA) awards with radio programmers' reactions to the awards show.[1] In addition to comments about sound quality and Luke Bryan's hosting skills, several programmers ended their statements by expressing their disappointment that none of the artists thanked country radio. Nikki Thomas of WXBQ in Johnson City, Tennessee, said, "I was sad no one acknowledged Country Radio in their acceptance speeches. [Likewise that] radio winners were acknowledged in-house, but not on the broadcast."[2] Tyler Reese of WKDF in Nashville had a similar reaction writing that there were "zero radio thank-yous or winner mentions. Overall, I'd give it a five-out-of-ten."[3]

Women artists had very little reason to thank country radio. Carly Pearce, who won Female Vocalist of the Year in 2021, has had limited radio success: only two of her songs reached the number one spot on *Billboard* Country Airplay, and each stayed there for only one week. Pearce has had a total of seven songs move above the top 40 on the

[1] Country Aircheck, "CMA Awards: Radio Reacts," *Country Aircheck*, Issue 782, November 15, 2021. http://www.countryaircheck.com/pdfs/current111521.pdf.
[2] Country Aircheck, "CMA Awards: Radio Reacts," 12.
[3] Country Aircheck, "CMA Awards: Radio Reacts," 14.

chart.[4] By contrast, the Entertainer of the Year award winner, male singer Luke Combs, has had thirteen number one songs on the Country Airplay chart, with ten staying on the chart for more than one week.[5] Examining radio airplay's role in trade awards like the CMAs allows us to see trends within the industry establishment, especially the interconnected nature of radio support and sustained success within the Nashville country music industry. The criteria for CMA nomination are vague: album and song award nominations are contingent on sales and radio airplay, and artist awards are based on musical performances and the artists' "overall contribution to country music."[6] What "overall contribution" means to the CMA members who vote on awards is unclear, but artists with the most frequent nominations have received consistent radio support.[7] The voting body for the CMAs are Association members. To be a member of the CMA a person must earn their income "primarily from the Country Music industry in one of the 17 membership categories."[8] These categories include roles in advertising and media; artists, composers, and musicians; publishing, talent agents, and touring personnel; and radio.[9] Also available are memberships for organizations like venues or record companies. That the CMA Awards are nominated and voted upon by industry insiders

[4] Chart History, "Carly Pearce," *Billboard.* https://www.billboard.com/artist/carly-pearce/chart-history/csa/.
[5] Chart History, "Luke Combs," *Billboard.* https://www.billboard.com/artist/luke-combs/chart-history/csa/.
[6] CMA Awards, "About the CMA Awards," CMA (website), https://cmaawards.com/about/.
[7] Sterling Whitaker, "How Does the CMA Awards Voting Work?" *Taste of Country,* November 10, 2021. https://tasteofcountry.com/how-does-cma-awards-voting-work/.
[8] CMA Membership, "About CMA Membership," CMA, https://www.cmaworld.com/membership/
[9] The CMA Membership application form can be found here: https://countrymusic.formstack.com/forms/cmaindividualmembershipapp

who make up the membership of the trade organization lends the awards prestige. At the same time, that the awards are chosen by industry insiders also ensures that they reflect biases seen plainly in other facets of the industry, such as radio.

A frequent refrain from critics and industry insiders is that for female musicians to succeed on country radio, their music needs to demonstrate "unique" qualities.[10] This standard is not applied to male artists: during the 2010s the stylistic range of songs sung by men has continued to narrow, creating a homogenized musical environment on country radio. Apart from the unfair double standard, there is significant bias in radio programming practices.[11] Even when female artists release music that *should* do well on country radio because it fits within the narrow stylistic range male artists successfully employ, radio stations do not program the music. Some women have had success in trade awards without currying favor with radio executives: Kacey Musgraves has chosen not to participate in certain aspects of the mainstream industry, such as radio tours and relationships with country radio, but she still won the CMA New Artist of the Year award in 2013; Album of the Year for *Golden Hour* in 2018; and Female Vocalist of the Year in 2019. By contrast to Musgraves, other women—Kelsea Ballerini, Maren Morris, Miranda Lambert, and Carrie Underwood—have continued to work within the systems of the mainstream country industry. Despite "playing by the rules," these artists have received comparatively little recognition. As of 2019, Ballerini was one of the most played female

[10] "CRS360 A Discussion of Gender Balance at Country Radio: Part II," *Webinar Series,* panel with Lindsey Ell, Cindy Mage, Beville Dunkerley. Zoom. June 11, 2019; Ell discussed the need for female artists to be "unique," and radio programmers and executives on the panel agreed with her.

[11] Gender bias in radio programming is discussed in Chapter 3.

artists on country radio. She has been nominated for numerous CMA awards over the years but did not win one until 2021, when she took home the Musical Event of the Year award for her song "Half of My Hometown," performed with Kenny Chesney.[12]

Beginning with a discussion of changes to radio formatting in the 2010s, this chapter identifies how female performers have created opportunities for themselves as country artists while negotiating varying levels of industry support. I identify metrics by which success can be measured, and compare the achievements of male and female artists to illustrate how industry-created barriers have forced female artists to navigate the industry differently. The case studies of Kacey Musgraves and Kelsea Ballerini unravel two patterns for success, here marked by critical acclaim, music awards show wins, and popularity chart success. As of 2022, both have released at least three albums and are past their "new artist" stage, demonstrating staying power within the genre. Both have, at times, moved beyond standard country music sounds either within their own releases, or through re-mixes or collaborations with pop artists. Musgraves and Ballerini negotiate the stylistic and socio-political boundaries of country music differently, though both of them succeeded without the support from country radio that male artists receive. Musgraves has consistently butted against the musical norms for mainstream country, and she has been far more outspoken on political and social issues. Ballerini generally steered clear of public statements about politics until 2020, and musically she has functioned within the

[12] Lisa Konicki, "Kelsea Ballerini Wins First-Ever CMA Awards; Takes Home 2 Awards," *American Songwriter,* November 2021, https://americansongwriter.com/kelsea-ballerini-wins-first-ever-cma-awards-takes-home-2-awards/.

typical sonic boundaries of country music.[13] Musgraves and Ballerini have both cultivated careers on the edges of country music through crossover opportunities such as touring with pop acts or releasing songs that have broad market potential. Even though female artists had been penalized for crossover in the past, crossover still offers women in country music opportunities for high earnings and critical acclaim.[14] But crossover is also how musical innovation has been negotiated throughout country music history; the stories told here of Kacey Musgraves and Kelsea Ballerini represent two different paths to success for women in country music and the cost of pursuing those paths.

Finding Success Without the Industry

Only a select few female artists have secured sustained access to institutions of country music. We saw in chapter 3 that the country industry has systematically limited women's access to radio; this in turn has affected record sales and touring receipts. Popularity charts like *Billboard*'s are widely regarded as key markers of success in the industry; these, too, reflect radio airplay. Maren Morris, Kelsea Ballerini, and Taylor

[13] Emily Yahr, "People often assume all country singers have conservative views. This year has proved— yet again—that's not the case," *The Washington Post,* October 21, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/10/21/country-singers-election-stereotypes-cmt-awards/; Bobby Moore, "Country Artists React to Joe Biden's Presidential Election Victory," *Wide Open Country*, November 9, 2020. https://www.wideopencountry.com/country-stars-2020-election/; Jessica Nicholson, "Kelsea Ballerini Writes about Eating Disorder, High School Shooting & More in Vulnerable Book of Poems," *Billboard,* November 15, 2021. https://www.billboard.com/music/country/kelsea-ballerini-poetry-book-interview-9660228/.

[14] As discussed in chapter 3, examples of crossover success include Faith Hill and Shania Twain, who were ostracized from country radio in the early 2000s after achieving success in mainstream markets.

Swift, along with Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert, are among the few solo female artists who had more than one song with sustained chart success or a hit within the top ten songs of *Billboard* country charts over the last decade.[15] Mediabase, a radio monitoring service, tracks detectable spins by stations across the United States. As calculated by Jada Watson in a gender equity assessment of the country format during the 2010s, year-end airplay reports generated by Mediabase's 256 chart-reporting stations between 2010 and 2019 indicate that there were just three female country artists who received airplay comparable their male counterparts: Carrie Underwood with 2,261,238 spins, Miranda Lambert with 1,634,812 and Kelsea Ballerini with 1,100,670 total spins. By contrast, Dierks Bentley, the tenth ranked male artist, had 2,326,920 (close to Underwood), but the top ranked male artist, Jason Aldean, had nearly 4.2 million spins, double the airplay of the top-ranked woman.[16] According to Watson's calculations, the ratio of male-to-female airplay between 2010 to 2019 was 8.7 to 1.[17] Beyond representing the astounding gender disparity on country radio, this year-end airplay data shows that there are just two female artists with sustained success on country radio, Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert. Of course, these two are not the only female artists making country music; they are just the two with the most radio airplay and most

[15] Jada E. Watson, "Gender Representation on *Billboard's* Yearend Country Airplay Charts from 2010-2019," *SongData* in Partnership with CMT Equal Play, November 12, 2020. https://songdata.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SongData-Watson-Billboard-AirplayChart-2019.pdf.
[16] Watson, "Gender Representation on *Billboard's* Yearend Country Airplay Charts from 2010-2019."
[17] Watson, "Gender Representation on *Billboard's* Yearend Country Airplay Charts from 2010-2019."

consistent industry support.

Awards, too, reflect the industry's tilt toward male performers. Nominations for CMA Male and Female Artist of the Year award reflect the top ten male and female artists for year-end country airplay, even though criteria for those awards are not based solely on radio airplay. Miranda Lambert and Carrie Underwood have been consistently nominated for Female Vocalist of the Year between 2006 and 2022. Lambert has been nominated fifteen times and won the award for CMA Female Vocalist of the Year seven times since her first nomination in 2007.[18] Underwood has been nominated fifteen times and won five times, with three consecutive wins between 2006 and 2008. The pool of nominees was nearly identical between 2010 and 2017, with Lambert and Underwood nominated each year, along with sixteen nominations for Martina McBride between 1995 and 2014 and five nominations between 2004 and 2017 for Reba McEntire.[19] Male Vocalist of the Year award nominees reflect a similarly insular pool, with Chris Stapleton winning the award five times between 2015 and 2022, and familiar names such as Blake Shelton, Keith Urban, and Luke Combs securing multiple wins throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Clearly, artists who receive the most consistent radio airplay are the artists who have success at the CMA awards.

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[18] All CMA Award Winners can be tracked on the Country Music Association's website: https://cmaawards.com/past-winners-and-nominees/; See also Jada E. Watson, "Gender Representation of CMA Awards: A Study of Nominees and Winners, 2020-2019," *SongData Reports* Partnership with CMT Equal Play. November 12, 2020. https://songdata.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SongData_Watson-CMA-NominationHistoryNovember2019.pdf.

[19] Taylor Swift, Kelsea Ballerini, Kacey Musgraves, and Maren Morris have each been nominated at least twice, and each has won at least once. Carly Pearce won Female Vocalist of the Year in 2021.

As I noted in chapter 3, the turn of the millennium marked one of the best years for women in country music, but it was followed by a sharp decline in female success as measured by popularity charts and radio airplay data. More recently, as Watson has argued, changes in how the industry measures success have diminished the turnover of artists in the top spots. According to Watson, when *Billboard* changed its method for calculating the Hot Country Songs (HCS) chart in 2012 to use the "Hot 100 methodology," they combined "digital sales, streaming and airplay from *all* radio formats"—instead of just counting tracks within the country format. According to Watson, this "new methodology…radically changed the chart's culture—rewarding crossover artists, reducing the number of artists reaching the coveted No. 1 spot and creating repetitious culture."[20] Watson argues that *Billboard* charts serve as a curatorial agent that reinforces the "existing inequalities in the genre" that systematically ignore white women and exclude Black and brown women.[21] Given that women have had strong incentives to pursue genre crossover, it should follow that changes to the HCS format to reward crossover artists would benefit female artists—yet that has not been the case. The charts still reinforce structural inequities present in the country industry.

As Watson has explained, popularity charts make popularity seem tangible; this sense that popularity is real and measurable, in turn, shapes the culture surrounding a genre.[22] Popularity charts curate genre culture—including genre's socio-political *and*

[20] Jada Watson, "Billboard's 'Hot Country Songs' Chart and the Curation of Country Music Culture," *Popular Music History* 13, no. 1-2 (2020): 169.
[21] Watson, "Billboard's 'Hot Country Songs' Chart," 170.
[22] Watson, "Billboard's 'Hot Country Songs' Chart," 170.

style-driven components—and record labels prioritize adherence to genre as they sign artists or support releases to media outlets. In country music, radio popularity charts reflect and shape which artists and what sounds become popular and which ones will have sustained success within the format. According to Watson's studies, changes to the HCS chart initially caused a "trend toward more artists charting multiple songs annually": over the last twenty years fewer unique artists are represented there. In 1997, 67.6% of artists on the chart appeared on the chart only once, but in 2002 39.3% of the artists were unique, and that number dropped to 36.6% in 2016.[23] The lack of representation is particularly apparent if we look for female artists who achieved the top spot on the HCS: female artists held the top spot just 12.0% of the time in 2016.[24]

One artist who benefited from the changes to the HCS chart calculation is Maren Morris. She rose to fame in the Nashville country music scene in the mid-2010s, releasing her debut album, *Hero,* in 2016. The lead single from the album, "My Church," is a mid-tempo ballad released in January of 2015, which went to No. 5 on the *Billboard* HCS chart.[25] "My Church" describes listening to older country artists like Hank Williams as a "soul revival" born from FM radio. The song's blues-inspired approach garnered Morris critical acclaim both from within the country industry and outside of it.[26] Her subsequent releases have been marketed as country music with a few exceptions: "The

[23] Watson, "Billboard's 'Hot Country Songs' Chart," 177.
[24] Watson, "Billboard's 'Hot Country Songs' Chart," 182.
[25] The *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart takes into account record sales, radio airplay, and streaming data. For a full description see: https://www.billboard.com/billboard-charts-legend/.
[26] Amanda Wicks, "Behind The Song: Maren Morris—'My Church'," *CBS News,* January 25, 2017. https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/behind-the-song-maren-morris-my-church/.

Middle" (2018), a pop/EDM collaboration with producers Zedd and Grey, and a remix of her hit single "The Bones" (2020) that featured British R&B singer Hozier did well on both country and pop charts.[27] Changes to HCS chart tabulation meant that crossover—like "The Bones"—was prioritized differently. The song was successful on multi-format charts because it appealed to multiple marketing categories. "The Bones" became Morris's second success on pop charts and was her first No. 1 single on *Billboard*'s HCS chart in 2020.

Yet, for all of Morris's success, it is important to recognize that female presence on these popularity charts was still limited. "The Bones" was the first song by a solo female country artist to go number one since Kelsea Ballerini's "Peter Pan" in 2016. "The Bones" sat at number one for 19 weeks, displacing Taylor Swift's "We Are Never Getting Back Together" of 2012 as the longest holder of that spot on the chart.[28] Gabby Barrett beat Morris's record with "I Hope" in 2021, which spent 20 weeks at number one.[29] Overall, though, male artists still have more songs recorded on the charts than do female artists, and their songs stay high on the charts for longer periods. The record for a songs time spent at number one on the HCS chart is currently held by pop artist Bebe Rexha, for the single "Meant to Be" (featuring country duo Florida Georgia Line), which

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[27] Andrea Dresdale, 'Maren Morris Beats Taylor Swift's Hot Country Songs Chart Record," *ABC News*, May 20, 2020. https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Culture/maren-morris-beats-taylor-swifts-hot-country-songs/story?id=70783775

[28] As I note in chapter 5 about Taylor Swift, "We Are Never Getting Back Together" was her last song that had tremendous success on country radio; this song contributed to her eventual departure from the mainstream country music industry.

[29] Jim Asker, "Two 'Good Ones': Gabby Barrett Banks Second Leader on Hot Country Songs Chart," *Billboard,* April 6, 2021. https://www.billboard.com/pro/gabby-barrett-good-ones-tops-hot-country-songs-chart/.

spent 50 weeks at number one between 2017 and 2018, more than doubling Gabby Barrett's record of 20 weeks.[30] All of the songs that have stayed a long time atop the HCS chart in the last five years have featured heavy pop/mainstream musical influences. Morris's number one songs likely would not have succeeded without crossover airplay and support from country radio. Even taking the tendency of women toward crossover into account, there is clear gender imbalance on the charts.

Together awards, radio airplay, and chart statistics register the staggering gender disparity found within the country industry. Importantly, awards and radio success also indicate a prioritization of particular modes for success in the industry through radio support and the way particular blends of musical styles are prioritized. What success looks like for every individual artist, it is clear that female artists must navigate a path to a sustained career in the country industry differently than their male counterparts. Success could be measured in the types of venues played on artists' tours (arena shows versus smaller or mid-sized venues); how high on airplay or popularity charts an artist's songs get; numbers of records sold; or the artist's popularity among a range of fan bases in different marketplaces (a country music fan base versus pop versus Americana or folk). The case studies included in this chapter illustrate two ways female artists have navigated careers in the country industry. Because Kacey Musgraves's and Kelsea

[30] Rexha's record has received criticism from within the country industry because she is not a country artist, and the song likely would not have received country airplay had it not featured Florida Georgia Line, see: Melinda Newman, "Songs That Defined the Decade: Bebe Rexha & Florida Georgia Line's 'Meant to Be'," *Billboard,* November 21, 2019. https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bebe-rexha-florida-georgia-line-meant-to-be-songs-that-defined-the-decade-8543862/.; Hot Country Songs: November 17, 2018, *Billboard.* https://www.billboard.com/charts/country-songs/2018-11-17/.

