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“The Industry is Playing the People Cheap”: Race and the Country Music Business From Nixon to 9/11

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“The Industry is Playing the People Cheap”:

Race and the Country Music Business From Nixon to 9/11

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in History

by

Amanda Marie Martinez

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

"The Industry is Playing the People Cheap":

Race and the Country Music Business From Nixon to 9/11

by

Amanda Marie Martinez

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Eric Avila, Chair

This work reframes the country music genre as the product of Black and Brown artists and listeners, and reveals how the Nashville-based country music industry disregarded the music's multiracial and multiethnic roots and embraced a politics of white conservatism. I analyze the tension between how the music business marketed the genre of country with how musicians and fans engaged with the music in more diverse displays. I argue that while Black and Brown artists resisted the industry's exclusionary marketing practices and suggested country music had the potential to become a symbol of multiracialism, the music business instead continued to define its audience as white and predominantly conservative. During the rise of the New Right, I reveal how the music industry branded country as the sound of wholesome, family-friendly white conservatism.

This dissertation of Amanda Marie Martinez is approved.

Charles L. Hughes

Robert Fink

Robin D.G. Kelley

Eric Avila, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

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Beyond my family, I am indebted to friends and mentors who've supported me from the start. Following undergrad at Berkeley I was lucky to land a paid internship at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in 2012. It was during this summer that I met many of the most important people of my life. Thank you to dear friends, including Elle Long, Jenn Jameson, and Erin Eastabrooks, whose friendship, love, and support has helped sustain me over the years.

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VITA

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"As Country Music Faces a Racial Reckoning, a New Question: Where Are the Latino Artists?" *Los Angeles Times* (June 28, 2021)

"The Crossroads Facing Country Music After Morgan Wallen's Use of a Racist Slur," *Washington Post*, "Made by History" Series (February 17, 2021)

"Country Music Needs to Stare Down Its Racist Past and Take Note," *The Tennessean* (July 21, 2020)

INTRODUCTION

This is a study about the significance of country music in U.S. culture between Nixon and 9/11, but this isn't a story about music. This is a business history, about how the country music industry, centralized in Nashville, Tennessee, fine-tuned a business model that didn't sell a sound, but whiteness. During a period when culture wars raged, especially in popular music, I explain how the country music business capitalized on white backlash politics, branded country as the sound of cultural conservatism during the rise of the New Right, and defined their product as anti-Black and the exclusive property of a white, adult, conservative, urban/suburban, and middle-to-upper income audience.

The country music business crafted the myth of a purely white subculture while continually being aware of and ignoring Black and Brown country artists and fans.[1] Despite cyclical, generational occurrences when racial tensions boiled over in country music, I show how the music industry never had an incentive to market country to anyone other than white listeners.[2] I explore what a racially and culturally diverse period the 1970s was for country music, when Black and Brown artists achieved incredible commercial success, fueled in large part by a similarly diversifying fan base— and when the business had a clear opportunity to

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[1] This work builds on other studies that have demonstrated the creation of mythic white and/or wholesome subcultures in business and culture, including: Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: the Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[2] The allure of potential Black buying power, and the potential to tap into the Black market, periodically came up in business discussions for country music. But ultimately this avenue never proved convincing enough to the industry at large. More on the myth of Black buying power can be found in Jared A. Ball, *The Myth and Propaganda of Black Buying Power* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

expand definitions of who the music was for but failed to do so.[3] Again in the 1990s I show how the same racial tensions arose, but opportunities to diversify again came and went.

Beyond race, class and region are other significant factors that shape this study. When country music was invented as a marketing category in the 1920s it was created along not just racial lines. It was also established as *poor*, *rural*, and *Southern* music—all three of which marked the genre with an inferior whiteness. While much scholarship has documented the struggles the marketing category endured over time to overcome this marginality (an obstacle the business continues to face to a small extent today), this study looks beyond such framework.[4] By the 1970s, although the industry's efforts to achieve respectability for country music were largely successful, such strategies relied on racial and class bias. As organizations such as the Country Music Association (CMA) worked hard to develop market research on the country audience, it faced radio advertisers' skepticism that country listeners were indeed respectable and had money to spend. As a result, the CMA and the broader industry became fixated on developing market research that appealed to advertisers: defining them as white, middle-to-upper income, and urban/suburban—and in the process overlooked any Black and Brown presence. By the 1970s,

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[3] While my study covers both the Black and Brown presence in country music, I frame analysis for both along racial lines. Some might suggest my analysis of Latinx artists and fans, particularly those of Mexican descent, should be framed along ethnic identity (rather than racial). However I maintain a racial lens of analysis as I argue the country music industry's marketing practices *racialized* Latinx individuals within the genre as nonwhite. For more on the racialization of Latinx identities, see Tomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Douglas S. Massey, "The Racialization of Latinos in the United States," The Oxford Handbook of Ethnicity, Crime, and Immigration (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[4] Country music scholarship has often framed the marketing category as a victim of class and regional discrimination, often positioning the success of the business in a celebratory light. See Jeffrey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me Hillbilly: Country's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2004); Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2014).

the malleability of country music's whiteness actually worked to the advantage of the business. As the industry successfully capitalized on catering to a middle-income and largely suburban audience (many of whom had benefited from post-World War II social mobility), fads like "redneck chic" of the seventies and the Urban Cowboy craze of the early eighties allowed this core audience to appropriate identities that did not reflect their lived experience. As such I argue the country music industry's marketing campaigns proved not only racist, but classist, as they participated in capitalizing on trends that fueled stereotypes of rural whites as backwards and unintelligent.

By the end of the 20th century, just as the country music business reached its commercial pinnacle, it appeared to fully overcome its historic class and regional discrimination. Articles in *Time* and the *New York Times* defined country as the sound of the suburbs—even white flight—and presented the typical listener as an affluent baby boomer.[5] At a time when profits had never been higher, it was clear it had no reason to attempt to alter an almost entirely white business. Not only were commercially successful country artists virtually all white, but so, too, were members of the business community in Nashville. By the mid-1990s, to Cleve Francis, the only Black country artist signed to a major record label at the time, the overwhelming whiteness of country music was cause for major concern and a point of possible no return for the genre's racial definitions. Though initially optimistic when signed to Liberty Records in 1992, he later came to the conclusion that "Race did play a very significant role in me not making it."[6] In

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[5] Jon Pareles, "When Country Music Moves to the Suburbs," *New York Times*, November 25, 1990, H1; Bruce Feiler, "Has Country Become a Soundtrack for White Flight?" *New York Times*, October 20, 1996, H38; Priscilla Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time*, March 30, 1992, 66.

[6] Brad Schmitt, "Cleve Francis: Get More Blacks in Country Music," *The Tennessean*, September 17, 1995.

response, the singer mobilized with other Black artists, forming the Black Country Music Association in 1995 to build a community for Black country musicians, and to educate the broader public about the genre's strong Black roots and continual presence. He also collaborated with the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in 1998 to compile the boxset, *From Where I Stand: The Black Experience in Country Music*. To Francis these actions were necessary, saying they represented "perhaps the last chance the industry has of keeping an antiquated assumption —that country music is created only by white people for other white people—from becoming a bedrock of truth."[7] By the new millennium, however, Francis's concerns manifested more concretely. In the following years country evolved into an even stronger synonym for whiteness.

This study ends with the events of September 11, 2001—a transformative moment globally, and also for country music, when the business leaned in to jingoism with anthems like Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)." During this period, country music became not only *more* white, but more explicitly misogynistic, and a source of intense fear for LGBTQ+ artists, fans, and members of the business.[8] The industry's jingoism and misogyny came to a head on the eve of the Iraq War, when, during a concert in London, the lead singer of The Chicks (formerly known as the Dixie Chicks), Natalie Maines, told the crowd

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[7] Tom Roland, "Push is on to Recognize Blacks' Contribution to Country," *The Tennessean*, February 19, 1998, 1D.

[8] A recent study by sociologist Braden Leap looked at country music lyrics over the past few decades and traced increasing references to whiteness with lyrics mentioning things like blue eyes, sun-kissed skin, and blonde hair. The study likewise found a growing objectification of women. See Braden Leap, "A New Type of (White) Provider: Shifting Masculinities in Mainstream Country Music from the 1980s to the 2010s," *Rural Sociology*, Volume 85, Issue 1, March 2020, p. 165-189. Studies have also revealed a stark decline in gender representation on country radio, as the number of women on the country charts has starkly declined over the past two decades. See Jada E. Watson, "Gender Representation on Country Format Radio: A Study of Published Reports from 2000-2018," SongData in consultation with WOMAN Nashville, April 26, 2019. https://songdata.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/SongData-Watson-Country-Airplay-Study-FullReport-April2019.pdf

that they were “ashamed the president is from Texas,” their home state, because of the imminent war in Iraq. Despite the fact that the band was the at the peak of their commercial success, having become the best-selling country group at the time, the trio was swiftly shun from country radio, abruptly ending their careers at the time.

The banishment of The Chicks and the broader culture of the country music industry by the 9/11 era confirmed that country music—as defined by the business—was not only predicated on white supremacy, but patriarchy, heteronormativity, and jingoism. It became clear this was an industry not simply selling music or even music that was in demand (given The Chicks’ sold-out shows even after their removal from country radio), but selling and protecting its whiteness. By 2019, any lingering questions about what country music was in the business of selling were again confirmed when Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” rapidly dominated popular culture—and yet was quickly taken off the country music charts. These events confirmed over and again that country music was in the business of selling whiteness, and a type of music for white, conservative listeners who do not identify with youth or Black culture.

In approaching this project, a recurring question has been: How unique is country music’s racial exclusion, really? In many ways, the country music business has not been unique. From MTV, to political campaigns, to primetime television shows, and even hip hop, the interests have been the same: a white, middle-to-upper income audience or voting base is nearly always the most coveted demographic. What sets country music apart, however, is its level of exclusion. While today there are increasing claims that the country music charts are diversifying, studies have revealed that artists of color have still accounted for just 2.3% of country radio airplay over

the last two decades.[9] That this is viewed as an improvement from the past is a testament to just how severe country's racial exclusion has been.

What also sets country music apart is its endurance. It's existed as a marketing category for nearly a century, and in that period (and most especially during the timeframe this study addresses), it has not only maintained a healthy presence overall, but its business has steadily grown. Over the past century, no genre of music has enjoyed more sustained, mainstream commercial success than country music. While rock 'n' roll emerged on a national scale in the 1950s, its decline became evident by the 1970s. Though hip hop remains dominant today, it has only existed since the 1970s. Country music, all the while, has remained a steady, relevant, and often times a dominant presence in American culture. While genres like rock and hip hop have held a commanding presence in popular music, country music has provided a convenient alternative for those who do not identify with youth culture, which has often been a synonym for Black culture. As such, the country industry has long capitalized on a demographic that's remained stable: of white adults who find refuge in the myth of country's whiteness.

Given country's endurance, another key question is: what has been the driving appeal of country music? On the one hand, the answer may be simple: whiteness sells. In U.S. history, country's longterm success may only compare to the sustained presence of blackface in American culture, and one could argue country in many ways is an outgrowth of that uniquely American cultural product. At the same time, country's longterm popularity is also a testament to its broad appeal. Since its early days as a marketing category in the 1920s, it has held wide

[9] Jada E. Watson, "Redlining in Country Music: Representation in the Country Music Industry (2000-2020), Song Data. https://songdata.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SongData-Watson-Redlining-Country-Music-032021.pdf

interest, boasting fans across race, class, region, age, and gender lines. While the allure of whiteness can certainly appeal to any demographic, I remain hopeful that country's sustained resonance is also due to more inclusive factors. I am adamant that although country music the marketing category is by and large an invention of the music industry, there is still a type of country music that exists beyond this framework—one that relies on storytelling and universal themes that touch on life's best and worst moments. It is this hope that I hold onto while emphasizing country's inclusive and radical potential.

This work grew out of my love for country music. As a child I grew up hearing Mexican regional music, punk rock, and country music. My earliest musical memory is how my grandpa would sing "Hey Baby, Que Paso?" with me, a song by the Tex-Mex country music supergroup, The Texas Tornadoes. The band featured Freddy Fender, undoubtedly the biggest Mexican American name to ever come out of country music who is best known for his 1976 mega hit, "Before the Next Teardrop Falls," a song with verses that transition between English and Spanish, and one that reached number one on both the country music and pop charts. Fender continued to actively tour throughout the 1990s, and as a child my mom took me to see him each time he'd play our local county fair, assuring me one day I'd thank her for it.

By the time I began college my interest in country music grew into an obsession, and one that I was fiercely loyal to. It was a type of music I was quick to defend when its politics were questioned as antithetical to my own and even racist. In my first year of community college, one of my instructors, who frequently used popular music in his U.S. history courses, claimed "there is no such thing as liberal country music." I took it as a deep affront to my being. How could I love this music so much if it's politically antithetical to my own beliefs? In the many years since

this comment was casually stated in my class, I've spent much of my time pondering its validity. And now, given that I have a deeper understanding about how the music has been marketed, I still fluctuate on whether I agree with this statement or not.

By the time I transferred to UC Berkeley as an undergrad I began to write on country music for research papers. But as I increasingly immersed myself in country music historiography, I grew perplexed by the literature and the singular narrative within it. According to these sources, country music was a product of rural white Southerners, who, by the years surrounding World War II, moved to urban centers throughout the U.S., took their music with them and then passed country on to their descendants.[10] It was a narrative I certainly struggled to find myself in. The idea that country music only appealed to white people certainly didn't track with my own experience being Mexican American and growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area listening to an artist like George Strait side by side with someone like the Mexican superstar Joan Sebastian. And yet, this was the only way we were meant to understand the growth of the music over the past century.