Ballerini's careers are not supported in the same ways male artists' are, they show us the varying ways that female artists can cultivate success for themselves in an inhospitable industry.

Kacey Musgraves: Disregarding Radio

Whereas artists like Maren Morris have intentionally courted country radio and benefited from radio crossover successes, Kacey Musgraves has taken an alternate route to making a place for herself in the industry. Musgraves's first two studio albums, *Same Trailer, Different Park* (2013) and *Pageant Material* (2015), featured pointed political and progressive lyrics that grated against a Nashville system that remained wrapped up in the "bro-country" movement of the 2010s.[31] "Bro-country," a term first coined by music journalist Jody Rosen, identifies male-dominated pop- and hip-hop-infused contemporary country songs with words focused on trucks, partying, and casual sex. In one of the few published pieces of scholarship on Kacey Musgraves, music critic and YouTuber Grady Smith frames Musgraves as a "challenge to bro country."[32] Musgraves's work as a vocalist and songwriter set her apart from male country artists who were recording songs about sexual conquests with pervasive references to trucks and beer. Musgraves herself

[31] Jody Rosen, "Jody Rosen on the Rise of Bro-Country," *Vulture,* August 11, 2013. https://www.vulture.com/2013/08/rise-of-bro-country-florida-georgia-line.html.
[32] Grady Smith, "Challenge to Bro Country: Kacey Musgraves," in *Pickers and Poets: The Ruthlessly Poetic Singer-Songwriters of Texas,* ed. Craig E. Clifford, Craig Hillis, Joe Nick Patoski, Robert Early Hard, Bob Livingston, and Tamara Saviano (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2016): 221.

has been a critic of bro-country, describing it as "not fun to listen to."[33] Her earlier work does not draw on the topically homogeneous content of bro-country songs, and Musgraves eschews the pop- and hip-hop-infused musical styles common in bro-country, opting for arrangements that prioritize her voice and instruments like the guitar and banjo.

The majority of "contemporary" or "radio" country music of the 2010s was music performed almost exclusively by male artists, whose sonic markers fell into the bro-country category.[34] This includes songs like Florida Georgia Line's "Cruise," the remix of "Cruise" that featured rapper Nelly, and Sam Hunt's "Body Like a Back Road."[35] All of these songs feature what music theorist Jeremy Orosz identifies as a combination of "dance-friendly beat[s] and auto-tuned vocals."[36] Hunt's "Body Like A Back Road," for example, begins with a strummed guitar back beat with snap sounds and a shouted "hey" later layered with drum machine sounds to craft a careful blend of stylistic signifiers for country and hip-hop. The dance-friendly beats Orosz describes are also readily heard on Florida Georgia Line's "Cruise" remix featuring Nelly, with a trap beat that makes the

[33] Smith, "Challenge to Bro Country," 223.
[34] See Hughes, "From Bros to Gentlemen: The Problem of Consent in Contemporary Country Music."
[35] As of 2012 the Billboard Hot Country Songs Chart also accounts for digital song streaming, not just airplay and sales; Jada Watson, "Looking for Bodies on the Back Road: Changing Billboard Methodologies and Stylistic Diversity on the Hot Country Songs," paper given at the International Country Music Conference, Nashville, June 2, 2018.
[36] Jeremy Orosz, "'Straight Outta Nashville': Allusions to Hip Hop in Contemporary Country Music," *Popular Music and Society*, 44, no.1 (2019): 3.

arrangement sound denser than the original country mix of the song.[37] *Billboard's* use of new methodologies for counting spins benefited bro-country songs because they were more likely to crossover into different radio formats, especially as they were remade with different radio edits and re-mixes. Florida Georgia Line's collaboration with Nelly is a key example of this trend: the original version of the song with only Florida Georgia Line did not have prolonged chart success, but the re-mixed version of the song did. *Billboard* counted all versions of the song together, rather than charting each version separately.[38] Although there was some pushback from critics and fans who appreciated a more "neo-traditional" approach to country music, exemplified by George Strait and Alan Jackson in the 1990s, the apparent pop and hip-hop influences of tracks released beginning around 2012 have since dominated the country airwaves.

At the same time bro-country took off, Musgraves received critical attention for her album releases, notably winning two Grammy awards in 2013 for her debut album, *Same Trailer, Different Park*. Musgraves maintained a distance from the tight sonic boundaries of mainstream country music and bro-country, relying on her guitar playing and softer vocal style to make her recordings sound more intimate than the over-produced pop sound of bro-country tracks. Musgraves also consistently made reference to her progressive politics in songs. A single release from that album, "Merry Go 'Round,"

[37] Sam Hunt, "Body Like A Back Road," *Body Like a Back Road – Single,* (UMG Nashville, 2017); Florida Georgia Line and Nelly, "Cruise – Remix," *Cruise – Remix – Single,* (Big Machine Records, 2013).
[38] Jada Watson, "Looking for Bodies on the Back Road."

reached No. 14 on the *Billboard* US Country Songs chart.[39] The song included words in favor of recreational marijuana use and lyrics articulating support for women's sexual freedom. These topics, controversial because of the varying legality of marijuana use throughout the United States and the continuing debates over limitations on women's reproductive rights, position Musgraves's music politically far afield from bro-country songs, which frequently involve passive patriotism and refer to legal substance abuse like alcohol. One example of Musgraves's sharp lyrics can be heard in "Merry Go 'Round," in which she describes painfully realistic truths of young adulthood in a small town. She sings about smoking marijuana and an unfaithful parental figure's sexual exploits with the line "Mama's hooked on Mary Kay / brother's hooked on Mary Jane / daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down."[40] The song is a far cry from the more vapid dime-a-dozen songs on country radio about getting drunk and having sex on the back roads of a small town in a pickup truck.[41] Instead, Musgraves offers a realistic impression of small-town life and growing up, airing the poorly-kept secrets of families and neighbors rather than valorizing an alcohol-infused party culture.

Musgraves has also been an outspoken supporter of the LGBTQ+ community and

[39] Chart History, Kacey Musgraves, *Billboard.* https://www.billboard.com/artist/kacey-musgraves/.
[40] Kacey Musgraves, "Follow Your Arrow," *Same Trailer, Different Park* (UMG Nashville), 2013.
[41] Rebecca Lin Densley and Eric Rasmussen, "Why Don't We Get Drunk and Screw?: A Content Analysis of Women, Sex and Alcohol in Country Music," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 30, no. 3 (2018): 115-128.

the Black Lives Matter movement.[42] Grady Smith describes Musgraves's politics as not "for everyone," implicitly pointing out that Musgraves's political positioning might not elicit a positive reception from the country establishment.[43] Musgraves's language of tolerance and acceptance within her music has required that she market her creative output to a wider audience, rather than the assumed audience of white, straight listeners that country still seeks to attract. The incorporation of politics into music and into a public persona is an important feature of Musgraves's career, and relevant to other female country artists of the 2010s as well: the mainstream industry (radio, industry gatekeepers) has often used their participation in politics as a reason to keep their music off the air or to dismiss their artistic contributions.[44] Musgraves is an interesting example because so much of her music received tremendously warm critical reception, but was not welcomed by country radio.[45]

Critical reception for Musgraves's 2018 album *Golden Hour* was generally positive; the album won the all-genre category Album of the Year at the 2019 Grammy Awards after garnering favorable reviews from critics after its release in the Spring of 2018. In an article for NPR Music about the release of *Golden Hour*, journalist Jewly

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[42] Claudia Harmata, "Kacey Musgraves Vows to Break 'Cycle' Cause by 'Systemic Privilege': 'I Will Not Be a Bystander'," *People*, June 1, 2020. https://people.com/country/kacey-musgraves-vows-break-cycle-caused-by-systemic-privilege-will-not-be-bystander/.
[43] Smith, "Challenge to Bro-Country," 223.
[44] As discussed in chapter 3, the silencing of women's political statements began after 9/11 with The Chick's blacklisting on country radio.
[45] Emily Yahr, "'Radio tour is not for the weak': Inside the First Step to Country Music Stardom." *The Washington Post*, June 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/radio-tour-is-not-for-the-weak-inside-the-first-step-to-country-music-stardom/2017/06/14/41feba42-4c60-11e7-9669-250d0b15f83b_story.html?utm_term=.d5f60e74cbf9.

Hight writes that "after establishing a reputation as a serious, smart-assed songwriter in a masculine musical lineage, it must have been a bit nerve-wracking for Musgraves to make room for softer, more sincere expression," noting the change of Musgraves's "sonic palette" on *Golden Hour*.[46] Given Musgraves's past lukewarm reception at country radio, it is unsurprising that the singles initially released to country radio did poorly there. For this album Musgraves released two singles at the same time, "Butterflies" and "Space Cowboy": both songs would languish at country radio. "Space Cowboy," penned with country hitmakers Luke Laird and Shane McAnally, did nominally better than "Butterflies": Hight noted that its "coolly cutting word play and wistful twang" made it ripe for country radio.[47] "Space Cowboy" peaked at No. 3 on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart, whereas "Butterflies" went no higher than the No. 32 spot.[48] Although it is difficult to determine whether Musgraves's moderate success on the HCS chart was due to streaming, sales, or airplay, these songs' presence in the Top-40 on the HCS chart does indicate that radio programmers and listeners were at least aware of her 2018 release, whether the artist herself was cultivating relationships with country radio or not.

Musgraves's lack of collaboration with country radio was a topic of conversation during an open forum at the 2019 Country Radio Seminar (CRS). Musgraves had just won the Grammy for *Golden Hour,* and she had also taken home Album of the Year at

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[46] Jewly Hight, "After Carving Out A Space, Kacey Musgraves Lets Her Guard Down on "Golden Hour," *NPR Music,* March 26, 2018. https://www.npr.org/2018/03/26/595765776/first-listen-kacey-musgraves-golden-hour.
[47] Height, "After Carving Out A Space, Kacey Musgraves Lets Her Guard Down on "Golden Hour."
[48] Billboard, *Hot Country Chart,* April 14, 2018, https://www.billboard.com/charts/country-songs/2018-04-14.

the 2019 Country Music Association (CMA) awards. As journalist Marissa Moss described the forum for a piece in *Rolling Stone,* many radio programmers and radio executives wondered aloud if they had missed the moment to play Musgraves's music.[49] Moss quotes Tom Hanrahan of Birmingham's 102.5 ("The Bull") on Musgraves's radio relationship, or lack thereof:

> We tend to like and embrace artists who are interested or want to engage with the format...My interaction [with Musgraves] has been hit or miss. I promise I haven't penalized her or any other artists. But from a humanity standpoint, people like to cheer on people who seem to want to row in the same direction and connectivity with her, but I haven't put her in the time-out chair...[50]

Hanrahan's comment is disingenuous, implying that he has the power to do what he wants with respect to programming artists, and that he could put her in the "time-out chair" if he wanted to. For country artists, the relationship that they maintain with radio is of the utmost importance, as radio airplay can shape the trajectory of an artist's career. When an interviewer asked radio programmers whether they had "missed" Musgraves's moment, they assured the interviewer that "'it's the song itself' that reigns, not the gender, and that they (programmers) are reluctant to play songs from artists who do not 'play ball' with the format."[51] An attendee described "playing ball" as the "promotional things radio expects especially a woman artist to do" and acknowledged that Musgraves

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[49] Marissa Moss, "Women on Country Radio: CRS Sends Mixed Messages," *Rolling Stone,* February 27, 2019. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/women-country-music-kacey-musgraves-crs-800797/.
[50] Moss, "Women on Country Radio: CRS Sends Mixed Messages."
[51] Moss, "Women on Country Radio: CRS Sends Mixed Messages."

refused to participate in those activities—but as Moss described it, this attendee "did not elaborate on what [those] things [were]."[52] Musgraves's songs did poorly on country radio, likely because they were not frequently played, but *Golden Hour* sold well and reached No. 4 on the *Billboard 200* album sales chart. Lack of radio support has clearly not hindered Musgraves's success: she has achieved industry recognition in the form of industry-voted awards like the CMA awards and the Grammys, along with several tours that filled halls and arenas between 2014 and 2022.

The contrast between Musgraves's lack of country radio support and the critical accolades her album received in other circles points to the disjuncture between country radio's social expectations that women artists would court personalities and build relationships and what Musgraves was willing to do.[53] In an interview with Zane Lowe and Apple Music in October 2018, Musgraves shared that *Golden Hour* was her most personal album. The interview focused primarily on the song "Slow Burn," the album opener, which Musgraves said she wrote under the influence of psychedelics.[54] Musgraves described "Slow Burn" as one of the last songs written for the album; it was meant to ease the listener into the album, while also setting the stage for the more

[52] Moss, "Women on Country Radio: CRS Sends Mixed Messages."
[53] Marissa R. Moss, "Inside Country Radio's Dark, Secret History of Sexual Harassment and Misconduct. *Rolling Stone*, 16 January 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/inside-country-radios-dark-secret-history-of-sexual-harassment-and-misconduct-253573/; Emily Yahr, "'Radio tour is not for the weak': Inside the First Step to Country Music Stardom." *The Washington Post,* 15 June 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/radio-tour-is-not-for-the-weak-inside-the-first-step-to-country-music-stardom/2017/06/14/41feba42-4c60-11e7-9669-250d0b15f83b_story.html?utm_term=.d5f60e74cbf9.
[54] Zane Lowe, "Kacey Musgraves: 'Slow Burn' Interview, Apple Music," *Apple Music,* October 16, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oA19ZDa8-IQ.

intimate songs that followed it. As Lowe commented during this interview, "Slow Burn" is a "hell of an opener" for an album he described as "special": he emphasized how it took him almost an hour to get past "Slow Burn" because of how captivating the song is. The interview explained what Lowe felt made "Slow Burn" such an appealing song, including Musgraves's personal autobiographical touches and the use of vocoder and expansive reverberation to create an innovative space-age sound.

Musgraves also used the interview to describe how she saw herself within the country industry. Describing herself as an "unafraid" artist, Musgraves spoke frankly about the limits of country as a genre and as an industry. Musgraves noted that there

> is a lot of freedom when you [break out from genre] from day one because there's no expectations on you. I mean especially me coming from the Nashville country music… modern country music genre, there can be a lot of expectations, stipulations, boxes, a lot of rigid lines especially as a female, and I was just like: that's not gonna be me. I'll just literally not have a career if I can't do [her own form of country songwriting].[55]

In the interview, both Lowe and Musgraves indicated that Musgraves has never tried to fit into the specific song types or stylistic parameters that were mainstream within the country music industry. Marissa Moss echoed this point in another context: Moss quoted Musgraves's first label publicist, Fount Lynch, who described Musgraves as unwilling to be "shaped or molded or manufactured in any way."[56] Kacey Musgraves set personal

[55] Zane Lowe, "Kacey Musgraves: 'Slow Burn' Interview, Apple Music."
[56] Marissa Moss, *Her Country* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2022): 126.

boundaries for what she was or was not willing to do for her music. Her unwillingness to take direction from the country industry has resulted in music that is stylistically further afield from what is commonly heard on country radio. Musgraves's *Golden Hour* is musically unique, with an infusion of '70s disco elements, reverberation-heavy arrangements, frequent use of voice manipulation technology, and a suffusion of country sounds. This blend of sonic elements relied on carefully crafted instrumental arrangements and Musgraves's own lyricism to sound both exactly like a country record and also unlike anything on country radio at the time, because Musgraves refused to echo the narrow styles of bro-country.

Musgraves toured for *Golden Hour* twice from January through September 2019: the second run for fall 2019 was added after *Golden Hour* won the all-genre category of Album of the Year at the 2019 Grammy Awards.[57] The first song performed on tour was "Slow Burn," which, like the album version, eased the audience into the sonic and emotional tone of the show. "Slow Burn" takes a minute and a half to reach a full-band arrangement, beginning with just strummed guitar, and adding an additional plucked string instrument to the mix with each line of the verse.[58] The airy acoustic guitar with a slight echoing reverberation and the friction of fingers on the guitar is joined by Musgraves's voice. Then, by the second stanza of the first verse, a plucked banjo enters the mix, continuing the same echoing production value—a trait that carries through the album, giving it an atmospheric, calm vibe. At the start of the second verse, with the line

[57] Stephen Spiewak, "Kacey Musgraves Announces 2019 Oh, What a World Dates," February 14, 2019. https://www.vividseats.com/blog/kacey-musgraves-2019-tour-dates.
[58] Kacey Musgraves, "Slow Burn," *Golden Hour* (UMG Nashville, 2018).

"in Tennessee the sun's goin' down / but in Beijing they're headin' out to work," a drum set enters just after the word "work," making the song sound more pop. Musgraves's vocals create a powerful intimacy central to the atmosphere of *Golden Hour* as a whole, setting the record up as something beyond the scope of Musgraves's previous work. The song's words flow between references to marijuana, alcohol, and a familiar lover, setting the tone for the album: a self-reflexive set of songs about falling in love, self-discovery, sitting with emotions. The soundscape of the song includes Musgraves's light vocal twang, her guitar playing, and a backing band which includes pedal steel, a Hammond organ, banjo, various guitars, drum set, and electronics: this combination allows clear country references and the elements of pop production to be clearly audible. Written in a circular form, the song begins where it ends, with just Musgraves's voice accompanied by acoustic guitar.