The majority of country music scholarship has supported the implication that the music has only had white appeal.While this literature has remained adamant that a Black "influence" has always been present within country music, Black individuals have always remained on the periphery of country music's history. They have been framed as major sources of influence to key country music sounds or artists, but not as central players. Notable examples include Lesley

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[10] Beginning with Bill Malone's landmark 1968 study, *Country Music U.S.A.*, the literature on country music has largely maintained that the music's whiteness is implicit. See landmark studies such as Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.: a Fifty-Year History* (Austin: American Folklore Society, 1968); Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

Riddle, a Black man who played a crucial role in gathering songs recorded by the Carter Family, and Rufus "Tee Tot" Payne, the Black man who taught Hank Williams to play guitar. Missing from these conversations is the clear fact that it would have been systematically impossible for these Black men to be welcomed into the country music business on their own because of their race. And while the most recent wave of scholarship has questioned country's implicit whiteness, a fuller picture is needed to understand *how* it has been maintained in the popular imagination.[11] These studies have also presented country music along a racial binary—simply considering it a product of white and Black foundations—without considering the significant Latinx role that has likewise been present, in addition to key factors such as the indigenous presence and influence.[12]

This project began with a key question I wanted to better understand: While scholarship on the creation of the sonic color line provides a clear understanding on how race and sound became commodified and segregated in the era of Jim Crow, I wanted to better comprehend how, nearly a century later, that racial color line has been maintained.[13] For country music especially, the color line has been firmly upheld; the genre is almost universally understood as a synonym for whiteness. The thought of a Black country artist almost always comes as a surprise in public discourse, or in the very least is highlighted as atypical. And yet, country music was built from

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[11] Karl Hagstom Miller, *Segregating Sound:Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

[12] Kristina M. Jacobsen has completed important work on country music and indigenous communities. See Kristina M. Jacobsen, *The Sound of Navajo Country: Music, Language, and Diné Belonging* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

[13] Miller, *Segregating Sound*; Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); David Bracket, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

Black music and it has always had wide appeal. Why do we continue to think of country as white when it so fundamentally has never been?

I went into the archives looking for a smoking gun, expecting to find testimonies from many overtly racist white business men explicitly barring nonwhite people from the country music business. Surely these individuals did (and do) exist. But this wasn't the type of evidence I encountered. The truth is much more nebulous, of a lot of coded racism that has left a lot of people out in more covert ways—which is a much more insidious form of racism when thinking about the past half century because it's been much more effective than overt racism in maintaining the color line. This manifestation of racial exclusion also tracks alongside the shift from de jure to de facto racism that dominated U.S. life following the 1954 passage of *Brown vs. Board*—providing another testimony as to why the story of race and the country music industry in the final decades of the twentieth century is an effective lens through which to understand the evolution of race and racism during this period.[14]

When I started this work I never wanted it to be simply be a story about country music. In closing in on this dissertation, I am even more convinced it is about so much more. I believe country music represents a microcosm for understanding the most fundamental theme in U.S. history: about the struggle for a multiracial democracy. About a beautifully rich culture built on a multiplicity of people and places—but one where material benefits are only available to a select few and built on white supremacy. The disconnect between country music as art and country

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[14] For more on the evolution of race (particularly whiteness) and racism in the post *Brown vs Board* period, see: George Lipsitz: *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White, The Strange Journey From Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

music the commodified product is about the struggle for what could be versus what it's become through the lens of racial capitalism.[15]

This study largely takes a chronologic approach. My first chapter, "Redneck Chic: Race and the Country Music Business in the 1970s" gets to the heart of my main argument: touching on the paradox of country music's multiracial and multicultural appeal, but the fundamental lack of incentive for the business to tap into this potential. This period, more than any other, represented a clear opportunity for the country music business to capitalize on the growing presence of Black and Brown individuals in country music. Nowhere was this potential more clear than in New York City, where the city's first ever all-country radio station, WHN, became the first—and to my knowledge *only*— example of a high profile and influential sector of the business which took advantage of country's inclusive potential. WHN consciously marketed country across not only racial and ethnic lines, but also class, region (urban and suburban), and age. While WHN was not in Nashville of course, by the end of the 1970s, it boasted the largest country radio audience in the nation, making it a source of key interest in Nashville. Still, as I

[15] Given what I frame as the broad potential of country music, my work is inspired by scholarship demonstrating the Black radical tradition as discussed by Cedric Robinson. See works including but not limited to Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Charisse Burden-Stelly, "W.E.B. Du Bois in the Tradition of Radical Blackness: Radicalism, Repression, and Mutual Comradeship, 1930-1960." *Socialism and Democracy* 32, no. 3 (November 2018): 181-206; Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesmMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

explain, larger historical forces by 1980—most notably the election of Ronald Reagan—ultimately dissuaded the industry from deviating from country's white status quo.

Chapter 2, "Billy Sherrill's Imaginary 40-Year-Old Housewife": How White Women Became Country Music's Most Coveted Listeners and Compounded the Industry's Racism and Sexism, considers the role of gender in the industry's business practices. Beginning in the late 1960s, I argue that white middle class *women* consciously became the target audience for country music, a strategy that continues to dominate the business today. Prior to this period, audience gender preference was more nebulous. If anything, industry leaders might have prioritized framing men, and specifically heads of households, as the preferred vision of who the typical country music listener was.[16] With the growth of format radio throughout the 1960s, however, it became beneficial for the country music industry to explicitly define their core listeners as women. Given that this demographic, often seen as the primary purchasers in the home, was the most appealing group to advertisers who drive radio profits, it became a wise business decision for the country music business to consciously create music that appealed to white women. I argue that it was the record producer Billy Sherrill who had the power to consciously adopt this marketing strategy. Within the context of second-wave feminism, I show how Sherrill used an artist like Tammy Wynette and her career-defining song "Stand by Your Man" to brand her as the sound of antifeminism, which was then sold to conservative women.

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[16] Diane Pecknold discusses early marketing efforts in the 1960s by the Country Music Association where men were presented as the typical listener they wished to reach. See Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 135-152; Diane Pecknold, "Configurations of Masculinity in the Nashville Sound Era," in Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold, Eds, *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004), 105.

Chapter 3, Suburban Cowboy: Country Music, Punk, and the Struggle over Space in Orange Country, 1978-1981, is a case study for my larger argument. Here I show how white, middle-age suburbanites in Southern California represented not only the core demographic for the country music industry, but how this cultural conservatism played out in practice. In analyzing the violence that frequently broke out between country music fans and punk rockers, I argue these displays were not simply about musical differences, but about maintaining a white, heteronormative status quo in suburban Southern California—and one that the country music industry unquestionably aligned with promoting.

Chapter 4, The Rise and Fall of Urban Cowboy: The Country Music Industry's Marketing Practices in the Reagan Era, 1978-1988, documents an odd period of transition for the country music business. This was a period when it experienced the highest highs and lowest lows, but ultimately emerged more profitable then ever before. I show how it did so by defining itself as the family-friendly sound of Reagan era conservatism, antithetical to the moral panic that dominated popular music in the 1980s with the outbreak of a new youth culture defined by MTV and the source of scorn for groups like the Parents' Music Resource Group (PMRC)—members of whom actively preferred country music as a wholesome alternative in popular music.

Chapter 5, "The Industry is Playing the People Cheap": Race and the Failure to Diversify Country Music in the 1990s, touches on the disconnect between the narrative of country music in the popular press as the sound of mind-numbing suburban whiteness, versus the racial anxieties that I argue were also at the heart of the business during this period. These conflicting narratives also paralleled a broader rosy public narrative of a post-Cold War "End of History" era that, in the U.S., continued to be severely at odds with racial equity, as demonstrated by the racial

uprisings that erupted in 1992 following the brutal beating of Rodney King and murder of Latasha Harlins. But while the end of the nineties resulted in an era when the country music charts would only become *more* white, this timeframe is also presented as key evidence of country's inclusive potential. This is the first time in the history of country music history when Black artists organized a collective, as artists like Cleve Francis and Frankie Staton did when they formed the Black Country Music Association. Above all, this decade represents the stark paradox of country's radical potential as compared to the business's exclusionary marketing practices.

In my conclusion, I consider how, by the 1990s, the business behind country music brought it to a new level of respectability, one that epitomized mainstream whiteness. I review the racial double standards foundational to country music as defined by the business, and how by the turn of the century and beyond whiteness continued to define the genre above all else.

Chapter 1

"Redneck Chic": Race and the Country Music Industry's Targeted Audience in the 1970s

In 1970, Paul Hemphill claimed "country music is still the white man's world" in his popular book on country music, *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music*.[17] But despite common presumptions that country music was for whites only, reports from concerts and record sales throughout the 1970s suggested the genre's audience was much more diverse than Hemphill indicated. By 1977, descriptions from a concert by the Mexican American country music star Freddy Fender spoke to the exciting trends occurring in country music at the time. A reviewer described the crowd, saying it was "made up of Chicanos, Anglos, many blacks and other races," leading the writer to conclude: "Country Music's new spirit of ecumenism is a hit."[18]

During the first half of the 1970s, the country music audience visibly diversified beyond its typically presumed listeners–white and conservative– not only in terms of its cultural and political affiliations, but also with regard to its racial definitions. But despite the potential to target increasing numbers of nonwhite fans, the country music industry instead leaned in to the genre's associations with whiteness, and by 1980 and the election of Ronald Reagan, remained more committed than ever before to defining the music as Hemphill had, by branding country music as a product for a white, affluent, and predominantly conservative audience only.

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[17] Paul Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 162.

[18] Bettye L. Frye, "Tex-Mex Freddie [sic] Wows 'Em Again," *Country Music Fan Club*, Fall Journal, 1977, 33.

At the dawn of the 1970s, country music's popularity skyrocketed. In 1970, singer-songwriter Tom T. Hall described the music's ubiquity, saying, "Country music is the hula hoop of today. It is the big thing. It's all over the networks. It is in all the magazines, in all the commercials."[19] The country music boom occurred during a tumultuous period of transition for Americans. After decades of overall prosperity following World War II, the United States entered a new era defined by intense social, economic, and political uncertainty. Under the Nixon presidency, Americans remained divided over polarizing issues like the Vietnam War, second-wave feminism, affirmative action, and busing. Months after an oil embargo shocked the globe in late 1973, the U.S. economy was in recession, and political anxiety also abounded surrounding the Watergate scandal.[20] At a time of such unease, white, urban Americans with middle incomes found refuge in the Southern imaginary and the signifiers of white rusticity, most notably found in a celebration of the white male Southern figure, the "redneck," and his musical counterpart, country music. As the bicentennial lingered and Americans of all backgrounds showed interest in reclaiming ethnic identities, country music and the trend of "redneck chic" were celebrated as symbols of whiteness and invoked as mythic but accepted evidence of a purely white American heritage. The country music industry capitalized on these circumstances, and, after decades of persuading outsiders of country music's solidly middle-class status, paradoxically leaned in to the lowbrow whiteness of "redneck chic," and sold country music fans on the optics of white

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[19] Interview with Tom T. Hall, *Country Song Roundup Annual*, 1970, 17.

[20] Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012); Matthew Delmont, *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016).

rusticity. The industry's efforts to target a large white and affluent audience came at the expense of not only nonwhite listeners, but also actual Southerners and low income whites, who were harmed by the stereotypes and widespread appropriations perpetuated by "redneck chic."

The growing, mainstream interest in country music came after decades of derision directed at the music and its listeners. The genre was invented as a marketing category in the 1920s, when record executives sought out new markets for the increasingly accessible technology of recorded music. First called "hillbilly" or "old time" music, what is now collectively referred to as country music was consciously created for and marketed to white and rural Southerners.[21] Because of its racial and regional affiliations, the music became a frequent target of ridicule (and remains so to a certain extent), including one instance in 1926 when a front-page *Variety* article described the music's listeners as "illiterate and ignorant, with the intelligence of morons."[22] By the 1970s, however, the music's connections to rural whiteness increasingly evolved into a marketing *asset*. Though country's rusticity had always accounted for at least a portion of its appeal to some listeners, more and more, it became fashionable for growing numbers of Americans to embrace country music and the signifiers of rural fashion and culture.

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[21] For a thorough explanation of this process, see Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), and Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[22] No author, "Hill-Billy Music," *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 1. For more on the past and present class-based discriminations aimed at country music, see Jeffrey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me Hillbilly: Country's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), and Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2014).

Around the country, major news outlets reported on the music's rising appeal. In 1971 a *Look* magazine cover story read: "Hillbilly No More: Country Music Sweeps the U.S.A.," while a 1973 *Newsweek* cover reported on "The Country Music Craze."[23] The growing presence of country music on radio also spoke to the genre's growing appeal. By 1970, Americans enjoyed 750 full-time country music radio stations, up from just 81 in 1961.[24] Miraculously, the genre suddenly appeared free of the discriminations it had endured for decades. A 1970 study on the music concluded: "Much of the stigma associated with country music as its being back country or hillbilly music has been lost," and country music artist George Hamilton IV echoed this sentiment, saying: "'Country' had a bad connotation when I was a kid. It's a good word now."[25] A growing number of corporate sponsorships also spoke to country's rising appeal and acceptance. In the early seventies, Coca-Cola ran a successful marketing campaign featuring the Dottie West song, "Country Sunshine," while other high-profile advertisements brought together Johnny Cash as the voice of American Oil, and Tom T. Hall for Chevy trucks.

What was perplexing about country music's ascendance during this period was the fact that it corresponded with the rising social mobility and urbanization of the bulk of the country music audience. Far from generally being the poor and rural whites who had been the music's initial targets, most country listeners by the 1970s instead represented many of the financially stable white Americans who had most benefited from the post-World War II economy. "The

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[23] *Look*, Volume 35, Number 14, July 13, 1971; *Newsweek*, June 18, 1973.

[24] No author, "Country Radio Spells National Success Story," *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, 1971-72, 30.

[25] E. J. W. Mclntire, "Country Music: Its Character, Audience and Change," *The Country Music Foundation News Letter*, Volume 1, Number 2, April 1970, 11; Christopher S. Wren, "Country Music," *Look*, July 13, 1971, Volume 35, Number 14, 11.

typical country-and-western fan nowadays is not precisely the poor hayseed he used to be, but he is a lineal descendant," explained one article. "The children of the Depression have grown up to grab a fair share of the nation's affluence."[26] A poll conducted at the Grand Ole Opry concluded that among its audience, "Affluence was very much in evidence," and elsewhere research showed that "more country listeners are found in the high income bracket ($50,000 plus per year) than average radio listeners…[and] a greater percentage of country listeners own their own homes rather than rent."[27] By 1979, studies confirmed two thirds of country music listeners resided in urban and suburban areas and a similar amount earned either middle or high incomes. And though the music still stood as a symbol of the South, just a third of country music listeners lived in the region.[28]

The impressive socio-economic demographics of the country music audience was not coincidental. Since the 1950s especially, the country music industry had taken conscious efforts to broaden the music's appeal as much as possible to create the highest profit. This was accomplished by homing in on a white, adult audience–the primary beneficiaries of the nation's post-World War II affluence. This segment not only included formerly-rural migrants from the South and Midwest, but also new listeners without rural or Southern connections.[29] No force was more influential in legitimizing the success and acceptance of country music than the Country

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[26] Saul Braun, "Good Ole Boy," *Playboy*, November 1970, 140.

[27] No author, "Grand Ole Opry: More Country Fans Like Classical Than R&B," *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, October 20, 1973, 25; No author, "CMA Arbitron Study Now in Mail," *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XIX, No. 4, August 1977, 5.

[28] Maria Elizabeth Grabe, "Massification Revisited: Country Music and Demography," *Popular Music and Society*, 21: 4 (1997), 73-4.

[29] Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham and London: University of Duke University Press, 2007), 168.

Music Association. Formed in 1958, the CMA is a trade organization for members of the country music industry and was created "for the purpose of fostering, publicizing and promoting the growth of and interest in country music." As a large part of this venture, the CMA vowed to "promote Country Music in its entirety," and "ensure that Country Music retains its individuality."[30] By the 1970s, the industry's marketing efforts, in conjunction with larger historical forces, catapulted country music to wider popularity than ever before.

In no place was country music's popularity more surprising than in New York City. "The Country is in the city," reported one *New York* magazine article in 1973. "The ads proclaim it, but you don't even need the ads; just open your ears. Country & Western music resounds from every radio and hi-fi, packing audiences into the same halls where Toscanini once reigned, sweeping its cornball into the urban way of life."[31] The article appeared months after the city adopted its first ever all-country radio station, WHN, which gained the nation's largest country radio audience by the end of the decade. Local record stores also benefited from the station's success, as one record store manager noted, "Two years ago there was little demand for country records. Since WHN made its switch to country our sales have increased 75 percent and they're still climbing."[32] Around town, bars featured live country music. As one article reported: "There are now genuine country music clubs in New York–(O'Lunney's and Hilly's in Manhattan, Henry's in Brooklyn, and three or four others). What's more, they are usually crowded and–get *this*–they usually

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[30] Country Music Association, Inc. Membership Application. *Billboard*, November 17, 1962, 42.

[31] John Seelye, "The Sound of the Cornball Invasion," *New York* magazine, Vol. 6, No. 14, April 2, 1973, 3.

[32] Ellis Nassour, "Three Major Forces Causes Country Boom in New York," *Music City News*, Vol. XII, No. 4, October, 1974, 4-C.

feature *local* bands."[33] Outside of the city, membership in the Eastern States Country Music Inc. and the Long Island Country Music Association grew.

But, as the *Wall Street Journal* questioned: "Where does all of this love of rural music come from among people who have never lived in the country and whose fathers and mothers were born in Brooklyn?"[34] To a growing number at the time, country music's appeal in urban spaces didn't appear to make much sense. To some, the music's popularity even seemed threatening, the sign of a growing embrace of conservatism. *New York* magazine expressed such concern by asking: "What gives? Is this some kind of (ugh) *political* thing?"[35] Months later, an article by Richard Goldstein in *Mademoiselle* magazine went further, saying:

> "There is something astounding about this–seeing the same kid who dotes on underground comics and progressive politics, dressed in a cowboy shirt and scruffy boots, emerging as a hidden audience for country music. I suspect there is something far more sinister to the current embrace of country music by the least likely people, and even a touch of desperation to their imitation of Southern style, as though they were admitting something far more threatening than mere nostalgia, which is the simple fact that the politics of this nation has changed drastically in the past four years, and that as deliberate consequence of administrative power, the values of Southern, Caucasian, Protestant, suburban, adult Americans have assumed supremacy."[36]

As such concerns revealed, country music by the early 1970s did not only signify a type of music, but a type of politics as well. The link between country music and conservatism was not only made by the music's outsiders, but also by the country industry. Diane Pecknold has described this alliance between conservatism (and the Republican Party) and country music by

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[33] Patrick Carr, "Country in the City–New York Style," *Country Music* magazine, November 1973, 21.

[34] Benjamin Stein, "Forget the Beatles, Here's to Tom T. Hall," *Wall Street Journal*, December 24, 1973, 4.

[35] John Seelye, "The Sound of the Cornball Invasion," *New York* magazine, Vol. 6, No. 14, April 2, 1973, 32.

[36] Richard Goldstein, "My Country Music Problem–and Yours," *Mademoiselle*, June 1973, 114.

saying the music "did not so much shift to the right as the right shifted to country, consciously seeking to transform an established marketing demographic into a political one."[37] But while the Nixon White House had recognized the value in targeting the country music audience as its "Silent Majority," members of the country industry likewise found it appropriate to embrace conservative politics that pushed against the social movements of the 1960s. The genre's relationship with conservatism had become particularly pronounced since the 1964 presidential election, when several high profile country stars endorsed Republican nominee Barry Goldwater, including Eddy Arnold, Roy Acuff, Hank Snow, and Marty Robbins, who served as the senator's "Stars for Barry" chairman.[38] Alabama governor George Wallace also made multiple welcoming appearances on the Grand Ole Opry during this period. Popular songs like Merle Haggard's "The Fightin' Side of Me" provided further evidence of the industry's commitment to branding country music as the soundtrack of conservatism. Though Haggard had wanted to release "Irma Jackson," a song about interracial love, following the huge success of the notoriously conservative anthem "Okie From Muskogee" in 1969, his producer, Ken Nelson, instructed him to instead lean into the jingoism of "Okie," resulting in the release of "The Fightin' Side of Me."[39] By the early 1970s, though many country artists claimed to be apolitical, the industry's marketing practices had nevertheless branded the genre as a strong symbol of conservatism and

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[37] Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham and London: University of Duke University Press, 2007), 219.

[38] Barry Goldwater advertisement, *Music City News*, October 1964, 16.

[39] Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2014), 65.

antithetical to the progressive social movements of the period.[40] As popular artist Buck Owens explained in 1971, "Country music is seldom controversial. People are tired of 'crisis programming.'"[41] The same year, George Hamilton IV offered a similar statement, saying, "People are fed up with noise, with being preached to. They're longing for an escape."[42]

As these artists revealed, they identified their listeners as white, middle-class Americans who had become fed up with the social movements of the previous decade. This sentiment tapped into the discomfort many middle-class whites faced following the push for greater racial, gender, and sexual equality.[43] This summation was described by the general manager of a country radio station in Minneapolis who explained:

> "I'm tired of it. I refuse to go to a movie and be moralized to. I know black folks and poor people have it bad. I don't need to be told that. But I made my own way through school and worked my way up. And I don't want to be made to feel guilty for it. That's why I can't listen to rock anymore. I don't need the guilt of not being liberal enough, or the guilt of having a nice house and a nice car to drive."[44]

For a growing number of whites discomfited by the social movements of the 1960s, refuge was alternatively found in the Southern imaginary and the signifiers of white rusticity. In the post-World War II decades, the South had increasingly become associated with conservative politics that many Americans identified with regardless of their regional affiliation. In this

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[40] Despite the industry's preference for conservative politics, recent scholarship has addressed some of the progressive instincts among country artists during this period. See Hubbs and Stimeling in Mark Allen Jackson, ed., *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), and Daniel Geary, "'The Way I Would Feel About San Quentin': Johnny Cash and the Politics of Country Music," Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences 142, no. 4 (2013): 64–72.

[41] Buck Owens, "A View of Country Music," *Music City News*, Vol. IX, No. 4, October, 1971, 38-A.

[42] Christopher S. Wren, "Country Music", *Look*, July 13, 1971, Volume 35, Number 14, 13.

[43] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

[44] Steve Berg, "Rednecks Come of Age: It's Fashionable to be a Hick," *Star Tribune*, September 23, 1977.

understanding, the South was painted as entirely white and conservative.[45] And while the South had long stood as a symbol of whiteness despite a large African American population, this racial affiliation became even more pronounced throughout the 1970s.[46]

The growing embrace of an imagined white Southern identity and culture also came at a time when Americans were contemplating personal family roots, and when white Americans in particular expressed a large interest in reclaiming ethnic identities. Following the Civil Rights Movement, and the rising struggles for African American, Chicano American, and Native American inclusivity, white ethnics–including Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Greek Americans, among others–likewise sought to reclaim their heritage. This yearning was only further propelled in 1977, when the wildly popular television miniseries *Roots* premiered. For white, middle-class Americans without a discernible ethnic background, however, country music and the semblance of a purely white American heritage understood through the signifiers of white rusticity could fulfill a yearning for ethnic identity. One Columbia Records ad promoting country music made this link, saying: "nowadays is a time when the nation is looking long and hard for its roots. And what better place to find them than in the land."[47] In his cultural study of the hillbilly, Anthony Harkins has explained how middle-class whites could see the Southern rural figure "as a fascinating and exotic 'other' akin to Native Americans or Blacks, while at the same time

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[45] Grace Elizabeth Hale, Commentary and Response to James N. Gregory, "Southernizing the American Working Class," "A Note on Region, Race, and Vision," *Labor History*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 1998, 157.

[46] Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 170.

[47] Columbia Records advertisement, "Country Music for the Whole Country," *The Palm Beach Post*, June 7, 1970.

sympathize with them as poorer and less modern versions of themselves."[48] In an era of Civil Rights and welfare backlash, the semblance of a poor and rural past that the Southern imaginary conjured could also conveniently obscure the systemic privileges–including access to home ownership and higher education–that granted many whites social mobility in the years surrounding World War II, and could also ease the feelings of guilt many white Americans had felt following the tumultuous 1960s.

The Southern imaginary could further be viewed on the popular television show *Hee Haw*, which depicted the mythic Southern past of "Kornfield Kounty." The show's rural setting featured cornfields, rural-themed characters like farmers, heavily featured country music and its artists, and relied on crass, rural-themed humor. When the show first aired in 1969, however, it was not embraced by either the music industry or critics, who universally lambasted the show as idiotic, embarrassing entertainment. But as *Hee Haw* producer Sam Lovullo recalled, "There were so many negative articles about the show, people began tuning in to just see how bad we were," and to everyone's disbelief, the show became an instant success. Despite the show's impressive ratings, however, the show was cancelled by CBS leadership in 1971 during the station's "rural purge," which cancelled rural-themed shows in an effort to reboot the channel in search of what it believed to be a more sophisticated audience. Though the purge marked the end of *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres*, *Hee Haw* soon returned to American living rooms via syndication, quickly becoming the nation's top syndicated show in both ratings and audience

[48] Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

share.[49] Though the show was country-themed, it was popular among urban Americans. Lovullo explained that viewers were "surprised that they liked what they saw…Sure, we were cornball, but *hilarious* cornball, good ole-fashioned country music, much of which was brand-new and quite refreshing to the folks up in New York and out in Los Angeles, and other sophisticated cities across the nation."[50] As George Lindsey, a writer and performer on the show also explained: "It's strong in New York, It's strong in all the cities. It's not a hillbilly show. It is a rural show, but funny is funny."[51] One article described the widespread surprise at the show's urban audience, saying: "The mystery of *Hee Haw's* elusive appeal probably will never be solved. All we know is that it just goes to show ya that you can't take the country out of people– even them big city slickers are little farm boys at heart."[52]

By the early 1970s, however, it became increasingly clear that not all country listeners identified as the white, adult conservatives the Nashville industry had shown clear preference for. More and more, country music fans showed an interest in diversifying sounds, and cultural and racial multiplicity within country music. Since the 1950s and the introduction of rock and roll, Nashville had defined country music as the product of white, middle-class adults who did not identify with youth culture or multiracialism. Led in large part by the work of producers Chet Atkins and Owen Bradley, the Nashville Sound transformed country into music that appealed to middle-of-the-road pop listeners with its lush sounds, orchestral arrangements, and backup

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[49] Sam Lovullo and Marc Elliot, *Life in the Cornfield: My 25 Years at Hee Haw* (New York: Boulevard Books, 1996.), 38.

[50] Lovullo and Elliot, 19.

[51] Associated Press, "Hee Haw is a Big Laugh," *The Province*, August 12, 1977.

[52] No author, "Hee Haw Rides Again," *Country Western Album*, March 1971, 46.

singers.[53] But despite the music's commercial success, many musicians and fans increasingly found the music dull, constricting, and insincere to the country music genre. By the time the dominant forces in Nashville had successfully branded country music as a product of Richard Nixon's Silent Majority, artists like the "Outlaws" Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings began appealing to the very opposite demographic: the counterculture.[54] And meanwhile, a growing number of nonwhite listeners also emerged alongside greater numbers of commercially successful nonwhite country artists. Despite these two new avenues for audience growth, the country industry only showed an interest in capturing the predominantly young, white, and male listeners drawn to the countercultural sounds of Nelson and Jennings. And with the emergence of the "redneck chic" fad, the industry did so by paradoxically leaning in to the lowbrow whiteness it had previously fought so hard against.