The tour performances captured Musgraves's vocal intimacy and musical range through different vignettes, progressing from her more typical country sound to a disco-inspired end to the show. Musgraves performed a series of songs in a stripped-down musical arrangement, physically positioned on stage closer together, with her band members off their risers, holding acoustic and in some cases miniature or toy instruments. During her sunset performance at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival, Musgraves included "Family is Family" from *Pageant Material* (2015) and the Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun."[59] In keeping with Telluride fashion, Chris Thile, a mandolinist and member of The Punch Brothers, came out to play with Musgraves and her band. Thile's guest appearance

[59] Kacey Musgraves at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival, 2019. Personal Observation.

helped position Musgraves as a participant in the collaborative environment the Telluride Bluegrass Festival. Famous performers like Jewel and Dierks Bentley made guest appearances throughout sets, including on Brandi Carlile's festival-closing performance on Sunday night. Musgraves's set harmonized with the more acoustic musical environment of bluegrass at the festival, so that it did not feel out of step.

The last set in the live show included Musgraves's cover of "I Will Survive," originally recorded by Gloria Gaynor, leading directly into Musgraves's own song "High Horse."[60] This conclusion to Musgraves's set functioned in two ways and made for a fun and upbeat end to the show. The album version of "High Horse" had started with an instrumental fade-in reminiscent of disco. In the live performance Musgraves began the song without an instrumental lead in, relying on a disco groove and strummed guitars as the backbeat to set up a pop-inspired feel. Over the course of the performance the guitars were slowly overtaken by electronic sounds, and Musgraves's "High Horse" conclusion to the tour set included considerable pop production. Where these final moments of Musgraves's set reference the pop-production of Musgraves's *Golden Hour* tour, the tracks do not recall the hip-hop or trap-influenced production styles of bro-country popular on country radio in the late 2010s. *Golden Hour* and its tour positioned Musgraves outside a strict country or pop paradigm, making it clear why her music was so appealing to a broader audience.

[60] Gaynor joined Musgraves for a performance of this song on a tour stop in New York City at Radio City Music Hall. Disco country was popular in the early 1980s, popularized through films like *Urban Cowboy*, for more information see: David Brackett, "Crossover Dreams: From Urban Cowboy to the King of Pop," in *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2016): 286-89.

Given that bro-country popularized a blend of pop and hip-hop production values for country radio, it would have made sense for "High Horse" to succeed at radio. But the song was not initially released as a single, perhaps because Musgraves has intentionally not cultivated a relationship with radio. Instead, she has charted a path to success as a country artist working Nashville by stepping outside of the industry norms. Musgraves has created music that feels authentic to her, rather than catering exclusively to the narrow whims of country radio.[61] *Golden Hour* is stylistically malleable, leaving space for country fans with "Space Cowboy" and welcoming everyone into the fold with "Rainbow." The blending of various sounds and styles seems to make perfect sense combined with Musgraves's poignant and personal songwriting. That Musgraves is able to musically flit between industry-formed genre categories, receive critical acclaim for that work, but not find support within the country music industry helps us see more clearly what approaches might help an artist succeed outside the country industry, including the importance of songwriting, musical creativity and experimentation, and the ongoing cultivation of a broad fanbase.

Kelsea Ballerini is Country Enough

By contrast with Kacey Musgraves, who has not cultivated a relationship with country radio at all, Kelsea Ballerini has worked within the frame of country-pop sounds—the same frame in which other artists like Maren Morris and Taylor Swift have

[61] Zane Lowe, "Kacey Musgraves: 'Slow Burn' Interview, Apple Music."

been successful. Through the summer and fall of 2021, Kelsea Ballerini went on tour with pop boy-band the Jonas Brothers. At the second to last stop on the 2021 "Remember This" tour with the Jonas Brothers in Phoenix, Arizona, four different acts preceded Kelsea Ballerini, who served as the final opener. Ballerini was the only performer of the night who was associated with country music. It is not new for female country performers to tour with male pop acts: in 2018, Kacey Musgraves toured with Harry Styles and Maren Morris toured with Niall Horan, both former members of the boy band One Direction. Signed to Black River Entertainment, an independent record label, Ballerini has consistently released pop-country music.

The balance of sounds and genre affiliation was apparent during Ballerini's opening set for the Jonas Brothers. She began with "Miss Me More," a single from *Unapologetically* (2018), with a pop introduction leading into her appearance on stage.[62] On the album version the opening line features an acoustic guitar lick and echoes of Ballerini's voice rising in volume before she sings the line "I retired my red lipstick 'cause you said you didn't like it / I didn't wear my high heeled shoes / 'cause I couldn't be taller than you."[63] The first verse sets the tone for the empowering breakup track that exhibits a clear blend of pop and country styles: Ballerini's voice is layered over electronic drums and automated snap sounds, but subtle plucked string sounds that recall an acoustic guitar, and a mandolin and banjo can be heard in the mid-range of the arrangement. Through the song's lyrics Ballerini recounts all of the things she changed

[62] Kelsea Ballerini, *Remember This Tour*, Phoenix, Arizona 2021. Personal Observation.
[63] Kelsea Ballerini, "Miss Me More," *Unapologetically* (Black Bear Entertainment, 2017).

about herself for a partner before realizing that her own self-worth was more important, giving a positive, female-focused meaning to the title phrase, "miss me more."[64]

By contrast with the album version, during the live performance of "Miss Me More" Ballerini struck a balance between pop and country with her vocal twang and heavy electric guitar evoking country music, even as the electronic drums and synths of the production side drew the song closer to pop music. After the opening song Ballerini sang a medley of her hit songs from 2015: "Yeah Boy," "Dibs," and "Love Me Like You Mean It." At the time of their release, these three songs, all of them clearly pop-country, broke the top ten on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart and US Country Airplay charts, indicating that they were received well by radio programmers and fans. These up-tempo pop-country tunes optimistically detail the beginnings of a relationship or an initial attraction. Ballerini blended the three songs together as the crowd sang along, demonstrating familiarity with each one: it seemed that the crowd had come to see Ballerini as well as the Jonas Brothers.

Ballerini's particular blend of pop-country made her set feel like a natural stylistic progression to the Jonas Brothers taking the stage. One performance that received an enthusiastic response from the audience was of Ballerini's most recent release, "I Quit Drinking." A pop-country duet with the male pop band LANY, "I Quit Drinking" appeared on both country and pop charts throughout 2021 and had moderate success charting on the *Billboard* US Country and Adult Pop charts, reaching the top 50. Though the song is pop-heavy, including the use of drum machines, there are a few elements that

[64] *Billboard* Chart History, Kelsea Ballerini, https://www.billboard.com/artist/kelsea-ballerini/.

lend themselves to its placement within country music; most obvious is Ballerini's voice, which has a subtle but consistently present twang. The song begins with descending chords on the piano before the drum pattern, various guitars, and an echoing slide guitar line enter with LANY vocalist Paul Kline for the second verse.

In both its content and its musical stylings, "I Quit Drinking" is reminiscent of the hit single "Tequila" (2018) by pop-country duo Dan + Shay.[65] "Tequila" and "I Quit Drinking" both contain sparse instrumental openers, and "Tequila" contains a soaring slide guitar line that enters by the first verse. It is made to feel like a country song most solidly by the vocals of Dan Meyers and Shay Mooney, whose tenor voices both have a pronounced twang. "I Quit Drinking" has a pop-style drum loop frequently used in music from the 2020s, whereas "Tequila" has a more sparse drum pattern that recalls a solid rock beat. Dan + Shay's more recent release "10,000 Hours" (featuring Justin Bieber, 2020) also contains a blend of pop and country comparable to Ballerini's "I Quit Drinking." "10,000 Hours" has a pop drum mix and flowing acoustic guitar line building the bulk of the arrangement. Dan + Shay, a successful pop-country duo, have had considerable success with their blend of sounds on country radio: they have crossed over to Top-40 and Adult Contemporary with songs like "10,000 Hours."[66] Dan + Shay's success with the country marketing category through heavily pop-influenced styles recalls other male pop-country duos like Florida Georgia Line and the pop-country styles often associated with bro-country men. Yet, for all the musical similarities between

[65] Dan + Shay, "Tequila, " (Warner Music Nashville, 2017).
[66] *Billboard* Chart History, Dan + Shay, https://www.billboard.com/artist/dan-shay/.

Ballerini's releases and those of male pop-country artists, she and fellow female artists like Maren Morris or Gabby Barrett—producing similar music and working with the same systems—have not seen their songs distributed as widely as those of their male counterparts.

The comparison of Ballerini's songs with Dan + Shay's similar strategies demonstrates most obviously that the guiding traits of pop-country are more readily acceptable in music by male artists. But Ballerini's success with this style also suggests that these mixed sounds are making it possible for female country artists to gain popularity with fans outside of the country fanbase. Although "I Quit Drinking" gained popularity on pop charts and has sonic elements that easily associate it with pop music, it has been marketed as a country song through radio promotion (the song peaked at No. 30 on the HCS chart) and through the premiere of the music video on Country Music Television (CMT).[67] The release of "I Quit Drinking," much like the musical arrangements of Ballerini's set on the "Remember This" tour, strike a balance between country and pop. This balanced worked well for Ballerini when she opened for a pop-rock band on tour, but is also one of the strategies she uses to gain and sustain a broad audience base that might not have found her through country music avenues. In essence, Ballerini was doing what female artists of the late 1990s and early 2000s had done: like Faith Hill and Shania Twain before her, Ballerini has released music with broader pop appeal while still maintaining a strong foothold in country music.

[67] Jessica Nicholson, "Premiere: Kelsea Ballerini, LANY's Paul Kline Reveal Rain-Soaked "I Quit Drinking" Video." *CMT*, June 15, 2021. http://www.cmt.com/news/1835047/premiere-kelsea-ballerini-lany-reveal-rain-soaked-i-quit-drinking-video/.

Indeed, Ballerini pointed explicitly to her attachment to country music in her concert set, just prior to her performance of a single from *kelsea* (2020). Ballerini told the audience that, because she is a country artist, the way she can tell if a crowd is going to be into her or have fun with her is based on how they react to the Shania Twain song "Man! I Feel Like a Woman" that was played from the loudspeakers just prior to Ballerini taking the stage. During the Phoenix show I attended, Ballerini told the audience that she got a "good feeling" about the crowd because of the positive reaction to the Shania Twain song. Ballerini's single "hole in the bottle" was one of the most stereotypically country songs from her latest album. Near the end of her set in Phoenix, Ballerini began this song by putting on a bedazzled cowboy hat and asking the audience if they were fans of country music. The song is about drinking wine, and the lyrics explain that the wine is going into a "hole in the bottle," rather than being consumed by the narrator. Musically the song has twanging guitar lines, a guiro sound combined with a straight-ahead drum pattern and slide guitar in the background, tight backing harmonies, all with Ballerini's voice that bears a pronounced twang. Although other songs on the set certainly seemed country-inspired—Ballerini's recent top-20 hit "Half of My Hometown" featuring Kenny Chesney, or the opening mash-up of some of Ballerini's early hits—"hole in the bottle," the second-to-last song performed on the tour, was the most visibly and audibly country song. It is important that this decidedly country moment took place near the end of Ballerini's set. It positioned Ballerini clearly as a country artist, but with enough pop appeal to make her not seem out of place on the Jonas Brothers tour.

The blend of Ballerini's concert set was certainly typical of her stylistic approach; it also seemed to be set up so that she was received by the audience as a pop artist *and* a country artist. The country stylings were present within her set, but the arrangements seemed crafted to appease an audience who might not be country music fans. Aside from "hole in the bottle," Ballerini also included a few more specific references to country music within the set. The first of these moments was a series of older songs that drew upon the nostalgia likely felt by most members of the audience seeing the Jonas Brothers, whose popularity stemmed from their meteoric rise to fame in the mid-2000s as teen heart-throbs. This interlude of nostalgia-building began with a home video of Ballerini, taken when she was a teenager, in which she listed "five reasons why she loves the Jonas Brothers." Only Ballerini's first reason for loving the Jonas Brothers was played on the large screens at the back of the stage, where the teenage Ballerini stated that both she and the Jonas Brothers shared a passion for music and both enjoy writing songs; and that this would be something she'd love to talk to the Jonas Brothers about.

This video served two purposes in the concert: first, and perhaps most importantly for Ballerini's role as an opener for the Jonas Brothers, she positioned herself as a fan of the band, representing herself in a way that the audience could identify with. At the concert in October 2021, the audience was mostly young women who seemed to be in their mid-to-late twenties, like myself. Based on my own experience, it is likely that members of the audience related to Ballerini's home fan video: perhaps some in the audience had even filmed their own. Second, this video situated Ballerini's fan videos for the Jonas Brothers in a specific period of time, locating her as a teen fan of the Jonas

Brothers and of the other artists whose songs she would cover briefly over the next few minutes. These brief covers were solos: Ballerini stood at the top of the risers playing her acoustic guitar, just below the large screens that had played her home fan video. Ballerini introduced the first cover by saying that she wouldn't have believed her teenage self if she'd told her that she would be opening on tour for the Jonas Brothers. Moving past the humble astonishment at her presence on the tour, Ballerini pointed to the fact that she and the crowd likely grew up listening to the same type of music, noting that "we got the good stuff." The good stuff, of course, being the Jonas Brothers, but also the next few artists she was covering.

The first of these covers was a Taylor Swift song, "Tear Drops on My Guitar," from Swift's 2006 self-titled debut album. Ballerini's version was just a minute long. She introduced the Taylor Swift song as part of pop music from the mid-2000s but separated it from the pop-rock style of the Jonas Brothers by saying, "we also got stuff that sounds like this." By pointing to different "sounds" Ballerini seemed to be highlighting the divide between pop and country musics. Although both the Jonas Brothers and Taylor Swift were part of the tween musical moment of the mid-late 2000s, their music was marketed in different categories: the Jonas Brothers were pop, and Taylor Swift was country. Within recent years, music that was "too pop" and made by a female artist had been excluded from the country charts or from consideration at country awards shows, but music that was "too country" might alienate pop fans or not be considered for pop awards. Yet the audience acknowledged no distinction. From the first word the crowd sang along so loudly that it seemed as if the entire audience were participating. It was

clear in that moment, as I sang along to a Taylor Swift song with Ballerini and several thousand other fans, that there is an audience for female country music and there likely always has been if that many twenty-somethings screamed along to a twenty-year-old song.

From the brief cover of early country-affiliated Taylor Swift, Ballerini then moved to "Breakaway" by Kelly Clarkson (2004), then Britney Spears's "Lucky" (2000). Ballerini's covers cultivated nostalgia through a range of musical styles: Taylor Swift's 2006 song from her country releases, Kelly Clarkson's 2004 pop-rock tune from her first album, and the wholly pop Britney Spears ballad from 2000. Even as Ballerini turned all three of these songs into acoustic covers with a country influence (due in large part to her vocal twang) the songs were also connected through the performance situation. Ballerini used this section of cover songs to tap into the nostalgia for mid-2000s that characterized the Jonas Brothers 2021 tour, aptly titled "Remember This" after the boy band's new single release about remembering special moments. It is also likely that the Jonas Brothers and the other artists Ballerini covered had shared a fan base in the mid-2000s tween music moment. Although this series of song excerpts did not form a large part of Ballerini's set, the sheer volume of the audience singing along to these three tunes, in particular Taylor Swift's "Teardrops on My Guitar," was remarkable. The crowd's singing demonstrated that the marketing category of an artist or a song is not always representative of the life of a song or of an artist's fanbase.

When I saw Kelsea Ballerini and the Jonas Brothers on the Remember This tour, I was twenty-eight years old. When "Tear Drops on My Guitar" came out in 2006, I was

twelve: the perfect age to be a fan of Taylor Swift and the Jonas Brothers, though perhaps a little young to have fully appreciated Britney Spears in 2000. Ballerini, who was also twenty-eight during this performance, pieced together a specific feeling of nostalgia for a time when the Jonas Brothers were popular. This move made Ballerini a great opener because she was able to use her own experiences as a Jonas Brothers fan to appeal to the audience. It is also noteworthy that she made reference to several well-known and immensely successful female artists. Ballerini reminded the audience, and perhaps herself, that there are many female musicians, songwriters, pop superstars, to look up to, and that there are familiar and joyful fans who continue to remember, sing along, buy albums, attend shows to support female artists whose music speaks to them. The popularity of the songs and their original artists (Taylor Swift, Kelly Clarkson, and Britney Spears) notwithstanding, I was struck by the reception of these songs—both the overwhelming response of the audience, but also by my own reaction as a fan of Ballerini and of all of the women whose songs she covered. Singing along to songs I love by artists who shaped my child and young-adulthood is a normal experience for me, but to do so surrounded by fans who felt similarly was singular. Ballerini offered herself as a fan to the audience, and the sound of Ballerini and several thousand people singing along to "Teardrops on My Guitar" is not something I will forget anytime soon.

"You Can Have Your Space, Cowboy"

The women described in this chapter navigate participation in an industry that systematically eliminates their music from airwaves and popularity charts, two of the

main ways that success within the music industry (especially country music) are determined. Although Kacey Musgraves's 2018 *Golden Hour* had massive success at country and all-category awards shows, her latest release, *Star-Crossed* (2021), was overlooked in country categories at awards shows.[68] Prior to the album's release in 2021, Musgraves described *Star-Crossed* as "even more country" than *Golden Hour*.[69] Her own identification of the album as country, and her marketing team's listing it as country on streaming platforms, did not matter; it was still absent from country categories at awards shows, and it has had the expected lukewarm reception from country radio regardless of critical reception and fan support.[70] None of the album's tracks made it to the *Billboard* Country Airplay chart. Some had a modest presence on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs chart, which takes into account streaming and a combination of physical and digital sales—but all of these peaked below the top 20.[71] *Star-Crossed* was listed by Musgraves's record label as a country release, the singer-songwriter worked wither her frequent Nashville-based collaborators Ian Fitchuk and Daniel Tashin, and she is still signed to MCA Nashville, but the record was jointly released with Interscope Records. This dual release, with the support of a large US record label, indicates that Musgraves is aiming her music at multiple markets, rather than just a country base. Musgraves is

[68] Kacey Musgraves, Grammy Nominations, *Recording Academy,* https://www.grammy.com/artists/kacey-musgraves/18025.
[69] Joseph Hudak, "Kacey Musgraves Announces New Album 'Star-Crossed'," *Rolling Stone,* August 23, 2021. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/kacey-musgraves-star-crossed-new-album-1215633/.
[70] Hudak, "Kacey Musgraves Announces New Album 'Star-Crossed'."
[71] Kacey Musgraves, *Billboard* Chart History, https://www.billboard.com/artist/kacey-musgraves/chart-history/csa/.

producing her music within the Nashville industry, just not in a way that conforms to the tastes of country radio.