After more than a decade of the CMA's efforts to convince outsiders of country music's respectable, solidly middle-class white Silent Majority status, a growing number of nonwhite listeners visibly showed interest in the genre. This was heavily driven by an unprecedented number of popular nonwhite artists. Far from representing a truly multiracial display, the 1970s nevertheless stands as a bright point of racial diversity in commercially successful country music artists' history. In 1966, Charley Pride became the first nonwhite country artist signed to a major record label, and his superstardom continued into the 1970s and beyond. Though no other black country artist has ever achieved success comparable to Pride, in the decade following his debut,

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[53] Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998).

[54] Travis D. Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jason Mellard, *Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).

black artists O.B. McClinton and Stoney Edwards also earned a string of small hits on the country charts. Mexican American artists Johnny Rodriguez and Freddy Fender also achieved success during this period, each having earned multiple number-one hits. And though far less visible, a handful of black women also attained some popularity in the country field, the most successful of whom was Linda Martell, but also included Ruby Falls, Barbara Cooper, Lenora Ross, and Virginia Kirby.[55] In 1975, Lenora Ross also became the first Black female country artist signed to a major label, RCA.[56] To some at the time, the presence of these artists suggested an evolution was occurring in country music, and that the genre was no longer defined by the whiteness it was founded upon. "Country entertainers are no longer required to be from the south, to have been raised in the country, to be white, or even to be familiar with the music's history," concluded one article in 1976. "All that's required is that they sell records. Freddy Fender is a case in point."[57]

The popularity of these artists highlighted the presence of nonwhite listeners and suggested country music's audience could expand beyond the purely white listeners the music industry had always imagined for the genre. Though market research on popular music from this period often failed to acknowledge race as a demographic characteristic, there is evidence to show that nonwhites represented more than an insignificant portion of country music listeners. One listener survey by radio station WDYL in Richmond, Virginia, for instance, showed that 40

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[55] Outside of the Nashville-based industry, several other nonwhite artists also recorded country albums during this time period, including Tina Turner, the Pointer Sisters, Bobby Womack, Joe Simon, and Ivory Joe Hunter.

[56] Lynn Harvey, "Lenora's Been 'Country' All Along," *The Tennesseean*, April 20, 1975, 8.

[57] Martha Hume, "What the Hell is Happening to Our Music?" *Country Music* magazine, February 1976, 30.

percent of the station's country music listeners were black.[58] Still, reports on the performances of nonwhite artists provide the most common and concrete evidence of racially diverse country listeners. In 1971, Charley Pride noted changes in his fanbase, saying, "I see more and more black faces in my audiences, especially in the last few years."[59] Johnny Rodriguez noted, "I've known for a long time since I was growing up that Mexican-American people loved country music, but they didn't have anyone to identify with."[60] Freddy Fender likewise viewed his race as a selling point, saying: "The Chicano population of the United States is large, and I hope to be able to capitalize on that."[61] Reports from Fender's concerts indeed revealed a multiracial audience. "Back in Texas," reported one magazine in 1975, "he's a local legend to the cult of long-haired hippies, redneck cowboys and Chicano rockers who frequent the smoky little honky tonks where he was playing not more than six months ago."[62]

New York City's popular all-country radio station, WHN–which earned the largest country radio audience in the U.S. by the end of the decade–capitalized on the potential to broaden country's listenership by making conscious appeals to both Latino and African American listeners. The station positioned itself as welcoming to nonwhites by posting subway ads with nonwhite artists like Charley Pride, and by featuring ads in Spanish. The station's program director, Ed Salamon, commented on the rarity of this strategy, saying "this was probably the

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[58] Arnold Shaw, "Country Music and the Negro," *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, Section 2–October 28, 1967, 82.

[59] Kenny Meyers, "Charlie [sic] Pride: An American with the Courage of His Convictions," *Music City News*, Vol. IX, No. 4, October, 1971, 21-A.

[60] Lee Rector, "Johnny Rodriguez is Country's Gift to Acting," *Music City News*, Vol. XII, No. 12, June 1975, 28-B.

[61] Jack Hurst, "Freddy Fender Today: Career is Getting Hot (and it's High time)," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 16, 1975.

[62] J.R. Young, "Freddy Fender El Bebop Kid," *Country Music* magazine, August 1975, 61.

first time any country station advertised in Spanish."[63] WHN also made a conscious effort to take calls from listeners with a variety of ethnic accents on air. The decision to target nonwhite listeners was touted by Salamon, who noted that country music "has true mass appeal. You'll hear it in suburbia, in the kitchens of Chinese restaurants, in Puerto Rican markets or on the radios of black cab drivers. If you didn't, we could have never made it in New York."[64] One of the station's popular disk jockeys, Jessie Scott, has echoed this description of the station's listeners, saying they "would be Stanford attorneys, they would be Bed Stuy black kids, they would be New Jersey housewives…They defied stereotyping."[65] The radio station's ability to appeal to nonwhites was met with surprise but was nevertheless acknowledged by one article in 1976 which marveled:"[is] country in New York appealing across class, race, creed or whatever lines? Seems so…WHN has not only succeeded in New York, but has also managed to cater to the musical vacuum of the inner city…almost as well as it has (naturally enough) penetrated the suburbs and the white working class fringes."[66] But though WHN found success in marketing country to nonwhites, Ed Salamon has recalled that he "did not notice any other country stations that specifically reached out to black and Hispanic listeners."[67]

Salamon's recollections are supported by Ed Benson, former Country Music Association Executive Director, and a high-ranking member of the association since the late 1970s. According to Benson, there was knowledge within Nashville about country's multiracial

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[63] Ed Salamon, *WHN: When New York City Went Country* (Los Angeles: Archer Books, 2013), 43.

[64] Lawerence C. Levy, "Nashville's Bite of the Big Apple," *New York Times*. July 4, 1976.

[65] Jessie Scott interview by Martinez, June 25, 2019.

[66] Patrick Carr, "New York's WHN: The Real Story," *Country Music* magazine, May 1976, 18.

[67] Salamon, 44-45.

listeners. Regarding this sector of the audience, he recalls: "It has been discussed as long as I can remember. When I started in '79, there was discussion about the African American audience, there was discussion about the growing Hispanic population in America," but also adds that he does not remember "that there was ever a targeted campaign."[68] Elsewhere, lack of racial data in market research led to presumptions that country music appealed to whites only. A number of studies on the country music audience during this period by sociologist Richard A. Peterson highlight this omission and conclusion about the racial makeup of country listeners.While Peterson could rely on solid evidence regarding things like the regional, class, educational, and age characteristics of these listeners, he acknowledged that race was a neglected factor in market research. This suggests that the Nashville-based industry, along with the wider public, failed to adequately consider nonwhites as a potential demographic. "All observers agree that the country music audience is almost exclusively white," concluded one study by Peterson, while another acknowledged that a "survey has no data on the race of listeners but all observers agree that country music's audience is almost exclusively white."[69]

In some instances, producers even viewed non-whiteness as a selling point. In the case of Mexican American stars Johnny Rodriguez and Freddy Fender, the two were encouraged by record companies to sing in both English and Spanish. Recalling the story of how he was first signed to a record label, Rodriguez stated: "I sang a couple of songs for [producer Roy Dea] and the 'I Can't Stop Loving You,' half in English and Spanish. Right in the middle of the song Dea

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[68] Ed Benson interview by Martinez, June 4, 2019.

[69] Richard A. Peterson and Paul DiMaggio, "From Region to Class, the Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis".Social Forces, Vol. 53, No. 3(Mar. 1975): 503; Paul DiMaggio, Richard A. Peterson, and Jack Esco, Jr, "Country Music: Ballad of The Silent Majority" in *The Sounds of Social Change: Studies in Popular Culture*, edited by Serge Denison and Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), 49.

stopped me and said, 'I'll sign you!'"[70] Singing in both languages proved particularly beneficial for Fender, as he had a string of big hits featuring a blend of his English and Spanish singing. This included the huge hit, "Before the Next Teardrop Falls," which reached number one on both the country and pop charts. In another instance, after Fender's Mexican American accent came through in a song recording, rather than being forced to rerecord it, his record company instead viewed his voice as a benefit. As Fender explained: "what I sing is English in the way I learned it as a Chicano. I still make a lot of mistakes in my pronunciation. In 'Roses are Red' there is a spot where instead of saying, 'Is that your little girl?' I say, 'Ees that your leetle girl?' But the record company is very satisfied with that. They say it serves to identify me more with what I really am."[71]

But while Mexican American artists' non-whiteness was at times viewed as a selling point for record companies, the same could rarely be said for the period's black artists. Following his great success, Pride recalled the suspicion he faced in the early stages of his career, saying: "I'm sure at the beginning of my career people, black and white, were wondering, 'What's he trying to prove?'"[72] The singer also faced the obstacle of an industry unsure of how to market his talent, and to whom, believing country's white audience wouldn't buy music by a black artist. Pride's manager, Jack Johnson, explained: "When Charley signed with me, a lot of people in Nashville laughed. They thought I was crazy, and maybe I was. They asked, 'Who's he gonna

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[70] Lee Rector, "Johnny Rodriguez is Country's Gift to Acting," *Music City News*, Vol. XII, No. 12, June, 1975, 28-B.

[71] Lee Rector, "A 20 Year Struggle Made Freddie [sic] Fender No. 1," *Music City News*, Vol. XII, No. 12, June, 1975, 14-B.

[72] Kenny Meyers, "Charlie [sic] Pride: An American with the Courage of His Convictions," *Music City News*, Vol. IX, No. 4, October, 1971, 21-A.

sell records to?'"[73] Following the massive popularity of Charley Pride, however, black artists were only viewed with increasing suspicion. O.B. McClinton went so far as to say, "I don't seek [Pride] out, because I have been afraid that he might think that I am using him to get my career zooming."[74] Meanwhile, Stoney Edwards also faced intense suspicion. The singer attempted to defend himself by saying, "I've had black people ask me why I 'want to sing that redneck music!' I say, 'I sing because I like it.'"[75] One article summarized the intense scrutiny black country artists faced at the time, saying: "Now we are witnessing another revival…which could be termed 'sign up the black country singer.' With the phenomenal success of Charley Pride, it's a game everyone seems to be playing. And predictably, the tag from many already-weary observers is–with appropriate sarcasm–'Oh boy, another black country singer. Isn't one Charley Pride enough?'"[76]

Despite a handful of instances where non-whiteness proved a successful marketing strategy for country music, however, the feelings of suspicion black artists in particular experienced was a reflection of the overall lack of welcoming nonwhite artists felt by the music industry. By the 1980s, Charley Pride was the only nonwhite artist who continued to find success as a country music artist. Interpretations about Pride's success have raised questions about his role in country music's racial definitions. To some, the singer has been held up as evidence that the genre is not racist. But to others, this interpretation is far too charitable to a type of music that

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[73] Ellis Nassour, "Charley Pride Remains a Country Music Favorite," *Music City News*, Vol. XIII, No. 10, April, 1976, 17.

[74] LaWayne Satterfield, "O.B. Doesn't Mind Being 'The Other One,'" *Music City News*, Vol. XI, No.4, October, 1973, 3-C.

[75] John Pugh, "Stoney Edwards: 'I Sing It Because I like It," *Music City News*, Vol. X, No. 4, October, 1972, 31-A.

[76] Pugh, 31-A.

has had no other long term nonwhite country star. By the 1980s, O.B. McClinton summarized his feelings on the singer's role in country by saying: "Many people…looked on Charley Pride as an accident."[77]

On the subject of the country music audience, however, it is clear that the industry–over the course of the past half century–has never shown a meaningful interest in expanding its listeners beyond an affluent white base. At no point in time was this more evident than during the 1970s, when the greatest potential to broaden the audience's racial makeup existed. Though WHN found success in marketing country to music to nonwhites, the station's program director, Ed Salamon has recalled, "I did not notice any other country stations that specifically reached out to black and Hispanic listeners."[78] The lack of interest the country music industry on the whole, and the Country Music Association in particular, showed in targeting a nonwhite audience during this period revealed a deep investment the industry had in maintaining perceptions that the genre was for whites only, and a belief that straying from the music's position in the Southern imaginary could ostracize middle-class white listeners. As one self-identified country music listener and redneck explained: "a redneck will listen to Willie Nelson, but he would rather listen to Hank Williams…As for listening to 'anything that comes over the country music station,' let 'em play a Freddy Fender record and see how long he listens to it."[79] An investment in whiteness was further proven by the fact that, rather than seek to expand its audience by appealing to a nonwhite audience within the United States, the Country Music Association's leadership instead

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[77] Quoted in Charles L. Hughes, "Country Music and the Recording Industry," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 216.

[78] Ed Salamon, *WHN: When New York City Went Country* (Los Angeles: Archer Books, 2013), 44-45.

[79] Steve Mitchell, "It Takes a Redneck to Know One," *The Palm Beach Post*, August 19, 1976.

showed a greater interest in seeking out non-American markets in primarily white countries like England and Australia.[80]

What was most peculiar about the mainstream industry's failure to seriously consider nonwhites as a potential demographic was that it occurred despite a proven potential to sell records by nonwhite country artists, and the visibility of nonwhite listeners at country performances. In spite of these successes, nonwhite artists generally understood their popularity as accidental and not sanctioned by an industry that continued to define country music as a product for whites only. While country's biggest nonwhite star, Charley Pride, often claimed to be unaffected by his race–saying: "I'm an individualist in the way I think about people, and I look at people as individuals. To me, I'm just an American with a tan"–others had a different view.[81] According to Fender, the success of his biggest hit, "Before the Next Teardrop Falls," came as a surprise, as he later recalled: "I think that before [the industry] knew what was going on, my song was number one, it was too late. I don't think they had a choice on whether they should accept me into their society or not…most of them didn't think that I was a Hispanic, they didn't know."[82] Fender's interpretation that his song's success was accidental was mirrored by O.B. McClinton's understanding of how the genre's most popular black star achieved success. Along with Stoney Edwards, McClinton was one of the few additional black artists to find success on the country charts following Charley Pride. Unlike Pride, McClinton was hyperconscious of his race, openly discussing it in several interviews and particularly in his

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[80] Frances Preston, "Your President Speaks," *CMA Close-Up*, Vol. XV No. 7, November 1973, 6.

[81] No author, "The Pride of Country Music," *Country Music Reporter*, January 1975, 17.

[82] "Interview with Augie Meyers and Freddy Fender," NPR's *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*, September 28, 1990.

recordings, including songs like "Black Speck," and "Country Music, That's My Thing." By the 1980s, McClinton summarized his feelings on Charley Pride's role in country by saying: "Many people…looked on Charley Pride as an accident."[83]

While the Nashville-based country music industry failed to adequately consider a nonwhite demographic, it instead remained fixated on enlarging the white and middle-income audience it had focused on for more than a decade. With the massive success of artists like the "Outlaws," Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, who released country music's first platinum album, *Wanted! The Outlaws*, in 1976, the country industry came to eagerly welcome the generally white, male, and younger urban demographic this new subgenre attracted. An outgrowth of the the "Progressive" country scene in Austin, Texas, this new brand of music was closely associated with a growing fad of the period, "redneck chic." By the mid-1970s, Americans not only expressed a growing interest in country music, but in acting and dressing the part of the stereotypical Southern white figure of the redneck. While this affinity began as admiration, by the time of the bicentennial, it evolved into widespread appropriations of a redneck identity.

Though long a term of derision, by the 1970s, "redneck" increasingly became a badge of honor.[84] This figure, like the cowboy out west, was white, male, agrarian, and, during a period when the nation's bicentennial celebration lingered, played into mythologies about the origins of the United States and self-reliant, bootstrapping capitalism. The redneck, often conflated with similar terms like "hillbilly," was championed by both Southerners and non-Southerners, and by

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[83] Quoted in Charles L. Hughes, "Country Music and the Recording Industry," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 216.

[84] Patrick Huber, "A Short History of 'Redneck': The Fashioning of a Southern White Masculine Identity," *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Winter 1995), 161.

the 1970s was associated with hard work and self-reliance. In 1973, George Wallace described his affinity for the white male Southerner, telling a reporter:

> "I don't know whether you use the term 'hillbilly any more. But I still use it. We still use it down here and we think it's all right. We think a hillbilly is a fella that don't mind doing an honest day's work in the sun. Sometimes they call us rednecks; we have a lot of rednecks in Alabama. Well, people don't mind getting their necks red by doin' an honest day's work. They're working people and they're proud of it."[85]

As the nation contemplated its beginnings during the bicentennial celebration of 1976, widespread understandings of the redneck like Wallace's (along with his implication that the redneck's hard-working nature was unique) fed into white boosterism and aligned the figure with Jeffersonian understandings of the American past. This interpretation promoted the idea that the United States was built solely on the efforts of white male farmers–which, historically speaking, most directly obscured the role of slavery in the American South. The bicentennial's white overtones were further indicated by the fact that nonwhite Americans often found less to celebrate. The *New York Times* reported on a "consensus among blacks that the 200th birthday of the United States was more of a dramatic event that pointed up continuing racial inequities of the nation than a cause to celebrate."[86]

The presidential election of Jimmy Carter, a peanut farmer from Georgia, in 1976–during the nation's bicentennial celebration–further propelled the celebration of the redneck. Though Carter himself wasn't championed as a redneck, his brother, Billy Carter, who described himself as "the token redneck on the campaign," fit the bill better than anyone.[87] As one newspaper

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[85] Peter McCabe, "The Wallaces Are Keeping Country Music in the Family," *Country Music* magazine, October 1973, 36-37.

[86] Thomas A. Johnson, "Few Blacks Inspired by Bicentennial," *New York Times*, July 8, 1976.

[87] Jeremy Rifkin and Ted Howard, *Redneck Power: The Wit and Wisdom of Billy Carter* (Toronto, New York, and London: Bantam Books, 1977), n.p.

reported: “It is easy to pinpoint when [redneck chic] changed from a cult to a full-fledged fad… Jimmy Carter is the culprit. He got elected president and accidentally transformed his baby brother Billy into a national celebrity–a beer-sloshing personification of the good ol’ boy, a national symbol of redneck chic.”[88] Shortly after Carter was elected president, one of Nashville's top talent agencies, Top Billing (whose clients had included Dolly Parton, Porter Wagoner, and Tom T. Hall), aggressively pursued Billy Carter and took him on as a client. Over the next few years, the president’s brother was marketed as the ultimate Southern stereotype that groups like the Country Music Association had previously fought so hard against. Through hundreds of television appearances (including on the popular country-themed show *Hee Haw*), visits to the Grand Ole Opry, and his very own brand of alcohol, Billy Beer, Billy Carter was touted and sold as a beer-drinking, bigoted, white Southerner. Reports indicated Carter was indeed a complicated figure. While he was said to be a voracious reader, and Lilian Carter claimed he was her smartest child, his heavy drinking sent him into rehab in 1979, and he was also charged with making anti-Semitic comments.[89] Following his decline, however, his agent, Tandy Rice, faced criticism for his overexposure of the president’s brother as a Southern caricature. “After all,” reasoned one article, “it was Tandy who led Billy down a trail of empty beer cans, booking him into events like ‘Hee Haw,’ ‘Anything Goes,’ and assorted shows like the World Championship Bellyflop and Cannonball Contest.”[90]

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[88] No author, “‘Hick Chic’ Has Arrived on the Scene,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, October 30, 1977.

[89] Robert D. Hershey Jr., “Billy Carter Dies of Cancer at 51; Troubled Brother of a President,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1988.

[90] Bob Allen, “Tandy Rice: Mr. Showmanship,” *Nashville!*, November 1980, n.p.

But the exploitation and outright appropriation of redneck stereotypes went far beyond Carter. Americans throughout the country joined in on the trend. "Now, of course, it is fashionable to play at being a redneck," noted writer Paul Hemphill in 1976. "Everybody is dressing like a double-knit cowboy, including the stars of the Grand Ole Opry, and business has never been better for Levi Strauss."[91] Elsewhere a report stated: "Rednecks. If you are one of the tribe, enjoy it. If you aren't, fake it."[92] High fashion even participated in the fad, as reports stated: "Lord & Taylor said it can't keep enough blue bib overalls on hand to meet the demand. 'We call them 'Georgia Tuxedoes,' said a salesman."[93] Several hit songs of the period also saluted the redneck, including Johnny Russell's "Rednecks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Beer," Vernon Oxford's "Redneck! (The Redneck National Anthem)," and Jerry Reed's "I'm Just a Redneck in a Rock and Roll Bar." In 1977, an entire book, *Redneck*, was published on the craze, stating: "Redneck chic has arrived…City slickers from north, south, east and west are climbing on the buckboard. From New York City to Los Angeles, and from Minneapolis to Miami, it's chic to be hick."[94] But not everyone found reasons to celebrate the trend. As one critic noted, *Redneck* had "produced, in overstated slang, a demeaning collection of stereotypes."[95]

No where was the embrace of redneck chic more common than in Austin, where images of the fad dominated the city's progressive country scene. Fans of this music were predominantly

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[91] Paul Hemphill, "Redneck Chic," *The San Francisco Examiner*, October 7, 1976.

[92] Kenneth F. Englade, "Hippies Out and Rednecks In," *Democrat and Chronicle*, September 4, 1976.

[93] Henry Hanson, "Redneck Chic, a Newfangled Phenomenon," *The Miami News*, August 25, 1976, 7A.

[94] Bill AuCoin, *Redneck* (Greatlakes Living Press, 1977), 1, 3.

[95] No author, "'Hick Chic' Has Arrived on the Scene," *The Orlando Sentinel*, October 30, 1977, 86.

white, middle-income, young, male, and drawn to the music's optics of white rusticity. The cartoonist Ace Reid capitalized on this trend by selling "redneck" cowboy hats and shirts, which came already equipped with sweat stains. Reid explained that he got the idea after seeing a group of young men deliberately distress a hat before wearing it, saying: "they paid about $35 for a hat called The Dude…They took it outside, beat the devil out of it, rubbed it in the ground and decided it was dirty enough to wear with their $40 faded Levis…I don't know where they get money."[96] By the mid-1970s, the popularity of the progressive country scene in Austin, and particularly the success of Willie Nelson's 1975 album *Red Headed Stranger*, convinced the mainstream country industry it was also time to capitalize on the trend. What resulted was the 1976 album, *Wanted! The Outlaws*, the concept of which was largely the vision of producer Jerry Bradley (the son of Nashville Sound producer Owen Bradley), and became the first country album to sell one million copies.

Despite allusions to leftist, progressive or outlaw politics, however, the marketing of the music produced by artists like Nelson and Jennings nevertheless fell into unabashed commercialism and the conservative tropes of patriarchy and white exclusivity.[97] With the exception of Jessi Colter (Waylon Jennings's wife), Outlaw country was male-dominated and celebrated histories of American conquest, as the *Wanted! The Outlaws* album cover, a bullet-ridden wanted poster, along with songs like "My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys," conjured images of the American West. Furthermore, though these musicians had initially faced resistance from the Nashville industry, their success was ultimately sanctioned and made possible by the

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[96] Nat Henderson, "If You've No Time to Look Cruddy, No Sweat; 'Cowpoke' Can Help," *Austin American-Statesman*, March 6, 1976.

[97] Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 162; Stimeling, 26; Mellard, 114-124.

very same industry, even prior to the release of the popular Outlaw album. As one country listener noted in 1976: "had record companies such as Liberty Records and RCA not been willing to take a chance on a country songwriter, and release that product at the label's expense, Willie Nelson would never have succeeded in creating the so-called Austin Sound. So in effect, Willie succeeded in beating the system only by first joining it."[98]

By the end of the 1970s, the redneck chic fad had evolved into another craze celebrating a mythic white and rustic figure: Urban Cowboy. As Americans traded in their sweat-stained shirts for glitzy cowboy hats and boots, Ronald Reagan–a cowboy of the silver screen–was elected president in 1980. Despite growing racial diversity in country music throughout the 1970s, the genre had emerged an even stronger symbol of whiteness by the end of the decade. In the following years, the country music industry grew to very explicitly define its music as the product of whites only. In 1986, *Billboard* reported on a study conducted by the Country Music Association and noted that, to qualify for the study, "subjects had to be white and have purchased a record within the past three months." The magazine expressed surprise at this strategy and commented, "White? It's a well-known fact that blacks also frequent malls and record stores. Why did the survey exclude them?" According to those conducting the research, "'It's known that the predominant country market is white people, and we wanted to get the greatest utility out of the study.'"[99] The following year, Country Music Association executive director Ed Benson discussed a survey aimed at potential markets, and specifically acknowledged that "blacks are not considered a potential market."[100]

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[98] John B. Henderson, "Letters," *Country Music* magazine, April 1976, 4.

[99] Gerry Wood, "Nashville Scene," *Billboard*, August 23, 1986, 34.

[100] United Press International, "Country Music's Market," *Newsday*, April 12, 1987.

For nearly a century, continuous effort by the music industry has been required to maintain the perception that country music is a genre performed exclusively by and for whites.[101] Though recent country music scholarship has complicated these racial affiliations, shedding light on the multiracial musicians and influences that have always been present in the production of country music, an analysis of the marketing practices and efforts of the country music industry can offer understandings of how the genre's supposed whiteness has been perpetuated.[102] At perhaps no point in time did this require effort greater than in the 1970s, when growing numbers of commercially successful nonwhite artists emerged alongside a nonwhite audience for country music, and when the Nashville industry capitalized on the trend of "redneck chic" and emboldened its efforts to consciously brand its music as that of middle-income whiteness exclusively.

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[101] Geoff Mann, "Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Volume 31(2008): 83; George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Benefit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

[102] For more on the constant multiracialism in the production of country music, see Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013); Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Mark Allen Jackson, ed., *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018).

Chapter 2

"Billy Sherrill's Imaginary 40-Year-Old Housewife": How White Women Became Country Music's Most Coveted Listeners and Compounded the Industry's Racism and Sexism

In 1975, *The Cincinnati Enquirer* reported on a local country singer, a woman named Lenora Ross. The piece highlighted the glaring omission of a Black woman star in country music at a time when Charley Pride had become one of the biggest names in the genre. "So far no black female country artist has followed in Pride's lead," noted the article, adding; "But this does not mean no one is trying. The strongest challenge to the Tammy Wynette-Lynn Anderson-types may come from Lenora Ross."[103] The writer had reason to be hopeful about the singer's future: A month earlier, she signed a record contract with RCA Nashville.[104] While six years prior Linda Martell became the first Black woman to receive a country record deal when she signed with Plantation Records in 1969, Ross became the first in her role to sign with a major label.[105] Given her positionality in country, and given broader movements pushing for gender and racial equality at the time, the singer could not escape inevitable questions about whether she identified as anything more than a musician. Coverage was quick to note her ambivalence to things like Second Wave Feminism and the broader struggle for racial equality. "Lenora realized that she may be occupying a rather historic place as a black woman in country music, but she doesn't

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[103] Cliff Radel, "Cumminsville Miss Rising Country Music Vocalist," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, February 16, 1975, 2-F.