As this chapter has shown, there are multiple ways to achieve careers in country music, with or without radio. The question we are left to ask, then, is this: if crossover success of the kind that Musgraves and Ballerini have cultivated is not being rewarded by the country industry, does what country industry insiders think or want still matter? Can the success of these artists be measured by other means? As year-end radio airplay and CMA nomination data cited at the start of this chapter indicates, there are only a few women who have succeeded on the industry's terms, and whose work has been sustained and welcomed by the country music establishment over the last fifteen years. But even that success is not comparable to male artists. Metrics of success like the *Billboard* Hot Country Song's chart changes in calculation reward crossover of songs that exist in multiple versions (like the two versions of Florida Georgia Line's "Cruise") and receive airplay or are listed on other formats like Top-40 or Adult Contemporary.[72] Crossover success in this sense comes from increased tabulation as tracks move between different radio formats, but the artists themselves are not moving between marketing categories or radically changing their stylistic approaches.

For female country artists, this narrow definition of crossover success does not tell the whole story. Women's participation within the boundaries of a curated country music genre is still contingent and limited based on gender. Women who are releasing

[72] Jada Watson, "Looking for Bodies on the Back Road: Changing Billboard Methodologies and Stylistic Diversity on the Hot Country Songs," paper given at the International Country Music Conference, Nashville, June 2, 2018.

records that appeal to mainstream markets or touring with pop acts are still neglected by the industry, particularly by standard metrics of success within country music like radio. This indicates that there are other metrics of success for female country artists to strive for. As the case studies of Musgraves and Ballerini show, there are different ways to create space for oneself within country music. Musgraves has not courted country radio for a wide variety of reasons, not the least of which is her stylistic approach to country music. Instead she has prioritized creativity in songwriting and a broader stylistic range, and she has cultivated a wider fanbase through music that encompasses a more inclusive socio-political lens than radio country music. By contrast, Ballerini has worked within country industry structures like radio, and has created pop-country music that is akin to male artists' output. Her lack of consistent support from country radio, and her lack of wins at industry awards shows like the CMA's or ACM's seem to result from her identity as a female artist, not from a lack of participation in mainstream industry processes.

Female country musicians are continuing to create space for themselves in an inhospitable industry environment: this chapter has asked how. How have these artists created space? How have they cultivated and sustained careers within country music? The answer is, naturally, complex and often contingent upon what parts of the country industry an artist is willing to participate in (as can be seen by the differences between Musgraves and Ballerini). Success too, is complex and contingent, but how it is achieved is ultimately up to these female artists themselves. They may choose to work within a country industry system that does not support female artists. They may use some of those systems, or use none and step outside the country infrastructure. In the end, it seems that

there is space, a market, and fans for female artists, even if gatekeepers in country radio have consistently played only two female artists between 2008 and 2022.

Chapter 5. Taylor Swift Becomes Pop: Claiming Adulthood, Leveraging Whiteness

On September 17, 2020, Taylor Swift performed "betty," a track from her surprise release *folklore* (2020), at the Academy of Country Music (ACM) awards. This song's lyrical narrative is complex, moving between two characters point of view as they apologize to each other. The song is part of an intricate teenage love-triangle Swift crafted on *folklore*.[1] Swift's performance at the ACM awards featured her playing acoustic guitar, and another performer on harmonica. This pared-back performance, certainly representative of *folklore*'s indie and alternative aesthetic, recalls Swift's days as a country artist and singer-songwriter when many of her songs did not have extensive pop production; it was like watching Swift return to 2012, when intimate acoustic performances were a regular part of her staged productions. "betty" was Swift's first performance at a country music awards show in seven years, and her first appearance at the ACM awards in five years. Swift's last appearance at a country awards program was to recieve the "Milestone Award" at the 2015 ACM awards after making the transition to pop music. Swift was recognized alongside Garth Brooks, George Strait, Reba McEntire,

[1] Nate Jones, "Untangling Taylor Swift's 'Teenage Love Triangle' Trilogy," *Vulture*, August 4, 2020. https://www.vulture.com/2020/08/folklore-love-triangle-explained.html.

Brooks & Dunn, Miranda Lambert, and Kenny Chesney: the award recognized "their significant impact in country music."[2]

Taylor Swift began her career as a country performer, and her relationship to the genre has been complex over the course of her career. Swift's early persona was that of a timid and people-pleasing teenager. As Swift grew up into a more outspoken adult, her music shifted along with her. Following her stylistic shift from country to pop in 2014, Swift largely stayed away from country industry events until the 2020 ACM awards.[3] Swift's transitions between genres have revealed her strategies for negotiating industry-enforced genre boundaries, or marketing categories, as defined by the interconnected groupings of race, gender, and age. This developmental range illustrates how identity formations are shaped in a country music industry where female artists and artists of color are systematically ignored and undervalued. Beginning as a teenage country artist Swift struck a delicate balance: she maintained a position in the country industry while appealing to a broad tween and teen demographic. In her early work in country music, Swift presented a youthful public persona with white innocence as a key feature. When Swift transitioned to pop music, white innocence was transformed into white feminism, the maintenance of individual privilege and empowerment at the expense of collective liberation. Following her transition to pop music, Swift continued to rely on her white

[2] Madeline Crone, "Taylor Swift Returns to Country Music With Amazing ACM Performance of 'Betty'," *American Songwriter,* November 18, 2020. https://americansongwriter.com/folklore-taylor-swift-album-interview/.
[3] Jem Aswad, "Are Taylor Swift and Country Splitting Up For Good?" *Billboard,* August 22, 2014. https://www.billboard.com/articles/6228999/taylor-swift-country-music-split.

feminist identity in her subsequent pop releases, becoming more politically outspoken in 2018 and settling into a confident adult persona.

Navigating Late-2000s Country: Teenage Taylor Swift

Over the course of nearly two decades Taylor Swift transformed from country performer to international pop superstar through gradual shifts in her musical style and her carefully crafted public image. Between 2006 and 2012 Swift released four studio albums with Big Machine Records, a Nashville based country label. During this period Swift participated in country radio tours, a grueling series of radio station visits meant to build connection between the artist and station programmers. Her music showed the stylistic markers commonly associated with country music of the late 2000s, including frequent use of traditional country instruments such as banjo or slide guitar, and a subtle vocal twang—as well as elements of pop production (called pop-country).[4] The first album that garnered Swift broad success was her 2008 release, *Fearless*. Though Swift was a teenager with teenage fans, she was positioned outside the "tween moment" of the early 2000s because her genre affiliation, country music, was typically understood as an

[4] I identify Swift's early career as her first three albums: *Taylor Swift* (2006), *Fearless* (2008), *Speak Now* (2010). Her mid-career phase, turning toward pop, consists of *Red* (2012) and *1989* (2014). Her subsequent pop releases were *Reputation* (2017) and *Lover* (2019). More recently she has invested in indie/folk releases: *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020).

adult format.[5] Tween market power has usually been attached to pop music, not country.[6] Because Swift positioned herself solidly within the country industry, her association with youth came from her own age and the age of her fans—not necessarily from the style or sound of the music she was making during the 2000s.

One example of how Swift negotiated her age was the rollout of her first radio single, a ballad about heartbreak titled "Tim McGraw" (from *Taylor Swift,* 2006). The song won Breakthrough Video of the Year at the Country Music Television (CMT) awards in 2007.[7] In discussing her age after this win, Swift stated:

> I feel like it's been hyped the minimum amount that it could have possibly been hyped. When my label released my single to radio, they didn't say on any piece of the press that I was 16. Of course people are going to talk about it because it is what it is. I am 17 years old ... I don't have a problem talking about my age because it's never been used as something to get me ahead—ever.[8]

Regardless of Swift's insistence that she had not used her age to get ahead, gatekeepers in the country industry did use it as a way to belittle the content of her music and her audience.[9] During the early portion of her career Swift's persona capitalized on youth and

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[5] Richard Lloyd, "The Sociology of Country Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 285; Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 95-132.
[6] Tyler Bickford, *Tween Pop: Children's Music and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 19.
[7] Kathleen Tracy, "Taylor Swift," in *Superstars of the 21st Century: Pop Favorites of American Teens* (ABC-CLIO, LLC 2013).
[8] Taylor Swift, interview at the 2007 CMA awards red carpet. Quoted in Tracy, "Taylor Swift," in *Superstars of the 21st Century: Pop Favorites of American Teens.*
[9] George Hatza, "Taylor Swift Growing into Stardom," *Reading Eagle*, December 8, 2008, http://www2.readingeagle.com/article.aspx?id=116460; Sasha Frere-Jones, "'Prodigy' – The Rise

perceived inexperience, allowing Swift to cultivate a young and ardent fanbase who felt she was like them. Yet, depictions of her as a child star or teenage performer with adoring teenage female fans meant that country critics frequently dismissed Swift's skills as a musician and songwriter. As can be seen through Swift's reaction to her CMT win in 2007, her response to this criticism was neutral and measured, showing astute knowledge of her unique position as a teen star in the country industry.

Important to cultivating that position was the maintenance of an authentically country persona. The sociologist Richard Peterson coined the term "fabricated authenticity" as a way to describe how authenticity is an artificially constructed set of cultural markers within a commercial music genre.[10] The presence of those markers leads audience members to consider the music as genuine and worthy of attention. As described by Peterson and other scholars, country authenticity privileges "adult white male constructions of musical authenticity": that the adult male voice "sounds" most authentic in country made it doubly difficult for Swift to be taken seriously.[11] Swift worked to legitimize herself through what Travis Stimeling describes as an "adolescent...approach to country authenticity" not typically found in "mainstream

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of Taylor Swift," *The New Yorker*, November 3, 2008, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/11/10/prodigy-pop-music-sasha-frere-jones. "Gatekeepers" in the country industry are individuals working in radio, label executives, and music critics who actively work to uphold boundaries around the genre based on gender and race. This is discussed further in the introduction to this document.

[10] Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997): 7.

[11] Travis Stimeling, "Taylor Swift's 'Pitch Problem,' the Place of Adolescent Girls in Country Music," in *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 87.

commercial music."[12] Stimeling identifies Swift's particular strategies, including "vocal ranges that seldom span more than a perfect fifth, melodies that lie near the top of [her] chest register, and the repeated use of short melodic motifs."[13] According to Stimeling, Swift counteracted the masculine focus of country music authenticity through her "sincerity contract"—by setting up a different kind of relationship with her fans that captured an earnest, youthful perspective.[14] Swift's early songs portrayed what it means to be a fifteen-year-old girl so that her tween audience could "[map] their identities onto those of the characters who inhabit her songs."[15] Swift's artistic persona was crafted through her music, but also through media presentations that combined concert footage with a variety of other materials that seemed to give fans a great deal of access to Swift's own life and experiences. Even early in her career, Swift thus cultivated her own brand of country music.

Touring Country Music: *Fearless* and *Speak Now*

On the *Fearless* concert tour video Swift positioned herself clearly as a teenager and as a country artist, with nods to country radio and details related to her autobiographical songwriting process. The *Fearless* concert tour video included a mixture of sit-down interviews and behind-the-scenes footage. Titled *Taylor Swift: Journey to Fearless,* the video was originally released as a three-episode special aired on

[12] Stimeling, "Taylor Swift's 'Pitch Problem,'" 86.
[13] Frere-Jones, "Prodigy," 2008.
[14] Stimeling, "Taylor Swift's 'Pitch Problem,'" 91.
[15] Stimeling, "Taylor Swift's 'Pitch Problem,'" 93.

The Hub in 2010.[16] The *Fearless* tour video carefully presented an origin story of a teenager attaining her dreams as a country artist (though Swift was nineteen at the time of the tour), framing Swift's own telling of her experiences alongside other interviews that were already available. The *Fearless* album portrayed Swift's experiences as a teenager through song, and the tour and its subsequent DVD release deepened Swift's connection to a fan base of teenage girls who related to Swift's music and Swift herself. The first episode in the video places Swift in the country industry, recounting how she begged her parents to take her to Nashville when she was eleven, the resulting songwriting deal, and her later signing with Big Machine Records.[17]

References to high school and teenage experiences are prominent on the *Fearless* album, and shape the first few performances on the tour. The opening performance on the concert video is of the song "You Belong With Me." This performance recalled the song's music video, which told a girl-next-door story set in high school. In the video Swift portrays two characters: the nerd narrating the song, and the "popular girl" antagonist in a brunette wig, the girlfriend of the male love interest. Swift's "nerd" character wears large glasses and a frizzy version of Swift's usually sleek curls, acting out various lines of the song. We see her "on the bleachers" in a blue marching band uniform while the male love interest plays football with the female antagonist cheering

[16] *Taylor Swift: Journey to Fearless*, directed by Don Mischer and Ryan Polito, The Hub October 22-24, 2010 (DVD, October 11, 2011). The Hub was formerly Discovery Kids; it is now Discovery Family.
[17] *Taylor Swift: Journey to Fearless*, 2011.

along with pompoms. At the culmination of the video, Swift's "nerdy" character appears at the school dance in a white gown, without her glasses, to finally "get the boy."[18]

The stereotypical high school tropes of the music video also made appearances on the live performances of the *Fearless* tour, helping fans to identify with Swift and shared experiences of high school. Swift first appeared on stage in a yellow and white marching band costume complete with a plume-topped hat. Digital screens produced brick walls and lockers, making plain the high school imagery. Throughout the course of the performance Swift slowly removed parts of her costume, eventually revealing a grey sequined dress that was far more modest than the midriff-baring costumes Shania Twain and Faith Hill were criticized for in the early 2000s. Swift negotiated her sincerity contract through these visual associations to teenage troubles without appearing immodest.[19] In several sit-down interviews throughout the concert video, Swift and her mother Andrea Swift implied that they wanted to maintain youthful teenage aesthetics. Using the phrase "family friendly," both described the modest costumes and fanciful visual elements of the stage design as key components of the tour.[20]

Whereas visual representations of teenage troubles permeated the *Journey to Fearless* concert video, Swift's framing of the song "Tim McGraw" on the concert video highlights how association with the country industry (especially with country radio) required negotiations of age and gender. When Swift released "Tim McGraw," the first

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[18] Taylor Swift, "You Belong With Me," music video (Big Machine Records, 2008). Posted to YouTube June 16, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuNIsY6JdUw.
[19] Julie L. Andsanger and Kimberly Roe, "Country Music Video in Country's Year of the Woman," *Journal of Communications* 49, no. 1 (January 1999): 69-82.
[20] *Taylor Swift: Journey to Fearless,* 2011.

single from her self-titled album, she and her label were working to distance the song from her age (Swift was then 16). They did not include her age when the track was sent out to radio stations. "Tim McGraw," and indeed the majority of her self-titled debut album, fit firmly within the genre of country music. The ballad opens with strummed acoustic guitar and plucked mandolin and banjo, and Swift's voice has a subtle twang, heard most prominently at the end of phrases and descending lines. The song unhurriedly tells the story of a summer fling rooted in mutual love of a song by Tim McGraw that the narrator and subject "danced to all night long."[21] The song is filled with stereotypical country music tropes: a car getting stuck in back roads, small towns, references to Georgia stars, and other country artists. The song is written as reminiscence, with Swift as narrator only coming back to the present tense in the bridge.

On the *Journey to Fearless* video, "Tim McGraw" is the second recorded performance: it is preceded by behind-the-scenes clips showing Swift on her first radio tour in 2006. These clips emphasized how Swift was a rising star in the country industry. During sit-down interviews Swift described the grueling nature of radio tour schedules and the necessity of ingratiating herself to radio DJs who had the final say over whether a song gets played on-air. The behind-the-scenes clips in this part of the video portray radio tours in a positive light: we see Swift playing for DJs in a conference room, and Swift and her mother driving around the country in a van with homemade cookies. In the concert footage from the *Fearless* tour that follows, Swift introduces "Tim McGraw" to fans as "the first song you heard from me," speaking from a small circular stage apart

[21] Taylor Swift, "Tim McGraw," *Taylor Swift,* (Big Machine Records, 2006).

from the main set. Swift began the tune with just her guitar, wearing a knee-length teal dress with brown embroidered cowboy boots to accentuate her country affiliation. As she sang, Swift stressed her relationship with fans and with country radio by altering the line from the song "turn the radio on" to "turn Houston radio on."[22] This performance and its framing in the video show Swift's strong connection to radio, a key point of attachment to the country industry. This theme continued when Swift's third studio album, *Speak Now*, was teased at the end of the *Fearless* concert video: we see brief clips of Swift in the studio working on the new album, collaborating with country music producer Nathan Chapman, who also worked on *Fearless*. This footage emphasizes how Swift maintained a strong connection to country industry networks during this period of her career.

Swift's youthful image was also manifested on her country tours through her use of vocal styles to help young audiences, particularly women, hear themselves in her voice and her pop-country styles. In these performances she combined sonic country signifiers with pop production, including the use of an electric guitar with an echoing quality similar to slide guitar, strummed acoustic-sounding rhythm guitar, a slight vocal twang, and tight vocal harmonies interspersed in verses and heard prominently in the choruses. These features can be heard on songs like "Sparks Fly" or "Mine," but successful pop-country tracks were just one part of the stylistic range on *Speak Now*.