[104] No author, "Inside Track," *Billboard*, January 18, 1975, 82.

[105] There is little doubt the label's owner, Shelby Singleton, notorious for selling controversy, consciously aligned Martell, a Black woman, with Plantation. For more, see "Diane Pecknold, "Negotiating Gender, Race, and Class in Post-Civil Rights Country Music: How Linda Martell and Jeannie C. Riley Stormed the Plantation," in *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2016), 146-165; Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 144.

think of herself as involved in a struggle for black and female equality," noted one article. It continued, quoting the singer as saying: "I'm not against movements, but there are so many more important things to think about," adding, 'The *human* race is more important."[106]

Ross's stated preference for colorblindness was not only a product of common understandings downplaying the role of race and racism by the early-to-mid 1970s, but it was also a borrowed strategic response from the most celebrated Black country artist at the time, Charley Pride. Since Pride became the first Black country musician signed to a major country label (also signed to RCA) in 1965, the singer carried the burden of having to ease anxieties of white fans by downplaying his race. "I try to avoid controversy so that my songs can reach the widest possible audience," Pride told *Essence* in 1977. "I feel that in my unique position if I did certain songs, their lyrics would take on different meaning. My songs are safe. That's my image, the one that works best for me."[107] Publicity on Ross indicated she was instructed to follow the playbook of the only longterm Black star in country music, going out of her way to ensure white country fans that she did not identify with progressive movements. But unlike Pride, Ross faced an additional hurdle: she was a woman in an industry dominated by male artists, where even white women were overwhelmingly outnumbered by male counterparts.

Despite a hopeful start, Ross appears to have only released one single, a cover of Bill Anderson's "Lonely Together," before RCA dropped her record deal. A year earlier, the Combahee River Collective, a Black radical feminist organization, formed in 1974 and began compiling a statement (released in 1977) illustrating how Black women endured magnified levels

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[106] Lynn Harvey, "Lenora's Been 'Country' All Along," *The Tennesseean*, April 20, 1975, 8.

[107] Dave Frechette, "Country Music: Back to Black," *Essence*, September 1977, 153.

of inequality and oppression due to intersecting positions as being both Black and women.[108] The experience of Ross, Martell, and other Black women who failed to gain acceptance in country music revealed their role as among the most marginalized artists in country music and highlighted the impact that not only race, but gender played in ostracizing anyone but white and overwhelmingly male artists in the genre.

As Ross's career in Nashville ended, evolutions in country music marketing worked to instill issues of racism and sexism, a reality made clear by the fact that only a handful of Black women gained singles on the country charts in the decades following Ross's career.[109] Throughout the 1970s, the country music industry came to consciously and increasingly prioritize creating country music for conservative white *women*, specifically—leading to an even higher reliance on attractive white male singers by the 1980s, whom the industry identified as most preferable to the female listeners they targeted. While the business had always envisioned country listeners as exclusively white, gender preference was less established prior to the late 1960s. By the 1970s, evolutions in format radio and broader struggles for and against women's rights helped shift perceptions that conservative white women should be the most coveted consumers when it came to marketing country music.

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[108] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

[109] Following Martell and Ross, only a handful of Black women earned charting-singles on the country charts, including: Ruby Falls, Dona Mason, Nisha Jackson, Rissi Palmer, and Mickey Guyton. In 1974, The Pointer Sisters, though not signed to a country label in Nashville, also had a charting country single with their Grammy-winning song "Fairytale." As of 2022, Martell's 1969 single "Color Him Father," which peaked at #22 on the country charts, continues to rank as the highest-charting country single by a Black woman. And though Martell and Ross gained visible record deals in Nashville, they were far from the only Black women trying to make careers as country artists, including Virginia Kirby and Barbara Cooper.

But while women country artists had been outnumbered by male acts from the start, by the first half of the 1970s, hope existed that the business was becoming more hospitable to women. During this period, in the years parallel to the height of the Second Wave Feminism and larger gains in women's rights, women gained new levels of commercial success, leading to belief that opportunities would continue to blossom for female artists. In 1974, one article reported on the growing presence of women in country music, explaining: "Women had a hard time getting anywhere in the business for a long time, and it wasn't milk and honey by any means. Now, it seems, things are a bit easier."[110] But like the women's rights movement that gained increased traction throughout the 1970s, only to face a more influential antifeminist movement by the end of the decade, country music, too, grew less hospitable to women artists by the time Ronald Reagan was elected president and lead a Republican party consciously defined by family values and antifeminism. The result, by the 1980s, was an industry even more firmly predicated on whiteness and male dominance.

Though the country business relied even more upon male artists by the 1980s to secure female listenership, this targeted campaign curiously did not begin with a male artist. Following the large success of Tammy Wynette's 1968 number-one hit "Stand By Your Man," her producer, Billy Sherrill, worked consciously to capitalize on feminist backlash to the song, and to position country as the voice of white conservative womanhood. No one was more instrumental in framing country music as a product for women than Billy Sherrill, who by the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s was one of the most influential figures in Nashville. During his most successful period, many country music listeners may not have heard of Billy Sherrill, but most

[110] Carol Offen, "The Big Speakout: Lil Darlin Know the Score." *Country Music* magazine, July 1974, 37.

knew the songs he wrote and recorded. The producer was responsible for recording many of the most well-known country songs of all-time, including George Jones's "He Stopped Loving Her Today," Tanya Tucker's "Delta Dawn," Johnny Paycheck's "Take This Job and Shove It," Charlie Rich's "Behind Closed Doors," and, most crucially, Wynette's "Stand by Your Man." Sherrill was so highly regarded that throughout the 1970s, *Billboard* routinely ran an ad which simply stated: "Four of the biggest words in the recording industry: Produced by Billy Sherrill."[111]

Sherrill's marketing preferences helped cement dominating perceptions within the music industry of who the country music listener was and continued to be. In the words of one article, that was "Billy Sherrill's Imaginary 40-year-old Housewife."[112] During his most successful and influential years as a producer, from the late 1960s and well into the 1970s, Sherrill worked consciously to define country music as the voice of white conservative womanhood. As the antifeminist movement gained momentum throughout the 1970s, and as tensions surrounding gender and the family ran high, Sherrill and the broader country music industry capitalized on the opportunity to associate their music with conservatism and women who did not identify with feminism in an increasingly polarized American political atmosphere—a strategy that continued to dominate industry-wide marketing strategies in the following decades. In the generations following Sherrill's career-peak in the 1970s, his lingering influence on the country music

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[111] CBS Records advertisement, "For of the Biggest Words in the Recording Industry: Produced by Billy Sherrill, Billboard, July 19, 1975; Jon Caramanica, "Billy Sherrill, Producer, Dies at 78; Promoted a 'Countrypolitan' Sound," *New York Times*, August 10, 2015.

[112] Dave Hickey, "Outlaw Blues," *Country Music* magazine, February 1977, 24.

business reflected a system that was overwhelmingly male-dominated yet branded country music as a product for the conservative-leaning average (and implicitly white) American woman.

In the 1970s, two women's movements featured prominently in American life: one of liberation, demanding more women's rights and full gender equality, and the other running in direct opposition. The early stages of Second Wave Feminism were marked by the release of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, and the movement continued to gain traction in following years, becoming dominant and polarizing in American social and political life by the late 1960s. By the early-to-mid-1970s, women's rights appeared to be on the offensive, as major legislation such at *Roe v. Wade* had protected abortion rights in 1973, Title IX was passed in 1972, prohibiting sex-based discrimination in public education, and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), demanding full equality regardless of sex, seemed likely to pass. Women's rights enjoyed widespread endorsement, with both Democrats and Republicans voicing support. President Nixon, though personally not a proponent of feminism (and whose personal statements about women disparaged them as "nags" or sexual objects), nevertheless recognized it was in his best political interests to publicly claim himself as in favor of expanded women's rights. Even the virulent racist George Wallace claimed to support the ERA and more women's rights. But just as Second Wave Feminism made its largest strides, antifeminism likewise gained momentum, power, and support. Throughout the 1970s, the movement worked consciously against the ERA and in favor of increasing dialogue surrounding and protecting what was referred to as family values—identifying women's role as in the home as wives and mothers. By the end of the decade and the election of Ronald Regan, this strong and unified antifeminist movement proved

successful in pushing conservatives and the Republican Party to irrevocably frame themselves as the party of family values and oppositional to women's rights.[113]

Billy Sherrill consciously positioned country music within antifeminsism, identifying country listeners as white, middle-class women who did not identify with struggles for gender equality. Sherrill's targeted listeners were not at odds with how many of the of the most prominent women in country identified at the time. Tammy Wynette, the most commercially successful woman in country music by the early 1970s, and positioned as the most vociferously antifeminist in public dialogue for her 1968 career-defining "Stand By Your Man," explained: "I won't go out and work for women's liberation because I believe I *am* free."[114] Dolly Parton, meanwhile, downplayed the role of sexism, saying "I had my own opinion long before women's liberation….Really, it's just as big a sin for a man to drink and run around as it is for a woman to do it. It's just that people don't accept it that way."[115] Kitty Wells, who became the first solo woman to earn a number-one country hit in 1952 for her song "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" (and for this reason was often analyzed with a feminist lens), added to the chorus of antifeminism, saying: "I feel like I have freedom and I like my life the way it is. The women's liberation movement is a little bit extreme."[116] The opposition to identifying with feminism that the majority of prominent women in country music expressed mirrored broader rejections of women's rights in the Southern states where they were from, and where country music continued

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[113] Marjorie J. Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

[114] Carol Offen, "The Big Speakout: Lil Darlin Know the Score." *Country Music* magazine, July 1974, 44.

[115] Ibid, 43.

[116] No author, "Woman Put on Earth for Man to Look After, Kitty Wells Says," *Country Style*, August 1976, Issue No. 3, 17.

to be identified with. While the Equal Rights Amendment had garnered widespread support for much of the 1970s, all but one of the eleven former Confederate states (Texas) failed to ratify the ERA.[117] Still despite widespread resistance to the women's liberation movement within the country music industry, there were some who vocalized support for feminism. In 1974 singer Bobbie Gentry explained that her song "Fancy" had a feminist message, saying it was her "strongest statement for women's lib, if you really listen to it. I agree wholeheartedly with that movement and all the serious issues that [it stands] for—equality, equal pay, day care centers, and abortion rights."[118]

Sherrill's dominance in country music mirrored prior and ensuing generations where just a small number of individuals, mostly men, monopolized country's business politics. This became especially true once the industry had become firmly centralized in Nashville by the late 1950s, wherein producers such as Chet Atkins and Owen Bradley and their "Nashville Sound" gained a dominating influence over country music recording practices. By the late 1960s, Sherrill represented a new generation of producers, with evolving business strategies and, most importantly, a growing portfolio of hit records. Born and raised in Alabama in 1936, Sherrill developed an early career in music playing in rock 'n' roll bands and co-founded FAME Studios with Rick Hall in 1959. By 1961, Sherrill had dissolved his partnership with Hall and found work as an engineer for Sam Phillips at Nashville's Sun Studio location. Within a few years, he was hired as a producer for Epic Records, and had his first big hit in 1966 with David Houston's "Almost Persuaded." Sherrill achieved success by both breaking with Nashville recording

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[117] Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields, *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 133.

[118] Morag Veljkovic, "Ode to Bobbie Gentry," *After Dark*, July 1974.

conventions, and building on the work of country music's most influential producers at the time, Chet Atkins and Owen Bradley, who'd developed the pop-friendly Nashville Sound since the 1950s. Sherrill cut songs that were deemed too long and too drawn out for Nashville's standards at the time, and his preference for jazz and rhythm and blues pushed the sonic boundaries of the country music he recorded. "I don't care if it is George Jones," Sherrill explained. "I don't want it to sound *too* country."[119] What resulted was countrypolitan, country music with lush, pop-friendly orchestral arrangements and heavy doses of pedal steel mixed in.

First and foremost, Sherrill was determined to record what would sell. "I don't really much care what musicians think about [a recording]," he said. "Every song I ever produced that the musicians really liked didn't sell three."[120] Asked what made a good producer, he explained, "I think the best prerequisite is the ability to think like the public…You don't go in and try to record what's great; you go in and try to record what's commercial, and to sell phonograph records. That's why they pay your salary."[121] In the studio, he took full control of recording sessions."Sherrill rarely just produces a recording. More often, he conducts it," explained one observer. By the mid-1970s, Sherrill had written about a hundred songs, almost all of which had made their way onto the country charts, and about 80 percent of which reached the top ten.[122]

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[119] John Morthland, "Changing Methods, Changing Sounds: An Overview," *Journal of Country Music*, Volume XII, Number 2, 1989, 6.

[120] Jack Hurst, "Discoverer of Tammy Wynette: His Target is the American Woman," *The Tennessean*, October 10, 1971.

[121] Walter Campbell, "Interview: Billy Sherrill," *The Journal of Country Music*, Volume VII, Number 2, May 1978, 90.

[122] Jack Hurst, "Nashville's Good Old Hit Man," *Chicago Tribune*, October 24, 1976.

Nowhere would Sherrill's influence on country music prove more enduring than his work with Tammy Wynette. He met the singer when she arrived at his office in 1966, and quickly took creative control over her talent. During her most successful years, from the late 1960s and into the 1970s, Sherrill directed the biggest decisions in her career, and later claimed "Tammy has never questioned my judgement on anything."[123] Such a statement reflected the overwhelmingly male dominated country music industry, and one where even the most commercially successful women in country music had the opportunity to have full creative control over their careers. From Virginia Pugh, he renamed her Tammy Wynette and almost immediately the two earned number one hits with "I Don't Want to Play House" and "D-I-V-O-R-C-E," songs dealing with motherhood and broken marriages.[124] Coasting on these themes, they wrote and recorded "Stand by Your Man" in 1968, a song that proved massively popular, but immediately reeked of chauvinism given the tense political atmosphere of the period. The same month the song was released, a march on the Miss America Pageant by feminist protestors marked the beginning of the radical Women's Liberation movement, which called for full gender equality. In the face of this feminist movement, Wynette was credited with spearheading a counterrevolution on gender equality, and a 1971 article in *Newsweek* labeled it as a song of "Non-Liberation."[125]

Though both Wynette and Sherrill denied initial intention to capitalize on the historical moment, the singer's career after the song's success suggests otherwise. Both Sherrill and others at Wynette's record label made conscious and continuous efforts to cash in on the gendered

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[123] Bob Allen, "Billy Sherrill: Nashville's Sharp-Tongued Studio Genius," *Country Music* magazine, May 1979, 40.

[124] Peter Guralnick, "Tammy: The Only Time I'm Really Me," *Country Music* magazine, March 1979, 37.

[125] Eleanor Clift, "Songs of Non-Liberation," *Newsweek*, August 2, 1971.

interpretations of the song. According to Sherrill, "There was a full-page ad in *Billboard* magazine taken out by Epic Records--some kid thought of it up there--'Tammy Wynette's answer to Women's Lib, 'Stand by Your Man,' New Release."[126] Sherrill also went on to write and have Wynette record songs like "Don't Liberate Me (Love Me)," "The Ways to Love a Man," and "He Loves Me All the Way," all leaning in to the chauvinistic understandings of "Stand by Your Man." When asked what his favorite Wynette recording was, Sherrill explained: "I guess 'Stand By Your Man' is my favorite song…There had been a bunch of songs out about then which had women nagging and complaining, you know–'Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' with Lovin' on Your Mind' and songs like that–and I just decided to turn it around and go all the way in the opposite direction."[127]

The song Sherrill referred to–"Don't Come Home a Drinkin' (with Lovin' on Your Mind)"–was a hit written and recorded by Loretta Lynn in 1967, and the moment he referred to was a significant one for women in country music. Though female country artists had of course existed prior to the late 1960s, it was not until this period that larger numbers of women achieved commercial success in country music. The rise of growing numbers of commercially successful women in country music was a reflection of a moment when women's rights enjoyed broad support, as Second Wave feminism gained traction by the late 1960s. In 1967 alone, for instance, the debut albums for Tammy Wynette and Dolly Parton were released. At the same time, growing numbers of female artists were given the opportunity to record and release outspoken songs, like Pretty Miss Norma Jean's "Heaven Help the Working Girl," Jeannie C. Riley's "Harper Valley

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[126] Anita Bugg, "Stand by Your Man," NPR, October 28, 2000.

[127] Jack Hurst, "Discoverer of Tammy Wynette: His Target is the American Woman," *The Tennessean*, October 10, 1971.

PTA," other songs from Loretta Lynn, like "Fist City," and even Tammy Wynette's first big hit, "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad." By 1971, an article in *Billboard*'s annual survey of country music reported on the growth of women on the country charts, but denied any feminist influences on the genre, saying "It is doubtful that women's lib has had anything to do with the change." Instead, it reasoned that an availability of material had simply become accessible to women, explaining, "There are more good songs available for girl singers today. For a while, during the female-singer drought, writers turned out their best work with male voices in mind. They were written specifically for men because that was what was selling. But with the growth of popularity of such artists as Loretta Lynn, Lynn Anderson, Tammy Wynette, and the rest, the efforts turned in a different direction."[128]

While women in country music enjoyed broader commercial success by the late 1960s, they continued to face severe sexism in an industry where women had always been considered less marketable than men. Loretta Lynn recalled how when she first arrived in Nashville in the early 1960s, she faced an aggressive environment where there was little room for women. "When I got here to Nashville in '61 there weren't hardly any women in country music. What women that was in the business tried to run me out of Nashville. They didn't want no competition."[129] By 1974, Lynn Anderson discussed how women continued to be far outnumbered, despite increased success: "It just seems like we're always outnumbered on a show. If they promote a country show, they always could have 3 or 4 male vocalists, but never more than one female."[130]

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[128] No author. "Girls, Girls, Girls: They're Putting Their Best Foot Forward." *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, October 16, 1971, 32.

[129] Carol Offen, "The Big Speakout: Lil Darlin Know the Score," *Country Music* magazine, July 1974, 37.

[130] Ibid., 42.

At the same time, Barbara Mandrell explained how longstanding myths that women could not draw fans persisted. “Even with all the records female country artists are selling now, the feeling still seems to be that women can’t draw on a show,” she stated.[131]

Beyond an industry skeptical they could sell records, women also faced issues about how to market themselves as palatable to both radio and female listeners. As Donna Fargo explained, “I think it’s very important for a female country artist to fit a certain image. It’s a more conservative image. In country music, a woman has to be more careful…I don't want women to think I’m tryin’ to be sexy or something.”[132] When it came to lyrical content, female artists had long had to be concerned with what songs were appropriate to record. Jean Shepard, when discussing an earlier period of her career in the 1950s, discussed how her producer was careful about which records he allowed her to cut referencing adultery. “Ken Nelson, my ex-producer, would never let me record a triangle song unless I was on the right side of the fence. He’d always say, ‘Oh, no, they just don’t expect that of you. You’re such a sweet country girl.’ I could never convince him how mean I really was.”[133]

Following his continued success with Wynette, and in spite of all the other prominent female country artists at the time, Sherrill was oddly billed as “country music’s foremost voice of the average American young woman,” and one article spoke to “a sort of sub-genre of country music that was developed by Sherrill and Wynette to appeal specifically to mothers.”[134] Sherrill boiled his strategy all down to commercialism, saying: “I make records for women. I write songs

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[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Jack Hurst, “Nashville’s Good Old Hit Man,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 24, 1976.

for women. They sell."[135] But as tensions rose surrounding gender roles in American society, Wynette's music was increasingly defined as the voice of women who did not identify with feminism, whom Sherrill identified as the average woman who'd endured hard times. "She has become the spokeswoman of every woman who's been kicked in the ass all her life," explained Sherrill of Wynette, adding: "Not too long ago somebody…made a survey and found out that the biggest buyers of country music are women between 20 and 30 years old. These are the kind of people who especially identify with Tammy. They hear her and say, 'That's me.'"[136] Wynette agreed, adding: "'Stand By Your Man' was so big because country people aren't attracted to women's lib. They like to be able to stand by their man and of course the men liked the idea that their women would stand by them."[137] A study by country music scholar Richard Peterson confirmed women were indeed the primary consumers of country music.[138] A survey conducted at the Grand Ole Opry also found that female visitors outnumbered male, and that women made up the bulk of the radio audience.[139] By 1978, Sherrill defined country music not by a sound, but by his targeted consumer, saying: "Country music is lyric. I can think of three songs that went

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[135] Michael Thomas, "Tammy Wynette: A Little Tear in Every Word," *Rolling Stone*, May 11, 1972, 45.

[136] Jack Hurst, "Discoverer of Tammy Wynette: His Target is the American Woman," *The Tennessean*, October 10, 1971.

[137] John Gabree, "Tammy Wynette: Songs of Heartbreak, But a Happy Home," *Country Music* magazine, April 1973, 29-30.

[138] Richard A. Peterson and Paul DiMaggio. "From Region to Class, the Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis," Social Forces, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Mar. 1975), 501.

[139] No author, "Grand Ole Opry: More Country Fans Like Classical Than R&B," *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, October 20, 1973, 25.

number one, all with the same melody. So it's always appealed to the twenty-five to eighty class anyway, the married lady with a couple kids."[140]

Prior to Sherrill, Nashville's most influential producers, Chet Atkins and Owen Bradley, didn't so much focus on highlighting gender but the class dynamics of the country music audience. Atkins emphasized his role in pushing country music "uptown," as he put it, smoothing out its sound and making it more palatable to middle-class standards of the 1950s and 60s.[141] Likewise, the country music industry more broadly focused on selling an image of a socially mobile country music audience. In its efforts to rid country music of its long marginalized "hillbilly" status, the country music industry in the 1950s and 60s proved eager to convince the public of country's solidly middle-class status.[142] If anything, the industry had identified the average country music listener as male and capable of financially supporting his family.[143]

By the 1970s, as country music achieved widespread respectability, evolutions in mass media gave credence to Sherrill's targeted audience. While radio and television had once catered to a broad, mass audience, marketing practices increasingly segmented audiences. This was especially true of radio and popular music by the 1970s, which heavily relied on consumer data to develop station formats catering to not only specific genres, but specific listeners along age,

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[140] Campbell, 63.

[141] Chet Atkins and Bill Neely, *Country Gentleman* (Chicago: Henry Regency Company, 1974), xii.

[142] Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 135-152.

[143] Diane Pecknold, "Configurations of Masculinity in the Nashville Sound Era," in Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold, Eds, *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004),105.

gender, race, and class lines.[144] For stations seeking lucrative advertisers, adult women—the primary purchasers in the home—proved the most attractive to advertisers. As the number of all-country stations skyrocketed by 1970, up to 750 from just 81 a decade prior, Billy Sherrill's targeted listeners proved especially attractive.[145]

But by the mid-1970s, there were growing signs that the country music audience consisted of much more than white, conservative, adult wives and mothers. On the one hand, there were growing signs of a listenership that was diversifying racially, drawn in large part by increasing numbers of commercially successful nonwhite artists like Johnny Rodriguez, Freddy Fender, and Charley Pride. And at the same time there was also a growing interest among younger white male listeners, who craved the rock-influenced country music from the likes of the "Outlaws," Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. Despite the record-breaking success of these artists, including their 1976 album *Wanted: The Outlaws*, which was the first country record to go platinum, an article in *Country Music* magazine lambasted the country music industry for still failing to see beyond Sherrill's definitions of country music, saying: "In their obsession with making country music 'legitimate,' in taking it into the television, middle-class mainstream of American music, it just never occurred to the moguls of country that American youth could identify with a bunch of over-thirty highway gypsies. Somehow Nashville became so obsessed with reaching Billy Sherrill's imaginary '40-year-old housewife washing dishes at three in the

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[144] Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 13; Kim Simpson, "Country Radio's Growing Pains in the Music Trades, 1967-1977," *American Music*, Vol 27, No. 4 (Winter 2009), 500.

[145] No author, "Country Radio Spells National Success Story," *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, October 16, 1971, 30.

afternoon in Pittsburg, Kansas,' that it forgot about the guy in the honkytonks and the kids coming out of the 1960s."[146]

Despite protest that the industry had come to prioritize Sherrill's "40-year-old housewife" in middle America, it reflected well how women came to be depicted in country music in the 1970s as compared to earlier decades. A generation earlier, artists like Kitty Wells and Jean Shepard portrayed women in country songs as honky tonk angels, where anxieties abounded that women would stray from the home and into the honky tonk, as heard in songs like Wells's "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" (1952), Shepard's "My Wedding Ring" (1953), which warned how a woman had lost her husband and child by ending up in a barroom, and Hank Williams's "Too Many Parties and Too Many Pals" (1950), which surveyed the preoccupation and double standards with which the public criticized "fallen women" who embraced the nightlife. By the 1970s, however, the songs of Wynette and others helped redefine women in country music songs as faithful suburban wives regardless of how their husbands treated them. This transition correlated well with the evolving class dynamics of country music, as most listeners by this period were identified as middle-income and urban/suburban. Even in the hits performed by Loretta Lynn, often noted for her outspoken songs like "Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' (With Lovin' on Your Mind)" (1967) and "The Pill" (1975), her songs still depicted women whose husbands treated them poorly and whose abuse appeared unchangeable. Perhaps no song better personified the ballad of a suburban housewife than her 1972 hit "One's On the Way," depicting a woman in Topeka, the suburbs of Kansas City, overwhelmed by her duties as a wife and mother but unable to receive recognition or assistance from her husband. Such

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[146] Hickey, 24.

characters were also heard in songs by men, such as Johnny Paycheck's "The Feminine Touch" (1976) (produced by Sherrill), which lamented how a man's wife had left him and that he had to cancel his home's subscription to *The Ladies Home Journal* and had to tell the Avon woman to stop calling—two markers of suburban womanhood at the time.

The period of the 1970s also witnessed a rise in the overtly sexy male singer, who increasingly topped the charts by the end of the decade, and foreshadowed growing reliance on attractive male singers in later decades. This shift was perhaps most defined by figures like Conway Twitty and Kenny Rogers, but also included artists like Charlie Rich, whose song "Behind Closed Doors" was clear in discussing a couple's sex life, and Freddie Hart's "Easy Lovin'" (1971), which described a man's desire for his wife and opened with the line "Easy lovin', so sexy lookin'," when referencing his partner. With songs like "You've Never Been This Far Before" (1973), "I See the Want to In Your Eyes" (1974), and "I'd Love to Lay Your Down" (1980), Twitty most explicitly expressed sexual prowess over women. Alongside Twitty, who presented himself as an unabashed sex object with low cut shirts exposing a hairy, masculine chest, Rogers likewise embraced this styling while also presenting himself as a partner to steadfast women as heard in songs like "She Believes in Me" (1979) and "Lady" (1980).