[22] *Speak Now: World Tour Live*, directed by Ryan Polito and Taylor Swift (DVD, November 21, 2011).

The tour video release for *Speak Now* closely resembled the *Fearless* video.[23] The performances on the *Speak Now* tour were nearly identical to album versions of the songs, and the visible presence of musicians combined with Swift's beaded dresses and knee-high black leather boots to recall the intentionally family-friendly and modest imagery of *Fearless.* Midway through the concert Swift performed two songs that musically and visually tied her to country music: "Mean" from *Speak Now* and "Our Song" from *Taylor Swift* (2006). Swift and her band performed these songs with acoustic instruments, including Swift on the banjo guitar, standing on an adjusted set of risers complete with a porch, picket fence and Edison lightbulbs.[24] This old-time-inspired set and performance depart from the more glamorous pop features of the remainder of the tour, recalling the music video Swift released for "Mean" that leans into a 1920s flapper aesthetic complete with a runaway train.[25] This staged interlude bolstered Swift's country affiliation by making obvious visual and instrumental reference to string band and old time music. The string band influenced set on the *Speak Now* tour showed off Swift's country chops, while the songs presented before and after the set sounded more obviously pop. Swift's claims to a country authenticity, navigated through country signifiers and

[23] "Taylor Swift Chart History," *Billboard*. https://www.billboard.com/artist/taylor-swift/chart-history/atf/.
[24] The banjo guitar or "banjitar" is a six stringed banjo (as opposed to the traditional five string instrument popular in bluegrass and old time music). The banjo guitar is tuned like a six-string acoustic guitar, E2-A2-D3-G3-B3-E4, which allows guitar players to easily transition to this instrument. It has the same tight twang, but is slightly lower in pitch than the five-string banjo. See Paul Race, "What is a Banjitar? – A Brief History of the 6 String Banjo," blog post, Deeringbanjos.com, August 31, 2016. https://blog.deeringbanjos.com/what-is-a-banjitar.
[25] Taylor Swift, "Mean," music video, May 13, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYa1eI1hpDE.

through her sincerity contract with young fans, made her an unlikely country star in a format that usually featured adult performers. By playing into her youthful white innocence, Swift made a position for herself in the country industry.

Turning Pop, "Abandoning" Country

Touring for her fourth and fifth studio albums (*Red* from 2012 and *1989* from 2014) Swift shed the youthful innocence attached to her country persona by leaving behind the country industry for mainstream pop and adopting visual representations of adult feminine sexuality. Although the songs on *Red* (2012) retained a blend of country and pop, several tracks featured obvious pop production. The content of *1989,* by contrast, was pop throughout: these songs were inspired by some of Swift's favorite pop music from the 1980s, including Phil Collins, Annie Lennox, and "Like a Prayer"-era Madonna.[26] *1989* is unique in relation to mid-2010s pop music: not much on the radio sounded like Swift in 2014, and the album was far removed from Swift's country music origins. Swift herself often describes her musical evolution as "eras" captured through the relationship she has with her fans, explaining that her fans encouraged her to explore and expand her musical range. This expansion of musical range, often described as "growth" or "evolution" in music journalism about Swift, constituted a gradual musical-stylistic shift toward pop music that began on Swift's second album *Fearless* (2008). This gradual

[26] Josh Eells, "The Reinvention of Taylor Swift," *Rolling Stone,* September 4, 2014. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-reinvention-of-taylor-swift-116925/.

musical shift could still be seen in Swift's songwriting and arranging styles on *1989* (2014), even though Swift had realigned her marketing and public-facing persona to an adult pop market. Some of her signature songwriting traits, such as a narrow vocal range and simple melodic lines, plus her trademark autobiographical and narrative lyrics, continued in her music marketed as pop.

Swift's calculated moves to ensure that fans continued to see her as a youthful and innocent singer-songwriter in country music also formed a key part of her transition to pop music. However, it was not until *1989* that Swift fully separated herself from any attachment or association to the country music industry, removing herself entirely from that marketing category. *1989* was a pop album that realigned Swift's career. Swift frequently recounts the story of the album's release: as she tells it, Scott Borchetta of Big Machine Records wanted to add three country songs to *1989* because he was concerned about appeasing country radio, and Swift refused. Swift characterized her response to Borchetta as "love you mean it...But this is how it's going to be."[27] *1989* was not promoted on country radio, nor did Swift perform its music at any country music awards shows.[28] The glamorous pop production of *1989* helped it become one of her most critically acclaimed albums, earning Swift her second all-category Album of the Year and

[27] Eells, "The Reinvention of Taylor Swift," 2014.
[28] Eells, "The Reinvention of Taylor Swift," 2014.

Best Pop Album of the Year at the 2015 Grammy awards.[29] It sold over 1.2 million copies in its first week, making it the first album to go platinum that quickly since 2002.[30]

For Swift, entry to the pop music industry was immediately profitable because she worked within existing pop-country crossover networks. With this shift, Swift remade her innocent and youthful image as a white teenage star into an adult persona built around white feminism. Although *1989* marked Swift's intentional artistic departure from the country industry, country critics and industry insiders had already noticed the beginning of this departure two years earlier.[31] Swift's 2012 release, *Red,* included tracks that succeeded on the pop charts, such as "I Knew You Were Trouble" and "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together." These songs co-existed on the album with tracks intended for a country audience, including "All Too Well" and "Begin Again."[32] Single releases from *Red* encompassed this range, with the pop single "I Knew You Were Trouble" featuring an opening electric guitar riff and an EDM-style bass drop at the end of the first chorus. By contrast, another single, "Begin Again," is a country ballad: it begins with a plucked acoustic guitar, and a prominent slide guitar melody enters between Swift's soft and unhurried vocal lines. Although *Red* was marketed as a country album and included

[29] On Swift's Grammy award statistics and the awards won for *1989* see "Artist: Taylor Swift" on the Recording Academy website. https://www.grammy.com/grammys/artists/taylor-swift/15450.
[30] Cecilia Kang, "Taylor Swift's *1989* Became the First Platinum Album of the Year," *The Washington Post,* November 5, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2014/11/05/taylor-swifts-1989-becomes-the-first-platinum-album-of-the-year/.
[31] Jem Aswad, "Are Taylor Swift and Country Splitting Up For Good?" *Billboard,* August 22, 2014. https://www.billboard.com/articles/6228999/taylor-swift-country-music-split.
[32] Aswad, "Are Taylor Swift and Country Splitting Up For Good?"

songs intended for play on country radio, this mix of songs points to Swift's deliberate shift toward pop music.

In a *Billboard* article from August 2014, prior to the release of *1989,* several record label and country radio executives described Swift's move from country music into pop as a "betrayal," a "disappointment," and a "carefully planned breakup."[33] Citing the varying success of Swift's pop-leaning songs, this article likened Swift's departure from the country industry to the crossover moves of female stars of the late 1990s such as Faith Hill, Shania Twain, and Martina McBride, whose album releases and touring opportunities brought them to mainstream markets even as they maintained industry ties to country music. The executives cited in the article regarded Swift's rejection of those country industry ties as unacceptable: these gatekeepers expressed "disappointment," with the subtext that all country artists should feel beholden to country radio and the industry that "made" them. Country radio executives, historically fickle about female participation, treated Swift's departure from the format as a personal affront, failing to acknowledge that Swift could succeed with a broader audience (much like Shania Twain did) rather than accept the limitations of a format and industry where music made by women had been systematically undervalued for the last 100 years.

Upon the release of Swift's *1989,* it became clear that her departure from the country industry would function differently than the typical patterns of country crossover pioneered by Hill, Twain, and McBride in the early 2000s. Artists in the late 1990s and early 2000s worked to retain attachments to the country industry, either by continuing to

[33] Aswad, "Are Taylor Swift and Country Splitting Up For Good?"

release records in the genre, participating in the radio format, or attending industry-sponsored awards shows, while also having singles do well on mainstream radio and participating in national tours geared towards the same broad audience.[34] Rather than retaining attachment to the country industry in these ways, Swift positioned herself entirely in the mainstream pop industry, bringing country fans along with her to the mainstream. Swift removed herself from previous country crossover patterns, ensuring that her music would not be limited by the constraints of the country industry that devalued female participation.

Swift's departure from country stylistically and as a marketing category coincided with a geographical move. Swift moved from Nashville to New York City; she also recorded *1989* with pop producers based in New York, including Jack Antonoff, Max Martin, Shellbeck, and Ryan Tedder.[35] "Welcome To New York," the first song on *1989*, documented Swift's new life in New York City and indicates a geographical separation from the Nashville country music establishment. The song documented experiences of optimism, glamor, and extreme wealth, all coded in language of authenticity and inclusivity that was still readily associated with Swift's country songwriting regardless of the song's obvious pop production. "Welcome to New York" makes repeated reference to community and camaraderie; Swift writes about "searching for a sound *we* hadn't heard before," crowds in the city, and the same "we" dropping bags on the apartment floor.[36]

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[34] The required relationships female artists have with country radio is discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4.
[35] Taylor Swift, CD liner notes to *1989* (Big Machine Records, 2014).
[36] Taylor Swift, "Welcome to New York," *1989* (Big Machine Records, 2014).

These implicitly shared experiences of young adults moving to a new city, likely on a shoestring budget, are an autobiographical reference to Swift's move. Yet, the inclusive "we" contrasts with the knowledge that Swift's experience of New York as a millionaire in 2014 would be very different from the experience of most of her fans.

In combination with the stylistic and geographical move came a shift in content: whereas Swift had scrupulously avoided political statements in her country phase, "Welcome to New York" marks one of the few songs in Swift's music prior to 2018 that hints at a political commitment.[37] In the second verse, Swift indicated support for the LGBTQ community with the line "And you can want / who you want / boys and boys and girls and girls."[38] As Eric Smialek notes, the mention of LGBTQ people is less apparent in "Welcome to New York" than in later releases, but the song did show "incidental awareness and advocacy."[39] It was not until four years later, however, that Swift fully engaged in clear political statements, and advocated for progressive politics like LGBTQ rights with her third pop release, *Lover* (2019). "Welcome to New York" was a first step away from the silence on socio-political issues that participation in the country industry had demanded. As Swift moved musically into pop, she moved away from the social limitations of country music, where talk of politics or social values was

[37] Eric Smialek, "Who Needs to Calm Down? Taylor Swift and Rainbow Capitalism," *Contemporary Music Review* 40, no. 1 (July 2021): 101. https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2021.1956270.
[38] Gwendelyn Nisbett and Stephanie Schartel Dunn, "Reputation Matters: Parasocial Attachment, Narrative Engagement, and the 2018 Taylor Swift Political Endorsement," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* (December 2019): 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2019.1704758.
[39] Smialek, "Who Needs to Calm Down?," 102.

forbidden unless an artist wanted to be banned from country radio and receive death threats like The Chicks.

Taylor Becomes Pop: The 1989 Concert Video (2015)

Swift's transition from country to pop can be understood in terms of her negotiations of whiteness and age, both of which are clearly represented on the concert tour video for Swift's *1989* world tour. This video highlighted performances drawn from Swift's fourth world tour: it was the highest-grossing tour by any artist in 2015, selling over 2.2 million tickets and grossing 250 million dollars.[40] Touring between May and December of 2015, Swift recorded her performance in Sydney, Australia on November 28, 2015 for video release. The concert film, titled *The* 1989 *World Tour Live,* was available to stream exclusively on Apple Music from late 2015 through June 2020.[41] It also featured guest appearances from other North American tour dates and sit-down interviews with Swift and her famous girlfriends, including models Karlie Kloss, Gigi Hadid, and Kendall Jenner. The tour set was a huge stage with risers near the back for Swift's band and a long catwalk projecting from the middle of the main stage into the arena; the catwalk rose up and spun periodically throughout the show. Swift took the stage with an eight-piece band, an additional wind and string section who were rarely

[40] Trevor Anderson, "Taylor Swift's '1989' One-Year Anniversary: 13 Impressive Chart Facts for the Blockbuster Album," *Billboard,* October 27, 2015. https://www.billboard.com/pro/taylor-swift-1989-anniversary-chart-facts/.
[41] Individual song performances from the *1989* tour and the *Red* tour are unofficially accessible on YouTube.

seen, four back-up singers, and sixteen male dancers. Beyond Swift being the only woman prominently visible on stage for the majority of the show, visual elements such as more revealing costumes and dance routines departed significantly from the family-friendly and country-inspired visual aesthetics of the tour productions for *Fearless* and *Speak Now*.

On the *1989* tour Swift maintained her attachment to whiteness by relying on white feminist modes of identity construction rather than the white innocence cultivated through her country music authenticity. Tyler Bickford has described Swift's transition to adulthood as "extended and smoothed" through consistent pairing with whiteness.[42] Her reliance on innocence was a "core structuring value" to her "formation of cultural whiteness."[43] Swift continued negotiations of whiteness and age, and although her musical transition to pop was abrupt, her reliance on innocence and whiteness remained firmly imbedded in her public persona. In other words, Swift's entire persona has been built on how she has represented her age, which was always connected to her race. On the *1989* tour Swift displayed her adult persona through representations of white feminism with presentations of female empowerment, self-identifying as an adult through performance choices that included costume selection, offering advice to the audience, and using her new pop genre association to leave behind the reliance on youth and innocence her country affiliations had necessitated. The deliberate sonic and visual performance choices made on the *1989* tour reveal how Swift used white innocence to aid her

[42] Bickford, *Tween Pop,* 134.
[43] Bickford, *Tween Pop,* 134.

transition to pop music. Swift completed this transition in two major ways. First, she explained the autobiographical or personal elements of songs from *1989*, often framing them as life lessons she shared with the audience. Second, Swift offered new versions of some of her older songs, most notably songs from *Red* (2012), transforming her earlier pop-country songs into more threatening rock-inspired versions.

Swift's performance of "Blank Space" exemplified this transition. In the first of many sit-down interviews interspersed throughout the concert video, Swift described the goal for the tour performance as a replication of the music video. The music video was set on a large mansion estate with gardens, opulent costumes, and over-the-top acting to reinforce the song's satire of Swift's media image. During the tour interview Swift noted that the song was written from the media's perspective: she remarked that "Blank Space's" popularity was ironic given that the song was about media speculation on her dating life and portrayals of her as a serial dater. In her concert performance of "Blank Space," Swift leaned into that characterization. Instead of beginning with the first verse, Swift started her performance with a slowed-down line from the bridge, moving her hips in sync with a snare backbeat: "Boys only want love if it's torture / don't say I didn't / say I didn't warn ya." Ever the showman, Swift stopped singing before the last "warn ya" of the bridge, leaving the crowd to sing it for her. After a brief pause audibly filled by screaming fans, the song began in earnest. Swift stayed true to the album version, adding some of the theatrics from the music video to emphasize the song's mocking intent. During the second verse, Swift walked along the stage's catwalk, followed by her backup dancers, and picked up a golf club, echoing a scene from the music video. Using the club

and a metal pole on the stage Swift creates an audio loop for the bridge as she tells the audience she has a "very important lesson" to impart. The lesson is the bridge's mocking line: a warning to the listeners to beware of "boys" who might hurt them. Each line of the bridge is performed over the audio loop comprised of the clanging golf club sound and Swift's shouted "Sydney!" (where the concert video was recorded). This part of the performance differed from the album version: Swift extended the bridge, letting her voice play back once as she brandished the club before adding the next harmony. The major chord is striking, presenting a sonic dichotomy between what Swift was singing—a cynical line about men's romantic intentions—and the major-mode chord that made the bridge feel buoyant and celebratory. "Blank Space" is an explicit example of Swift empowering herself: by strutting up and down the catwalk and swinging the golf club as if it were a weapon, Swift maintained visual dominance in front of her backup dancers. This performance aimed to overturn the press's overblown, inaccurate, and misogynistic characterizations of her as a serial dater; she took the stance of an angry adult woman who has been around the block and now knows better.

This stance resonates with a brand of white feminism that advocates for individual action and self-assertion as the only means for women (specifically white women) to gain equal access to social power. It arose in the supposed postfeminist, postracial days of President Obama's second term, when feminism seemed no longer to be about structural change guided by community, but instead became an imperative built around self-

optimizing and self-discipline as the way to (white) female liberation.[44] I paraphrase Kyla Schuller here, who situates white feminism in the context of Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In.* Published in 2013, Sandberg's book was heralded by both Oprah and Gloria Steinem as a new way of being feminist whereby individual empowerment is prioritized. If individual women worked hard enough, Sandberg claimed, they could take power in their workplaces. Rather than choosing an intersectional approach to feminism that acknowledges structural inequalities exacerbated by racial capitalism, white feminism encourages women to get ahead in the capitalist system, leaving others behind.[45]

Importantly, when Swift and other white female pop and country stars have participated in this popular white feminism it has often been at the expense of artists of color.[46] Swift's career has not been without its struggles: her dating life has been picked apart by the press since she was a teenager, she has experienced sexual harassment on radio tours, and she was famously and publicly interrupted by an inebriated Kanye West at the 2009 VMA awards when Swift won Video of the Year over Beyoncé.[47] In order to combat these struggles, Swift has leaned into her perception of victimhood as a white woman by centering herself. As seen through key performances from the *1989* concert video such as "Blank Space," the narrative of self-empowerment as a means to defy

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[44] Kyla Schuller, *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021): 222.
[45] Alison Phipps, *Me Too Not You* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2020): 5.
[46] Phipps, *Me Too Not You,* 6.
[47] Gil Kaufman, "2009 VMAs Oral History: What You Didn't See When Kanye West Rushed the Stage On Taylor Swift," *Billboard,* August 21, 2019. https://www.billboard.com/culture/tv-film/2009-mtv-vmas-oral-history-8523549/.

moments of victimhood became a key pattern of white feminism that dismisses an intersectional approach for gender liberation and equity.[48]

The angrily assertive persona Swift put on in her performance "Blank Space" was one shade of her new self. Another aspect of Swift's white feminism can be found in re-imagined performances of songs from the *Red* album (2012) on the *1989* world tour, which overturned the childhood innocence associated with her earlier country career.[49] On the *1989* tour Swift performed "We Are Never Getting Back Together" and other songs drawn from previous albums in a pop-rock arrangement. For this performance Swift stood center stage playing a white electric guitar. On the *Red* tour in 2013 Swift had performed this song wearing a red sequined majorette costume, with fellow performers dressed as *Alice in Wonderland* characters—all pointing to a childish image.[50] By contrast, Swift's *1989* costume for this number was a leather outfit of tight pants and a tank top with horizontal openings around the midsection, shoulders, and back. The costume was moderately revealing, the black leather presenting a hardened edge that Swift reinforced with growling vocalizations and snarling facial expressions.

The *1989* tour performance of "We Are Never Getting Back Together" had a half-tempo feel. The red back and side lighting on the stage helped transform the song into a power ballad akin to those of 1970s/80s rock performers such as Freddie Mercury, Billy

[48] Throughout this chapter I will use the phrase "white feminism" as a catch-all term for the ways that public, neo-liberal, and political feminisms are broadly beholden to white feminism of the early 2010s.
[49] Tyler Bickford, *Tween Pop: Children's Music and Public Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 130.
[50] Bickford, 130. There are no official video releases for the *Red* tour in 2013, but numerous fan videos and network television appearances are available on YouTube.

Joel, or Mick Jagger. These "hard core" performance features were jarring compared to the more lighthearted pop production of the original version. Much as she did with the theatrics of "Blank Space," Swift turned the bridge of "We Are Never Getting Back Together" into another moment for audience participation framed as empowerment. She invites the audience to shout "UHH" with her, mimicking the vocalization she had been performing. The final chorus is also filled with the same angry vigor, akin to the mocking irony of "Blank Space," as Swift leaned into the harder rock edge of the arrangement with headbanging gestures over her guitar.

Following "We Are Never Getting Back Together," Swift descended into the stage before re-emerging for the final songs of the set, including "Shake it Off." In the music video released for "Shake it Off" in August 2014, Swift was seen dancing in front of and around groups of dancers whose costumes were meant to represent different dance idioms. Notably, one clip showed Swift twerking in a tutu, and in another she half-heartedly performed hip-hop moves, her persona of white innocence mocking Black dancers and art forms.[51] Although that particular choreography was not present in the *1989* concert video, Swift's jubilant performance of "Shake it Off" extended to almost eight minutes and was used for curtain calls. A short, fringed skirt and crop top outfit emphasized Swift's gyrations on the repeated line of "shake it off" as she and her backup dancers were clipped onto the raised, rotating catwalk. As presented on tour, "Shake it

[51] See also Tyler Bickford, *Tween Innocence,* 133-134; and Robin James, *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019): 45-50.

Off" seemed like an uplifting and emboldening moment for Swift's audience, and perhaps for Swift herself.

The white feminism-infused "female empowerment" of Swift on the *1989* tour falls flat in the same way that Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* "female empowerment" does. Journalist Lindsay Zoladz described this phenomenon of female empowerment within Swift's career as an "ambient, unquestioned virtue" of the pop culture Swift participated in and helped to create in her early pop music days.[52] I would contend that rather than being "ambient," Swift's assertion of female empowerment is loud and direct, particularly when considered through her genre movement from the country industry to the pop industry. The *1989* tour is boisterous. Swift was clear in her presentation of self as she mocked the media in "Blank Space" while simultaneously giving sisterly dating advice to 20,000 fans in an arena. The glamorous pop productions and pop re-imaginings might fall flat in the same way white feminist "female empowerment" only offers individualist uplift, but *1989* did position Swift into a realm of pop music stardom that supported her pursuit of self-advocacy and advanced the adult persona she became known for in the early 2020s.

[52] Lindsay Zolandz, "Taylor Swift Bent the Music Industry to Her Will: In the 2010s, She Became its Savviest Power Player," *Vulture,* December 30, 2019. https://www.vulture.com/2019/12/taylor-swift-in-the-2010s.html.

The *Reputation* Era: Swift's Pop Status Negotiates Adulthood

Following *1989*, Swift's initial foray into the pop market, Swift's next album, *reputation* (2017), was equally pop-heavy. Its corresponding concert video, released on Netflix in December 2018, relied on the same modes of exaggerated, self-centered intensity. Whereas *1989* was soft, sparkly, pop-heavy, and joy-filled, *reputation* was the opposite: full of angst, the album's pop influences were more aggressive with grinding bass sounds and more frequent speak-singing or monotonal vocal lines. Swift toured the album throughout 2018, once again breaking records as the highest-grossing domestic tour that year, bringing in $266.1 million and selling over two million tickets.[53] Swift's touring profits increased by 85% from the *Red* tour ($98 million) to *1989* ($181.5 million), then increased by another 47% with *reputation,* making Swift the top earner in domestic US touring since the *Fearless* tour in 2009. (Country artist Kenny Chesney and pop-rock group U2 held the number two and three spots.)[54]

New York Times pop music critic Jon Caramanica described *reputation* as Swift adopting a pop "maximalism" that was indebted to Black musical "styles and approaches" which were then "[softened] enough to where Ms. Swift can credibly

[53] Eric Frankenberg, "Taylor Swift's Reputation Stadium Tour Breaks Record for Highest Grossing U.S. Tour," *Billboard Chart Beat,* November 30, 2018. https://www.billboard.com/pro/taylor-swift-reputation-stadium-tour-breaks-record-highest-grossing-us-tour/.
[54] Frankenberg, "Taylor Swift's Reputation Stadium Tour Breaks Record for Highest Grossing U.S. Tour."

attempt them."[55] This assessment encapsulates the lukewarm reception Swift's second pop album received, reviews of which were not always grounded in strictly musical reactions like Caramanica's. As one review put it, Swift "knows that some people don't like her, and she knows why. And she wants to be very clear that she doesn't like *them* either, and that for the record, none of the bad things she's done are actually her fault. It's all stuff that someone else made her do."[56] The "bad things" were a series of public disagreements: break-ups and celebrity feuds, including very public relationships ending with DJ/producer Calvin Harris and actor Tom Hiddleston.[57] These relationships were well known from posts on social media, but Swift had been private about the break-ups. Additionally, Swift had had another public feud with rapper Kanye West and his now-estranged wife Kim Kardashian involving a nude figure of Swift that West included in the music video for his song "Famous."[58] Swift engaged in a back-and-forth with Kim Kardashian, who had released secretly recorded audio in which Swift supposedly agreed to her nude likeness appearing in the "Famous" music video. For her part Swift disagreed with how that phone call audio was framed, and asked to be "excluded from the

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[55] Jon Caramanica, "Taylor Swift Is a 2017 Pop Machine on 'Reputation,' but at What Cost?" *The New York Times,* November 9, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/arts/music/taylor-swift-reputation-review.html.

[56] Constance Grady, "A Unified Theory of Taylor Swift's Reputation," *Vox,* May 7, 2018. https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/11/9/16598106/taylor-swift-reputation-intimacy-control.

[57] Laura Cohen, "An Important Timeline of Everything That's Happened Since Taylor Swift and Calvin Harris' Breakup," *People.com,* December 8, 2020. https://people.com/celebrity/taylor-swift-calvin-harris-breakup-timeline/; Anna Lewis, "Taylor Swift and Tom Hiddleston: a timeline of their very short relationship," *Cosmopolitan,* November 10, 2017. https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/news/a45792/taylor-swift-tom-hiddleston-relationship-timeline/.

[58] Billboard Staff, "A Complete Timeline of Kanye West & Taylor Swift's Relationship," *Billboard,* March 24, 2020. https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/kanye-west-taylor-swift-relationship-timeline-6686064/.

narrative."[59] Swift was also entangled in a lawsuit at this time: she pressed charges against Denver radio DJ David Mueller after he groped her at a public photo event during a country radio tour in 2013. Mueller sued Swift for defamation, and Swift countersued for one dollar. Swift ultimately won the suit in 2018.[60] Discussing this point in her career on camera in the *Miss Americana* documentary from 2020, Swift remarked that she just "disappeared" from public life in 2016 following her celebrity break-ups and feuds, believing that was what the public and her fans wanted.[61] Through the release of *reputation,* Swift staged her return by making space for a fallible version of herself, embracing her role as an adult pop star in control of her own narrative.

The initial releases from *reputation* differed significantly from Swift's previously typical autobiographical love songs. In the music video and tour performance for "Look What You Made Me Do," one of the initial singles released for the album, Swift explicitly distanced herself from previous releases. The music video for this song featured different vignettes: Swift in a dominatrix costume, Swift in a bathtub of jewels, Swift in black leather on a motorcycle, Swift in a gold sports car crashing into a pole, and Swift with a group of men in drag makeup wearing fishnet tights and heels wearing "I <3 TS" shirts.[62] The music video referred to Swift's public feuds with celebrities and ex-

[59] Myles Tanzer, "Taylor Swift: 'I Would Very Much Like To Be Excluded From This Narrative'," *Fader,* July 18, 2016. https://www.thefader.com/2016/07/18/taylor-swift-responds-kim-kardashian-kanye-video.
[60] BBC Staff, "Taylor Swift Wins Assault Case Against DJ," *BBC,* August 15, 2017. https://www.bbc.com/news/40931988.
[61] *Miss Americana: Taylor Swift,* directed by Lana Wilson (January 31, 2020, Tremolo Productions, Netflix).
[62] Taylor Swift, "Look What You Made Me Do," music video, August 27, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tmd-ClpJxA.

boyfriends, and Swift made cameos as her past self.[63] "Look What You Made Me Do" was the fifth song performed on the *reputation* stadium tour, coming after a mash-up of "Style" (*1989*) with "Love Story" and "You Belong With Me" (*Fearless)* and a costume change. After the older songs, the stage lights went dark and videos began playing on screens over a sinister, slippery descending synth sound. Including muffled and glitched clips from Swift's "Love Story" music video and photos from her debut album, the video sequence shifted to two images of Swift: one standing alone in the desert dressed in a light blue dress, and one in a tight cropped outfit with snake details. Visual references to past and present audibly changed with the sound of wind or distortion before a steady groove begins. Through this transition in the performance, Swift explicitly separated from her past self as she visually and audibly moved into the new persona heard (and seen) on *reputation.* The video ended and Swift appeared on stage sitting on a throne with dancers in masks all around her as a virtual snake slid down the screens as if to bite the audience. A wink from Swift on the screen coincided with the plucked strings and glockenspiel as the song began, sounding much as it did on the album version. Swift rose up from under the stage to an electric guitar melody, wearing a green bedazzled boxer's robe. Behind her dancers stood on a large seesaw as snakes flitted across screens upstage. The performance set and opening video clips recalled the opening scene of the music video, set in a gothic cemetery with Swift emerging from a grave as a dirt-covered corpse. Swift's previous visual and musical transitions had maintained a version of her

[63] See Billboard, "A Complete Timeline of Kanye West & Taylor Swift's Relationship"; Cohen, "An Important Timeline of Everything That's Happened Since Taylor Swift and Calvin Harris' Breakup"; Lewis, "Taylor Swift and Tom Hiddleston."

white femininity through songs about romantic relationships like “Blank Space” or “You Belong With Me”; by contrast, “Look What You Made Me Do” placed emphasis on Swift herself rather than describing her subjectivity through romantic relationships.

The *reputation* performance also featured clear hip-hop and trap elements, heard most obviously on the single releases “...Ready For It?” and “Look What You Made Me Do.” For example, “...Ready For It?” (which opened the album and the tour) began with a distorted bass synthesizer, later layered with a rolling trap beat. The song is a study in contrasts: the verses and pre-choruses feature harder edges, with vocalizations closer to speaking and rapping and ominous lyrics like “are you ready for it” or “baby, let the games begin.” The chorus, however, is more reminiscent of the breathy pop sound found on *1989* (and the rest of the love songs on *reputation*), with lyrics making reference to nighttime and dreams as Swift’s vocal register moves higher for clearly sung lyrics. These musical elements, like the opening of “...Ready For It?” and the driving chorus of “Look What You Made Me Do,” shaped how *reputation* was received. They served as a musical backdrop for Swift’s damning rhetoric about the hazards of public life: these songs are not about romance, but about the political and public turmoil that surrounded Swift throughout 2016. In a piece for *Esquire* marking the third anniversary of *reputation*’s release, Lauren Kranc astutely noted that the single releases shaped reception of the album and set up criticism of *reputation* as overblown and aggressive.[64]

[64] Lauren Kranc, “Three Years After *reputation* It’s Time to Accept It As Taylor Swift’s Best Album,” *Esquire*, November 10, 2020. https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a34622864/reputation-taylor-swift-best-album-anniversary-essay/; Swift’s lowest-selling album is her debut album from 2006, *Taylor Swift*.

Critics interpreted the presence of initial singles like "...Ready For It?" and "Look What You Made Me Do" as both revenge and rebranding: perhaps as a result of their negative reactions, *reputation* would be Swift's second-worst-selling album, even as the domestic tour broke records.

Ultimately, the negative critical opinions of Swift and her sixth release failed to recognize how Swift's songwriting had matured beyond surface-level tracks of romantic entanglements. Swift's new songs gave voice to a woman making mistakes in her love life, falling in lust, and falling in love. Songs like "Delicate," "Getaway Car," "King of My Heart," or "Call It What You Want" recalled the autobiographical songwriting Swift had been known for, but also offered a range of emotion and expressions of physical intimacy that were new for Swift. "Getaway Car," for example, told a story about the narrator (Swift) running from one relationship to another, eventually apologizing to the slighted partner abandoned in a "motel bar" in the bridge.[65] "Call It What You Want" showed Swift as indifferent to public perceptions, secure in herself and a new relationship. The lines "I'm laughing with my lover / making forts under cover / trust him like a brother / yeah you know I did one thing right" from the second verse gave listeners glimpses of a new, healthy relationship that was hidden from the public.[66] But these were not the songs Swift chose to represent the album and offer audiences first impressions upon its release in 2017.

[65] Taylor Swift, "Getaway Car," *reputation* (Big Machine Records, 2017).
[66] Taylor Swift, "Call It What You Want," *reputation* (Big Machine Records, 2017).

Along with Kranc, other critics' retrospective analysis of *reputation* claimed that much of the harsh reaction to the 2017 release was due to the fraught social and political climate leading up to and in the wake of Donald Trump's election in 2016 and the rise of right-wing extremism in the United States.[67] Whether these events were connected or not, after receiving the mixed reviews of *reputation* in 2017, Swift began to make clear political statements. Swift's earlier political statements had been subtle; for example, the music video for "Mean" featured a visual storyline of a young boy wearing a light purple sweater vest and bowtie being bullied by football players in a locker room for reading a fashion magazine rather than participating in sports. As Eric Smialek notes, this scenario implied that this male student was bullied because he was queer, and it showed at least an "incidental awareness" of LGBTQ issues.[68]

Female country artists of the late 2000s and early 2010s, including Swift, Carrie Underwood, and Miranda Lambert, strove to be non-threatening, and certainly non-political. Swift's approach to her career was largely shaped by the experience of The Chicks, who were blacklisted from country radio and subsequently from the entire Nashville-based industry in 2003.[69] Swift, a teenager when she entered the country industry in 2006, deliberately stayed away from politics, balancing her career within the tenuous apolitical (or at least not liberal) politics of the country industry. Discussing her early career in the 2020 Netflix documentary *Miss Americana,* Swift contextualizes her

[67] Kranc, "Three Years After *reputation...*"
[68] Smialek, "Who Needs to Calm Down?," 102.
[69] Gabriel Rossman, "Elites, Masses, and Media Blacklists: The Dixie Chicks Controversy," *Social Forces* 83, no. 1 (September 2004): 61-79.

early reticence to speak about politics in these terms.[70] Swift stated that from the start of her career publishers and label executives repeatedly told her to not be like The Chicks.[71] As a young female country artist Swift maintained a relationship with the country industry and her fans by staying within the boundaries of the Nashville establishment's definition of the genre. Only later did Swift become bolder in representing her political views, speaking in support of feminist causes and LGBTQ+ rights. One of Swift's first steps into discussing politics was her endorsement of a Democratic senate candidate in Tennessee during the 2018 mid-term elections.[72]

One of the lead singles for *Lover* was the song "You Need to Calm Down," which made several references to LGBTQ+ rights and feminist ideas. In their analysis of this video, and the reception of Swift's more outspoken political persona, Smialek follows Swift's analysis, describing the song as having three distinct sections that deal with three

[70] *Miss Americana: Taylor Swift*, a documentary, was released on January 31, 2020. It followed Swift through 2017-2018 and it was likely intended to be a precursor to Swift's planned tour for *Lover* (an album released in 2019). 2020 tours for *Lover* were cancelled due COVID-19 pandemic, and Swift subsequently released two more albums during that year that presented a sharp stylistic change from the pop-inspired work presented in the *Miss Americana* documentary. *Miss Americana: Taylor,* directed by Lana Wilson (January 31, 2020, Tremolo Productions, Netflix). See also Daniel Kreps, "Taylor Swift Cancels All 2020 Tour Dates Due to Coronavirus: Singer Pushes Planned Lover Fests to 2021," *Rolling Stone,* April 17, 2020. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/taylor-swift-cancels-2020-tour-dates-986059/.

[71] *Miss Americana: Taylor Swift* (50:30).

[72] Swift was most concerned about the US Senate race between far right wing Marsha Blackburn, who ultimately won, and Democratic candidate Phil Bredesen, though she did also comment on state and local elections. See Shannon Van Sant, "Taylor Swift Endorses Democratic Candidates in Tennessee," *NPR,* October 8, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/10/08/655599374/taylor-swift-endorses-democratic-candidates-in-tennessee; and James Arkin, "Marsha Blackburn beats Phil Bredesen to retain Tennessee seat for GOP," *Politico,* November 6, 2018, https://www.politico.com/story/2018/11/06/phil-bredesen-vs-marsha-blackburn-tennessee-senate-race-results-2018-963526.

separate political issues.[73] Further, Smialek describes other moments of Swift's activism about various issues, not just those in support of the LGTBQ+ community.[74] With these moments in her music dating back to queer representation in the music video for "Mean" (*Speak Now*, 2011) and a line in "Welcome to New York" (*1989*, 2014), it is clear that Swift gradually developed a more assertive political voice as her music shifted further toward pop. This can be seen through statements made in 2020, in which she voiced support for the Black Lives Matter movement, endorsed Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, and praised Kamala Harris as Biden's running mate.[75] Most striking about Swift's development between the release of *reputation* (2017) and *Lover* (2019) was her movement into talking about politics and social issues. There is little evidence to suggest that Swift's public statements, typically made on the social media platforms Instagram and Twitter, had any material consequence in determining the outcome of elections, but they do indicate a marked change to Swift's brand.[76] Out from under the culture of fear created by the country industry to stop women from making political

[73] Eric Smialek, "Who Needs to Calm Down?," 99-119; I follow Smialek and Swift's lead in this reading of "You Need to Calm Down" and its video. The song was criticized following its release for conflating many different political issues together (sexism, homophobia, racism) and for centering Swift herself as part of a marginalized group. Criticisms also include the presence of class-shaming in the music video: see Nadine Hubbs, "The Poor-Shaming Vision of Pride in Taylor Swift's 'You Need to Calm Down': The video for Swift's LGBTQ+ anthem is erected on the stereotype of the redneck homophobe," *Frieze,* June 26, 2019. https://www.frieze.com/article/poor-shaming-vision-pride-taylor-swifts-you-need-calm-down.
[74] Smialek, "Who Needs to Calm Down?," 101.
[75] Sandra Gonzalez, "Taylor Swift Endorses Joe Biden," *CNN Entertainment,* October 7, 2020. https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/07/entertainment/taylor-swift-joe-biden/index.html.
[76] Gwendelyn Nisbett and Stephanie Schartel Dunn, "Reputation Matters: Parasocial Attachment, Narrative Engagement, and the 2018 Taylor Swift Political Endorsement," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 29, no. 1 (2019): 4. DOI: 10.1080/15456870.2019.1704758

statements, and past her own more personal insecurities about being liked, Swift stepped closer to politics with her own music in 2019.[77]

Returning to Country on Her Terms

Following the release of *Lover* in 2019, Swift had expected to tour the album.[78] With live music events disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Swift instead released two surprise albums *folklore* and *evermore* in July and December of 2020.[79] Although both albums were listed as "alternative" or "folk-pop," songs from both albums made an impact on the *Billboard* Country Airplay chart—including "betty" from *folklore* and "no body, no crime" featuring the band Haim from *evermore*.[80] During Taylor Swift's pre-recorded ACM performance of "betty" in 2020 she made periodic direct eye contact with the camera.[81] One of these moments was near the end of the performance, just after the bridge of the song (and prior to a key change). Looking directly at the camera, with a slight decrease in tempo, Swift sings "the only thing I want to do / is make it up to you,"

[77] This culture of "fear" in the country industry for female performers is discussed further in Chapter 2 with regard to The Chicks' blacklisting from country radio.
[78] Kreps, "Taylor Swift Cancels All 2020 Tour Dates Due to Coronavirus."
[79] Elias Leight, "Taylor Swift Finally Abandoned the Traditional Album Rollout," *Rolling Stone,* July 23, 2020. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/taylor-swift-folklore-surprise-album-1033102/; Will Richards, "Taylor Swift to release surprise ninth album 'Evermore' tonight," *NME.com,* December 10, 2020. https://www.nme.com/news/music/taylor-swift-to-release-surprise-ninth-album-evermore-tonight-2835851.
[80] Taylor Swift, *Billboard* Chart History, Country Airplay. https://www.billboard.com/artist/taylor-swift/chart-history/csa/.
[81] Hannah Yasharoff, "Taylor Swift Returns to ACM Awards After 7 Years for First Live 'Folklore' Performance," *USA Today*, September 13, 2020. https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/music/2020/09/13/taylor-swift-returns-acm-awards-first-live-folklore-performance/5786142002/

continuing to gaze at the camera before singing "so I showed up at your party" with a slight smirk.[82] Although it a brief moment in the performance, this final verse of the male character James's story in "betty" is an apology. Swift's facial expressions—looking directly at the camera, the smirk as she sings about "showing up" to the party—could be understood as a quasi-apology or acknowledgement that it had been a long time since Swift had shown up to a country music party. Perhaps this re-kindled relationship between Swift and the country establishment was to make the re-release of her successful country albums *Fearless* and *Red* less jarring, or perhaps it was just an acknowledgement that there were certain songs and songwriting features—autobiographical and narrative tracks from *1989, reputation,* and *lover*—that had always retained their attachment to country songwriting where Swift got her start. Or maybe Swift is just a household name that could attract viewers to awards ceremonies that have had consistent declines in viewership over the last three years.[83] Regardless of the ACM producers' intentions, in 2022 Swift is a global pop superstar with considerable sway in the music industry.[84] It does not matter what country radio executives think of her now, but it did in 2006 when

[82] Taylor Swift, "Betty – Live from the 2020 Academy of Country Music Awards," YouTube, September 17, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orXAg5dIMa8.
[83] Associated Press, "ACM Awards Hit Record Low Ratings, Joining Ceremony Slump," *Billboard,* April 21, 2021. https://www.billboard.com/music/awards/acm-awards-2021-record-low-ratings-9560125/. The ACM awards were not renewed by CBS after the 2021 ceremony, and they were streamed live on Amazon Prime Video in March 2022; see Melinda Newman, "What to Expect at the 2022 ACM Awards Show in Las Vegas," *Billboard* February 22, 2022. https://www.billboard.com/music/awards/2022-acm-awards-las-vegas-what-to-expect-1235034667.
[84] Lindsay Zolandz, "Taylor Swift Bend the Music Industry to Her Will: In the 2010s, She Became its Savviest Power Player," *Vulture,* December 30, 2019. https://www.vulture.com/2019/12/taylor-swift-in-the-2010s.html.

she was first releasing music, first going on radio tours, first trying to get her brand of pop-country about being a teenage girl taken seriously.

Taylor Swift's career, which now spans over fifteen years of regularly releasing albums and touring, is a series of monumental achievements, not the least of which is the way she cultivated an adoring and sometimes problematic fan base. Swift gave young women's feelings and experiences validity as she shared her own stories, dramas of growing up, falling in love, falling out of love, being hurt, healing, and learning to embrace oneself. During these fifteen years, Swift has negotiated genre crossover in terms of musical stylistic shifts (some subtle, some obvious); her public persona; and the reception of her songwriting. Swift's move from country to pop, framed as genre abandonment by the country industry and artistic growth by her fans, offers a remarkable example of both gender- and age-based biases within the country industry. It is also a plain example of how whiteness can be operationalized as a tool to mediate success. Approaching the study of Swift and other stars like her (white female country or pop artists) with a gaze critical of whiteness demonstrates how whiteness is normalized and unspoken, just as the patriarchy is normalized and unspoken.

Taylor Swift's career and her stylistic changes interact with the sonic boundaries informed by racial politics. Writing about racial imagery, Richard Dyer notes that "as long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people."[85] Dyer goes on to note the politics of looking at whiteness, which

[85] Richard Dyer, *White: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Routledge: New York, 2017), 1.

includes presenting the "privilege and dominance that is at stake in analyzing white racial imagery."[86] Dyer's assessment of the importance of seeing whiteness as a part of understanding racial imagery is particularly relevant to this study of Taylor Swift and the study of popular music generally. Swift's version of whiteness was built by her age, presentations of innocence, and femininity during her time as a young country artist. Later Swift's representation of whiteness was bolstered by political attachment to white feminism and neo-liberal progressive politics. Author Rafia Zakaria defines a white feminist as "someone who refuses to consider the role that whiteness and the racial privilege attached to it have played and continue to play in universalizing white feminist concerns, agendas, and beliefs as being those of all feminists and of all feminisms."[87] Swift's genre movement or "crossover" was informed by the racial privilege whiteness affords, which has manifested differently over time as her genre affiliation has changed. White artists like Taylor Swift have used white femininity to further their own careers without addressing structural, institutional barriers to success for individuals who are not white women. Specific attention to race, and in this case whiteness, ensures that a feminist approach encourages critiques of individual artists and industry to surpass surface-level action to advance the cause of systemic change.

[86] Dyer, *White,* 9.
[87] Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), ix.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

When Beyoncé took the stage with The Chicks at the 2016 CMA awards to perform her song "Daddy Lessons" from *Lemonade* (2016), Alan Jackson, a white male country artist famous for his neo-traditional country approach in the late 1990s, left his front row seat. Travis Tritt, a stylistic compatriot of Jackson's, posted on Twitter about Beyoncé the next day, saying: "Apparently, the CMA thinks Beyoncé is as relevant to country music as Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette or Patsy Cline...I'll tell you why! Because the CMA folks don't think country music is strong enough to stand on its own."[1] Omise'eke Tinsley identifies Tritt's comments and the online and in-house reactions to the performance as misogynoir: part of the "implicit—and too often, explicit—racism embedded in outcries against Beyoncé's countryness."[2] Tritt's online reaction, Jackson's walkout, the frowning and uncomfortable posturing of artists like Charles Kelley of the band Lady A, and singer Kenny Chesney, all amounted to explicit performances of racism: they acted out displeasure at Beyoncé's inclusion in the program in ways they knew would be highly visible. These protests attempted to draw a boundary that would

[1] Omise'eke Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation: Remixing Black Feminism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 46.
[2] Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation*, 46.

exclude Beyoncé as a Black artist and as one identified with popular genres outside of country.

We know that the historical formation of country music as a style was "nowhere near entirely white."[3] But the disbelief that Beyoncé could make country music and the denial that the Texas-born global pop star could represent country music's past or its present implicitly reframe country music as a genre belonging to a white past and owned by white musicians in the present.[4] So, too, did mainstream country overlook the fiddle players, banjo, mandolin, brass band, drums and guitars that played on both the album version and the live performance of "Daddy Lessons." All of these instruments, with white musicians wearing black, and Black musicians wearing white, were on stage at the 50th anniversary of the CMAs in 2016 and should have solidified the song's country qualifications. But, Beyoncé is a Black woman, and *Lemonade* also contained hip-hop and futuristic R&B. As we have seen throughout the case studies in this dissertation, if a woman artist blends other styles with country music, she risks exclusion from the genre of country. This gendered exclusion is further complicated by race. The reception of Beyoncé's performance of "Daddy Lessons," a song about shooting guns, listening to your parents' teaching, and embracing a fearless womanhood, showed the country industry's racism. Beyoncé's CMA performance was transgressive not just because she was a Black woman standing on a stage with a group of white women who had been

[3] Spencer Kornhaber for *The Atlantic*, quoted in Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation*, 45; Spencer Kornhaber, "What Beyonce's 'Daddy Lessons' Had to Teach," *The Atlantic*, November 3, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/cmas-beyonce-daddy-lessons-dixie-chicks-country-music-awards-race/506375/.
[4] Tinsley, 58.

banned from country radio in 2003, but because she represented the past and future of country music in a way that contradicted the country industry's story about its own history. As music critic Jewly Hight reported, Beyoncé's crossover performance, which was met with such negative vitriol, was "more like a reclamation than invasion, since the genre's roots entwine with African-American folk, blues, string band and pop contributions."[5] This performance brought questions of race and country music—specifically how and when Black artists can or should participate—to the foreground.

Beyond the genre blending and marketing category crossover of "Daddy Lessons" on the 2016 CMAs, *Lemonade* as an album also brought these same questions to the surface. *Lemonade* was listed as an R&B album by Beyoncé's label Parkwood Entertainment, an imprint of Columbia Records. Tinsley describes *Lemonade* as "excavating" a "family history of genres" like rock, country, and blues, where black women have been "glossed" or "ignored."[6] The record's songs present a wide sweep of popular genres. "Daddy Lessons" is of course country-infused, but "Don't Hurt Yourself" (featuring Jack White) features the sonic identifiers of rock, with a grinding electric guitar, sampled steel drums. and Beyoncé's distorted vocals with the repeated line "let it be" through the chorus.[7] There are also plenty of pop songs that recall Beyoncé's previous five releases: "I'm Sorry" and "Hold Up" use pop beat production combined

[5] Jewly Hight, "Beyoncé and The Dixie Chicks Offer Up Lessons On Country Music's Past (And Future)," *NPR: The Record*, November 4, 2016. https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2016/11/04/500562813/beyonc-and-the-dixie-chicks-offer-up-lessons-on-country-musics-past-and-future.
[6] Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation*, 21.
[7] Beyoncé, *Lemonade*, (Parkwood, Columbia, 2016).

with stringed instruments frequently heard in 2010s pop and R&B. *Lemonade* as a whole was stylistically diverse, the album and visual components presenting a "vision of unapologetically black, unapologetically feminist lives situated in the historical, artistic, and political landscape of the US South."[8] A historically informed understanding of country music's history would frame Beyoncé's presence at the CMAs as a logical outcome of her song's participation in the genre. It is also possible that the CMAs wanted to have a major pop star in attendance, with hope for increased viewership or expanded demographics of their audience. Practical and documentary evidence of the explicit and implicit racism within the country industry, however, also beg the question of whether this move was based on the false optimism felt within US society as former president Barack Obama's second term came to a close in 2016.

The 2016 CMAs were otherwise a valedictory event for the organization's fiftieth anniversary. At the same event, Dolly Parton—whose country career has been built on crossover—received a Lifetime Achievement award. Beyoncé's crossing into country was unacceptable to certain portions of the country industry, like white artists and fans who expressed their shock and discomfort at her presence, but her song was country enough to have warranted an invitation to the event. The vitriolic response might have been so dramatic because the song was written and recorded outside the Nashville country industry or that Beyoncé has been primarily known as a pop act. Most likely, however, is that the misogynoir within US culture which helps to "maintain white supremacy by offering tacit approval of the disparate treatment that Black women

[8] Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation,* 5.

negotiate in society" was at work when Beyoncé stepped on the stage at the 2016 CMAs.[9] Beyoncé, one of the wealthiest and most powerful figures in the popular music industry, was able to transgress country music's racialized genre boundaries for the length of one song, though she was not immune to ugly responses from country music headliners. Most Black artists working within the Nashville industry have struggled against similar barriers outside the spotlight.

Country Trap: Lil Nas X and Blanco Brown

Questions of race and country music—specifically how and when Black artists can or should participate—became part of the broader country music discourse a few years after Beyoncé's CMA performance. In 2018 rapper Lil Nas X released the song "Old Town Road."[10] The track was a viral success, but controversy arose as to whether it "counted" as country music. Born Montero Lamar Hill, Lil Nas X independently released his hit single "Old Town Road" in December 2018. Four months later, in April 2019, Lil Nas X was signed to Columbia Records, and "Old Town Road" debuted on the *Billboard* Hot 100 Chart, Hot Country Songs Chart, and Hot R&B/Hip-Hop simultaneously. "Old Town Road's" time on the country charts was short lived; *Billboard* tried to remove the track quietly after just one week on the chart, later stating that Lil Nas X had made it onto

[9] Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 3.
[10] Lil Nas X, "Old Town Road," (Columbia Records, 2019).

the Hot Country Songs ranking by mistake.[11] *Billboard*'s statement, released to *Rolling Stone,* said that

> upon further review, it was determined that "Old Town Road" by Lil Nas X does not currently merit inclusion on Billboard's country charts. When determining genres, a few factors are examined, but first and foremost is musical composition. While "Old Town Road" incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery, it does not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version.[12]

Billboard's statement suggested that musical style was a chief concern, but failed to acknowledge the prevalence of hip-hop sounds in "today's country music," indicating that there were likely considerations beyond style at play in their decision to remove "Old Town Road" from country charts.

In an interview with Elias Leight for *Rolling Stone,* David Kang, co-manager of tween country singer Mason Ramsey, dismissed "Old Town Road," accusing Lil Nas X of exploiting the ratings system to help the song gain popularity. According to Kang, because Lil Nas X listed "Old Town Road" as a country record on iTunes, "he was going to these spaces, gaining a bit of traction on their charts, and there's a way to manipulate the algorithm to push your track to the top."[13] Although Kang's assessment of the logistics of chart and algorithm manipulation are true, in this case it is also important to

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[11] Elias Leight, "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed Its Mind." *Rolling Stone,* March 26, 2019. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/#.
[12] Leight, "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' was a Country Hit."
[13] Leight, "Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" was a Country Hit."

consider Lil Nas X's own description of the track. When asked in an April 2019 interview for *Time* if he considered "Old Town Road" a country song, Lil Nas X stated "the song is country trap. It's not one, it's not the other. It's both. It should be on both."[14] Lil Nas X's assessment of his song is fair, and though the vocal performances tend toward rapping more than sung vocalizations, it should be noted that many other country artists incorporate rap and spoken vocals in their work. Ultimately *Billboard* decided that the decidedly country theme and banjo loop, even with a feature from country artist Billy Ray Cyrus, were not enough for the song to chart as country music.

Over the last two years there have been numerous examples of country music's crossover potential and stylistic blending where African American musical styles have been incorporated into the mainstream of country music. The exclusion of "Old Town Road" is arbitrary, seeming to have more to do with Nashville systems being flouted because of the song's independent release rather than the track's musical qualifications. In the early 2000s "hick-hop" was a crossover sound that included both Black and white artists. Take, for example, Trace Adkins's song "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk" (2006), which was "celebrated…as breaking" the tradition of "anti-hybridism that tightly entwined [country music] with white working class identity."[15] In his discussion of Adkins's song, David Morris notes the "complex roots" of varied "racial groups and

[14] Andrew R. Chow, "Lil Nas X on 'Old Town Road' and the Billboard Controversy," *Time*, April 1, 2019. https://time.com/5561466/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-billboard/.
[15] David Morris, "Hick-Hop Hooray? 'Honky Tonk Badonkadonk,' Musical Genre, and the Misrecognitions of Hybridity," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28, no. 5 (December 2011): 471.

cultural traditions" which have shaped country music as we know it today.[16] Where Adkins's "Badonkadonk" was an exciting moment of stylistic hybridity and its allusions to hip-hop have continued to resonate through the 2010s into the 2020s, Adkins's song could be celebrated because it was released by a well-known white artist.[17] Just a year before the release of Adkins's song, Black country artist Cowboy Troy released "I Play Chicken With the Train," which had only moderate success as a novelty song.[18]

"Old Town Road" ultimately succeeded in similar ways to "I Play Chicken" as a novelty song and similar combinations of hip-hop production styles and country music sounds. One of the most important consequences of "Old Town Road," however, was how the track's removal from *Billboard* country charts reinvigorated conversations about race and racism within the country industry, and how it factors into reinforcing barriers around country music as a marketing category. Country music is constantly negotiating genre boundaries, authenticity, and respectability, but one way that artists participate in the genre is by declaring that they are making country music. The question of "Old Town Road" not being "country enough" for the *Billboard* country charts raises questions about how particular crossover sounds (trap, rap, hip-hop) are framed as acceptable or unacceptable by gatekeepers in the country industry. It is implicitly indicated that race is

[16] Morris, "Hick-Hop Hooray? 'Honky Tonk Badonkadonk,' Musical Genre, and the Misrecognitions of Hybridity."
[17] Jeremy Orosz, "'Straight Outta Nashville': Allusions to Hip Hop in Contemporary Country Music," *Popular Music and Society,* 44, no. 1 (2019): 7.
[18] Cowboy Troy, "I Play Chicken With the Train (with Big & Rich), *Loco Motive* (Warner Music, 2005).

a key marker in what makes a song or artist acceptable or unacceptable, as has been the case since the earliest days of the recorded music industry in the 1920s.

By contrast with Lil Nas X, whose song was removed from the *Billboard* country charts, fellow country-trap artist Blanco Brown released "The Git Up" in 2019 and had no issues with country charts. "The Git Up" is an instructional dance track, built on a loop of a lap steel riff in the same way that "Old Town Road" is built on a banjo loop. "The Git Up" contains the lap steel, several drumbeats, spoons and "anything else [Brown] could find."[19] Although "The Git Up" and "Old Town Road" are different in style, they share production values; a stereotypically country instrument used as a loop combined with drum machines, and clear references to cowboys and riding horses. Yet, for all their similarities, these two songs did not co-exist as "country music" on the *Billboard* country charts. In an interview before the American Music Awards in 2019 Brown spoke about "The Git Up," describing how he and Lil Nas X are pushing forward a particular sound Brown describes as "trailer trap."[20] Interviewer Tetris Kelly asked Brown how Brown and Lil Nas X fare as Black artists making country music. Brown equivocated, stating that "you make music with heart and you make it with art and it's gonna do what it's supposed to do."[21] It is not surprising that Brown sidestepped the

[19] "Blanco Brown Explains How He Created 'The Git Up'" on *How it Went Down*, Billboard Online. accessed 26 November 2019. https://www.billboard.com/video/blanco-brown-the-git-up-how-it-went-down-billboard-interview-sep-2019-8529775.
[20] Blanco Brown, Interview by Tetris Kelly, "Blanco Brown Talks 'Git Up' Dance Craze, Teases His Next Single & Explains What 'Trailer Trap' Is: AMAS 2019," Billboard Online with Tetris Kelly. https://www.billboard.com/video/blanco-brown-billboard-interview-american-music-awards-november-2019-8544663/
[21] Blanco Brown, Interview by Tetris Kelly, "Blanco Brown Talks 'Git Up' Dance Craze."

opportunity to comment about industry racism in late 2019: race was (and still is) a taboo topic in Nashville, where Brown is signed to the country label BBR Music Group.

Music critic Jon Caramanica has noted that Brown's label affiliation puts him in a different position from Lil Nax X, who distributed "Old Town Road" first via SoundCloud. Because "Old Town Road" originated on SoundCloud, outside of the Nashville country industry's control, the industry had no incentive to support the song's success. Because "Old Town Road" "leapfrogged right over the country music industry into the pop world," Caramanica writes, Nashville was left "cold, and resentful" especially after the track launched Lil Nas X's into fame.[22] "The Git Up" worked within the country industry framework that ensured the entrance of Brown's 'trailer trap' would not cause disruption to radio formatting. These two songs, though stylistically similar, negotiated industry gatekeepers and barriers differently. What becomes clear in the comparison between "Old Town Road" and "The Git Up" is the importance of the country industry to making or breaking a career; there are (arbitrary) rules, and if an artist breaks these rules, they cannot successfully negotiate a path to airplay and popularity.

It Took a Decade

An example of the industry's role in making or breaking careers is Black female country artist Mickey Guyton, who gained increased visibility within the country industry in 2020. Guyton, born in Texas like Beyoncé, released a clip of her song "Black Like

[22] Jon Caramanica, "The Short Rise and Long Tail of Lil Nas X," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/26/arts/music/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-7.html.

Me" following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.[23] Written in 2018 after the death of Botham Jean, a 26-year-old who was mistaken for an intruder by a police officer, the song calls attention to police violence against Black people in the United States. Marissa Moss notes that "'Black Like Me' could apply to any number of lives taken by the people who are supposed to be protecting them."[24] As Moss has shown, after Guyton released a clip of her song on Instagram, Spotify asked if they could have a complete version to put on a playlist. Amid increased attention to police violence during the Black Lives Matter racial reckoning, the song "resonated instantly" with fans—it went to no. 4 on the *Billboard* Digital Country Sales chart—but did not make an impact on country radio.[25] Programmers said it was "too pop," something Guyton had heard throughout her career—but no one would call bro-country men like Florida Georgia Line or female country-pop artist Maren Morris's releases "too pop," because they are white adults.[26] Even with this specter of misogynoir from within the country industry, "Black Like Me" was nominated for Best Country Solo Performance at the 2021 Grammy Awards. Guyton was the first Black woman ever nominated for the award.[27]

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[23] "How George Floyd Died, and What Happened Next," *The New York Times,* November 1, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd.html.
[24] Marissa Moss, *Her Country: How the Women of Country Music Became the Success They Were Never Supposed to Be* (New York: Henry and Holt, 2022), 263. For information on the murder of Botham Jean see Marina Trahan Martinez, Sarah Mervosh, and John Eligon, "Former Dallas Police Officer is Guilty of Murder for Killing her Neighbor," *The New York Times,* October 1, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/01/us/amber-guyger-trial-verdict-botham-jean.html.
[25] Moss, *Her Country,* 264.
[26] Moss, *Her Country,* 264.
[27] Emma Specter, "With Her First Grammy Nomination, Mickey Guyton Is Changing the Face of Country Music," *Vogue,* March 14, 2021. https://www.vogue.com/article/with-her-first-grammy-nomination-mickey-guyton-is-changing-the-face-of-country-music.

"Black Like Me" placed Guyton on a national stage. But nearly a decade earlier, after years spent working multiple jobs and singing countless demos, she had signed a record deal with Capitol Records Nashville. Since signing with Capitol in 2011 Guyton had released a few singles, including her first self-titled EP with the single "Better Than You Left Me" in 2015 which had the highest single add rate on the Country Aircheck chart.[28] With that statistic in her favor, it would have made sense for Guyton's career to move forward, but at the time Guyton signed with Capitol records, the "rules" for country music were changing. Gone were the days when a singer could sign a deal and immediately put out an album that would produce hit songs. Instead, what was heard on the radio were bro-country songs, which Jewly Hight has described as "humdrum hit-makers, primarily male, who sat back and let beat-driven production create a party vibe."[29] Radio's reliance on repetitious party songs with a masculine perspective kept female artists off the air: they might write songs, but the rigidity of radio programming and popularity chart tabulation ensured that these songs would not be heard by the public. Women artists were played on the radio so infrequently you might not hear even one within an hour.

As Guyton was trying to build her career, she was concerned about sounding "country enough"—even though she was hearing trap beats take over the airwaves of country music. Indeed, one of Guyton's earliest songs, "Nice Things," is squarely placed

[28] Capitol Records is a subsidiary of UMG Nashville. "Biography," *Mickey Guyton*. https://www.mickeyguyton.com/about.
[29] Jewly Hight, "Is Country Music Finally Ready for Mickey Guyton?" *Los Angeles Times,* April 9, 2020. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2020-04-09/mickey-guyton-country-singer.

within the traditional country sound. Released as a single in 2017, "Nice Things" is a mid-tempo track that begins with a guitar melody and includes tight, high vocal harmony heard alongside guitar, bass, fiddle, and mandolin.[30] Guyton's vocals blend with the harmonization, and her use of a vocal break at the top notes of the chorus adds intimate restraint to the track. "Nice Things" is reminiscent of other country releases from around 2017, but it has a little less pop influence than most; the arrangement and themes are similar to Kelsea Ballerini's "Peter Pan," which was Ballerini's first radio No. 1. Yet "Nice Things" did not chart on country radio, and Mickey Guyton would not receive broader country industry recognition until her 2020 Country Radio Seminar performance of "What Are You Gonna Tell Her."

"What Are You Gonna Tell Her" was first performed at the Country Radio Seminar (CRS) in February of that year, where it was dubbed "the No. 1 Song of Country Radio Seminar."[31] Guyton played the song at the Ryman auditorium in Nashville, where it received a standing ovation, a rarity for any artist, let alone an artist who had yet to release a full-length album. Chris Willman has called the song a "gut punch" to country radio: it addresses the "prejudices, roadblocks and danger women face (disproportionate airplay possibly among the least of them)."[32] At CRS 2020 the song had not gotten past the demo stage, but it was officially released as a single on March 6, 2020. When

[30] Mickey Guyton, "Nice Things," *Nice Things – Single* (Capitol Records Nashville, 2017).
[31] Chris Willman, "Mickey Guyton Delivers the No. 1 Song of Country Radio Seminar – and It's a Female-Themed Gut Punch (Watch)," *Variety*, February 21, 2020. https://variety.com/2020/music/news/mickey-guyton-country-radio-seminar-what-are-you-gonna-tell-her-1203510984/.
[32] Willman, "Mickey Guyton Delivers the No. 1 Song of Country Radio Seminar."

speaking about the song Guyton said:

> I've been in Nashville for eight years now...I've seen so many women that I love, including myself, killing their spirits just for a chance to be heard. We have been overlooked and silenced for so long. But the tipping point for me was when a Filipino girl reached out to me on Instagram informing me that she got accepted to Belmont [University] and was going to move to Nashville. She asked me what she had to look forward to in her journey, and I had nothing good to tell her. That was a heartbreaking reality. I realized that women cannot do whatever they put their mind to just because the world won't allow it. And that needs to change now. So this song came from that realization.[33]

The cover art for Guyton's single release is a pink-filtered polaroid picture with a young Guyton sitting on a stool, playing guitar and singing. The photograph reinforces the song's meaning, visually representing Guyton's younger self to all of the future female country artists who will face an uphill climb in an industry that marginalizes their voices. Hight's piece on Guyton for the Los Angeles Times asks whether "Country Music [is] Ready for Mickey Guyton" and describes Guyton's performance of "What Are You Gonna Tell Her" at the CRS seminar as "something of a radical act."[34] Programmers, excited about the song at CRS 2020, offered lip service, saying they would add the song to their playlists if it were available. Nevertheless, the song has not charted on country radio.

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[33] Willman, "Mickey Guyton Delivers the No. 1 Song of Country Radio Seminar."
[34] Hight, "Is Country Music Finally Ready for Mickey Guyton?"

Writing about Guyton's performance of "Love My Hair" at the 2021 CMA awards, music scholar Kimberly Mack notes the "power of narrative to shape musical genres, music scenes, artists' music and personal histories, and music journalism and criticism itself."[35] Guyton was joined on stage by Brittney Spencer and Madeline Edwards, and the performance received a standing ovation from a mostly white live audience.[36] Mack rightly cites this performance, which celebrated Black women in country music, as a moment of reclamation for Black presence and participation in country music. Another example of this reclamation came in February 2022 as Guyton performed the national anthem at Super Bowl Fifty-Six.[37] Guyton wore a bright blue gown, and she was backed by an interracial gospel choir wearing white. Journalist Jon Freeman framed this moment well, stating that "Mickey Guyton has earned her Super Bowl moment. It should be celebrated as a victory of her, for country music and—even though we've still got a long way to go—for the America that could be."[38] This hopeful tone was tempered by Freeman's acknowledgement of white male country artist Morgan Wallen's unaccounted-for use of the n-word in 2021 while publicly socializing in Nashville, and the racist vitriol Guyton experiences daily on social media.[39]

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[35] Kimberly Mack, "What Are You Gonna Tell Her?: The Power of Black Women's Narratives," in *AMP: American Music Perspectives,* 1, no. 2, 2020 (forthcoming, 2022), 157.
[36] Mack, "What Are You Gonna Tell Her?": The Power of Black Women's Narratives," 175.
[37] Jon Freeman, "Mickey Guyton's Super Bowl Performance was a Win for America," *Rolling Stone,* February 13, 2022. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/mickey-guyton-super-bowl-national-anthem-review-1299505/?sub_action=logged_in
[38] Freeman, "Mickey Guyton's Super Bowl Performance was a Win for America."
[39] TMZ, "Morgan Wallen Hurls N-Word After Rowdy Night Out: Apologizes, 'I Promise To Do Better.'," *TMZ*. February 2, 2021. https://www.tmz.com/2021/02/02/morgan-wallen-n-word-nashville-neighbors/.

A few months prior to her Super Bowl performance, in September 2021, Guyton released her first full-length album *Remember Her Name* after her Grammy nomination and her continued public political outspokenness following the murder of George Floyd and release of "Black Like Me." She describes herself has having moved past "just singing about my relationships to then just singing about being a black woman in country music...And then being a woman in country music. I want to fight for all of us."[40] Guyton's new releases and her approach to songwriting is to be entirely self-aware. She has unabashedly taken on political controversy, tackling marginalization in a genre that seems allergic to change. What remains to be seen, regardless of the hope Guyton's activism and support of other Black artists offers, is if there will be substantive changes within the country industry.

The Color Line's Future

In recent years the interracial history of country music has become more visible, with academic scholarship and music journalism alike committed to telling the stories of country music's past and present where all voices and bodies are represented. It is in this spirit I have traced the fluctuating and contingent boundaries of country music crossover. By looking at the musical in-between of crossover the ways that sounds, bodies, and ideas are marginalized or deemed less-than becomes apparent. I identify country crossover as a gendered and racialized process. What it means to make country music as

[40] Hight, "Is Country Music Finally Ready for Mickey Guyton?"

a female artist is located within the longstanding and pervasive gendered bias is within the country industry. The case studies in this document offer readings of music, industry, public policy, and socio-political realities at once, detailing how crossover processes change over time. Further, by approaching country music from its boundaries, from the places of crossover, I question whether the framework of popular music genres can be productive. Genres offer tidy ways to categorize sound, but those categories are one of the fundamental ways that structural racism is upheld within the recorded music industry. Important to this work is a realigned approach to hearing popular music genres, specifically in how whiteness is heard and operationalized to support structural inequities.

The individual chapters of this dissertation are focused on specific artists and time periods, but attend to the issue of racialized and gendered genre barriers as they have been historically formed, and how those barriers have changed over time. The moments where genres blur are where stylistic blending happens, and artists or songs crossover to different markets. It is in these moments when the rickety structure of white supremacy upholding genre is disrupted. By looking at these moments of disruption, moments of crossover, we are able to see clearly how genre boundaries are defended. We see how whiteness is protected and unnamed, and we see how women are labeled as sellouts, dissenters, or not worthy, while male artists' presence goes unquestioned. The conditions of genre participation, of acceptable crossover, seem to be situational if a person is not white, or not male; but these conditions are predicated on forms of inequity that are built into the structure of the industry. This dissertation helps us see musical genre more clearly as a social phenomenon and uses the examination of style to clarify the limitations

of genre as a way of thinking about music, historically and in the present day. When participation in a musical form is dictated by social phenomena rather than musical attribute, it becomes plain that genre is not only musical, but also political.

It is my hope that by approaching crossover within country music in this way—dealing forthrightly with the musical in-between and the boundary cases—I have offered a model for studies of this nature that could be applied to other musical marketing categories. Country is not the only genre impacted by the formation of the musical color line, and whiteness is rendered invisible broadly, not just in popular music studies. This work holds space for future research that takes on the mantle of hearing whiteness, of listening for gender discrimination within the musical in-betweens of crossover.

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