By the 1980s, Sherrill's imaginary housewife continued to be the most coveted demographic for the industry. By this period, however, country music for white women evolved from being issue-oriented to being a direct outlet of sexual fantasy for women—an issue which magnified gendered double standards women artists had already historically faced in the genre. Singer Reba McEntire explained the difficult line she had to toe with fans, making herself attractive but not too much so for her primarily female audience. "Anything too sexy makes

women jealous when they're with their husbands or boyfriends," she explained.[147] Meanwhile, singer Naomi Judd of The Judds admit, "Let's face it, the average ticket buyer for a concert is your middle-aged housewife." She elaborated on the difficulties this demographic created for her as a female artist, explaining these women listeners "want to see George Strait, Alabama, Hank Jr…she sits home and listens to the radio during the day…It's a fantasy, an escape from her problems. Maybe she could have a one night stand with him," before concluding: "Women want to hear a man sing a love song to them, that's why men sell more records, get more airplay."[148] Judd continued to address how this resulted in less record sales for women, saying "What bothers me about this business, from a woman's standpoint, is that we do not sell tickets. We do not sell the albums men do."[149] Making matters more difficult for women country artists in the 1980 was that men continued to dominate the country charts even when women were praised for being more creatively innovating. In 1985, *New York Times* critic Joh Rockwell wrote on new and exciting music by women artists like The Judds and Rosanne Cash, but reported that "In the country music sales chart of the *Billboard* magazine most recent to this writing, the top 13 positions are occupied by men."[150] Elsewhere, one article confirmed that sales reports indicated "male artists generally outsell the women in record sales and concert receipts two to one in country music."[151]

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[147] Katy Bee, "What's a Woman to Do," *Lost Highway*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Winter 1987, 2.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid.

[150] John Rockwell, "Vitality Without Popularity For Country Music's Women," *New York Times*, August 11, 1985.

[151] Bee, 2.

By the 1990s, the country music industry's efforts to target women continued as a "country lifestyle" was broadly sold as appealing to socially conservative, suburban, and family-friendly listeners. Country's pursuit of white, suburban wives and mothers paralleled growing interests in women as a coveted voting demographic in national politics, as the campaign for "soccer mom" voters in the 1996 Clinton presidential campaign revealed.[152] By the 1990s, the country music business continued to consciously prioritize white women with healthy incomes as its prime audience. Key to this strategy was the dominating presence of country radio, arguably the most powerful wing of the country music business for decades until this period. As Jimmy Bowen explained in his autobiography in 1997, radio had long guided every part of the recording process for country music. When Bowen first arrived in Nashville in the late 1970s, he explained that "radio came first, label second, artist last," adding that, by the 1990s, it was still "radio first, with artist and label battling for second place."[153] By the 1990s, other industry leaders agreed that the dominance of radio had increasingly overtaken every aspect of the recording and marketing process of country artists. As Tim DuBois, head of the record label Arista Nashville, explained in 1997, his "wonderful, naive dreams were smashed many years ago when [he] realized radio basically is using our music to get from one commercial to the next."[154]

Country radio had long desired women for one reason: these listeners were perceived to have more buying power than any other demographic. In terms of radio, this translated into

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[152] For more on the Clinton campaign's pursuit of suburban women voters, see Mary Douglas Varvus, "From Women of the Year to 'Soccer Moms': The Case of the Incredible Shrinking Women," *Political Communication*, Volume 17, 2000, Issue 2, 193-213.

[153] Jimmy Bowen and Jim Jerome, *Rough Mix: An Unapologetic Look at the Music Business and How It Got That Way–A Lifetime in the World of Rock, Pop, and Country as Told by One of the Industry's Most Powerful Players* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 205.

[154] Chuck Aly, "Same Game, Different Rules: A Conversation with Tim DuBois," *Music Row*, August 8, 1997, 14.

advertising revenue, the principal generation of income within the business. In the eyes of advertisers, these women were the listeners most likely to be receptive to buying the products in their commercials. Even when the bulk of the radio audience was proven to *not* be women, female listeners were nevertheless prioritized. This had been explicitly true in many instances since at least he 1970s, when stations narrowly focused on women listeners, in spite of the fact that surveys showed country radio listenership was predominantly male.[155] By the 1990s, the prevalence of attractive male country stars like Billy Ray Cyrus and George Strait, among many others, was evidence of the industry's efforts to target women listeners. A report from the 1992 Fan Fair, an annual event for country music fans in Nashville, spoke to the abundance of female fans, saying: "Those who have doubts about whether country music dollars are female driven had only to listen to the squeals each time a male artist turned around."[156] Tim DuBois, head of Arista Records echoed this definition of country listeners, saying, "Most of the dollars are female dollars, both ticket sales and record sales, and the same old strategy still works that to get the females out you give them the good looking guy who sounds great."[157] Still, the industry did not prove willing to support just any male artist, most principally when it came to race. Cleve Francis later reflected that his label consciously did not allow him to record songs that would position him as romantic subjects to white female listeners, saying that he realized "you cannot have a Black man being the love maker." Instead, he explained how he was simply allowed to

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[155] Richard A. Peterson, "The Production of Cultural Change: The Case of Contemporary Country Music," *Social Research*, Summer 1978, Col. 45, No. 2, pp. 298.

[156] David M. Ross, "Wrangler Butts Drive Me Nuts: Fan Fair '92," *Music Row*, June 23, 1992, 13.

[157] David M. Ross, "Building the Nashville Sound," *Music Row*, June 23, 1994, 9.

record “kumbaya type” songs, where no threat existed to boyfriends or husbands that their girlfriends or wives were fantasizing about a Black man.[158]

Over the past two decades, the country music industry and country radio in particular has continued to aggressively target conservative adult women as the genre’s principal consumers, even when there have been clear signs of greater diversity among country listeners. In 2002, following the huge popularity of the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, which heavily featured bluegrass music and boasted a Grammy-winning, multi-million-selling soundtrack, the *New York Times* reported on country radio’s refusal to play the film’s music. “Contemporary country radio is targeting young adult females,” said Paul Allen, the executive director of the Country Radio Broadcasters. “Now, why would you want to target them? Because that’s what advertisers want. The young adult is oftentimes a mom. She influences 90 percent of all the buying decisions in the household…even though women are heavily pressured for time and responsibility, they remain optimists. So, don’t play the negatives.”[159] More recently, in 2015, comments by country radio consultant Keith Hill about the lack of women on country radio launched the infamous “Tomato-gate” scandal, after he said “the tomatoes of our salad are the females.” According to Hill, “If you want to make ratings in country radio, take females out,” adding that most country radio listeners were female and “women like male artists.”[160]

In recent years, country music’s desire for women listeners has taken a more dramatic turn as bachelorette parties have flocked to Nashville in multiplying numbers for the better part

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[158] Cleve Francis Interview with Martinez August 6, 2020.

[159] Neil Strauss, “Music; The Country Music Country Radio Ignores,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2002.

[160] Beverly Keel, “Radio Adviser Clarifies Remarks,” *The Tennessean*, May 29, 2015.

of the past decade. In 2018 the *New York Times* even claimed Music City had become the biggest destination for married-to-be women to let loose, overtaking even Las Vegas in this role.[161] CMT has also given these women a television series, *Bachelorette Weekend*, chock full of all the shenanigans one might expect from a group of drunken young women out to celebrate a friend's last hurrah as a single lady. And over the past couple years, not even a deadly pandemic and uprisings against systemic racism stopped them from overtaking the pedal taverns, party busses, and downtown honkytonks on Broadway.

Now, decades after Sherrill's reign, the major forces of the country music industry continue to value adult, white women above all else. Whereas these women were once imagined to already be wives and mothers, today's industry has captured women who are just about to embark on those paths. In a politically divisive atmosphere not completely unlike that of the late 1960s when "Stand By Your Man" was released, white women today can still cling to country music as an escape from struggles for social justice. And with listeners skewing younger today than in previous generations has come a tone of carelessness in the production of country music, and a sense of escapism that's accessible both in song and in a weekend visit to Nashville. While listeners can drown in an endless assortment of easygoing songs about dirt roads, pickup trucks, tan legs, or any variety of alcohol, a weekend trip to Nashville can continue to extend these experiences for young, white women listeners. That such escapism is still sought after during increasingly tumultuous times is a testament to the many privileges of these women. At a moment when the Coronavirus disproportionately impacted people of color, white, affluent women were afforded the luxury of escapism that others do not have. And while these women's

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[161] Stephanie Cain,"Bachelorettes in Boots Take On Nashville," *New York Times*, June 13, 2018.

livelihoods are not likely to be at stake within the current political and social climate, business interests will continue to prey on their buying power, luring them to Nashville for as long as the city and country music can wrangle them.

Chapter 3

Suburban Cowboy:
Country Music, Punk, and the Struggle Over Space in Orange County, 1978-1981

At the dawn of the Reagan era, Orange County stood at the forefront of a wave of conservatism that had recently overtaken national politics and popular culture. With a legacy of grassroots conservatism that helped propel Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980, the area also carried a history of country music and cowboy culture that were represented in the "Urban Cowboy" craze that dominated national fashion and music trends at the time. The fad shared its title with the popular film of the same name that starred John Travolta, and was embraced throughout the country as western wear fashion and country music sales reached new heights, and as thousands of former discos installed mechanical bulls and transformed into nightclubs with a country and western theme. Many equated country music's unprecedented popularity with the new sense of conservatism that came with the Reagan presidency and the rise of the influential conservative New Right. "The phenomenal popularity that country music has enjoyed recently … may have something to do with the general resurgence of political conservatism and patriotic fervor," observed the *New York Times*.[162]

But while Orange County's embrace of conservatism and its musical counterpart, country music, defined the region in a familiarly conservative light, less commonly acknowledged is the simultaneous presence of a music scene that was politically and culturally antithetical to the region's dominating character: hardcore punk rock. The region's conflicting musical identities came to a head in the city of Costa Mesa, where punk rockers and country music fans violently

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[162] Robert Palmer, "The Pop Life; Riding the Country's Wave of Patriotism?" *New York Times*, May 13, 1981. Special thanks to Sean Graham for his generosity in sharing newspaper scans, without which this chapter would not be possible, and his zine about the Cuckoo's Nest, "Suburban Struggle."

clashed in a battle over suburban space that revealed a set of competing identities in a region more frequently defined as monolithically conservative, and served as a harbinger for greater political and cultural resistance throughout the Reagan era. In Costa Mesa, joint efforts by country music fans, local police, and city leaders to quash the punk rock scene foreshadowed a broader cultural clash within popular music during the 1980s that pitted country music, defined as the sound of Reagan-era conservatism and wholesomeness, against more youthful popular music, which was viewed as corrupting and a target for censorship by conservative groups like the Parents' Music Resource Center.

In the early 1980s, violence regularly arose between fans of punk rock and country music in Orange County. This tension frequently erupted in a parking lot in the city of Costa Mesa, between two neighboring nightclubs: the Cuckoo's Nest, the region's leading hardcore punk venue which attracted predominantly white youth from throughout Orange County, and Zubie's, a pizza parlor that hosted a local white, middle-aged crowd of country music listeners and followers of the Urban Cowboy craze.[163] Though patrons of both clubs were known to initiate violence, several reports indicated that one side was the more common instigator. "It's the Okies," explained one onlooker, adding that they "gawk at [punks], call them names, get into fisticuffs with them.… Yeah, they generally start a lot of the problems."[164] While this summation suggested country music fans were mostly to blame for this conflict, it also highlighted the enduring legacy of Okie migrant culture in Southern California. By 1980, this culture – represented by an achievement of social mobility, pride in suburban homeownership, and

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[163] This conflict is documented in "Urban Struggle," a song released by The Vandals in 1982.

[164] *Urban Struggle: The Battle of the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Paul Young (Endurance Pictures, 1983), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMarsBr2PKA.

political and cultural conservatism – was well-entrenched and protected in Orange County. As such, community leaders in Costa Mesa worked with country music fans in a mutual effort to preserve the status quo and to suppress the resistance to the region's cultural and political conservatism that came with the rise of hardcore punk rock.

The conflict between punks and country music listeners in Costa Mesa represented not just a simple culture clash, but a moment when two uniquely suburban and Southern California sounds collided at a significant point of transition in American politics and culture, and at heart revealed a conflict over the merits of suburban life.[165] Whereas the region's country music fans expressed pride in and protectionism over suburbanism, punk rockers rejected the mundane orderliness of suburban space. This struggle over space was one in which country music fans emerged victorious, as their efforts to violently quash the local punk scene worked in conjunction with city leaders, who forcibly closed the Cuckoo's Nest in 1981 and revealed a solidarity between country music fans, police, and local politics.

This essay adds to literatures concerned with the social, political, and cultural history of suburban Southern California, and studies of youth culture and the 1980s more broadly. While scholarship such as the work of Lisa McGirr and Eric Avila has depicted Orange County as overwhelmingly conservative in the immediate postwar decades, this essay analyzes an emergence of cultural and political resistance by the later decades of the twentieth century. Likewise, this essay builds on studies by Becky M. Nicolaides and Peter La Chapelle on the ongoing influence of migrant communities in Southern Los Angeles and Orange County by the

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[165] I recognize some may take issue with my use of the term "suburb" to refer to Orange County in 1980. Still, I've chosen to use this term rather than alternative phrases like postsuburban or ex-urban because most local residents continued to refer to their lived experience in Orange County as suburban.

Reagan era.[166] Building on works on youth culture that have documented the historic agency of young people to reimagine alternative ways of being, this piece also analyzes resistance to youth and varying types of rock music more specifically, and how this resistance remained significant throughout the culture wars of the 1980s and beyond.[167]

By 1980, Orange County was defined by cultural paradox, a region that proved historically influential to leading conservative politics and the rise of Ronald Reagan, and where hardcore punk rock took root.[168] In the post World War II decades, white flight, propelled by government assistance that made white home ownership accessible, transformed the Los Angeles suburbs (and Orange County in particular) into a cultural and social space defined by racial exclusion and white privilege.[169] Though Orange County overall grew increasingly racially diverse throughout the 1970s, the area remained segregated with overwhelmingly white areas

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[166] Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004); Laura Barraclough, *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscapes, Urban Development, and White Privilege* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[167] For studies on youth culture, see Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War* II (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2008) and Joe Alan Austin and Mike Willard, eds, *Generations of Youth* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). For more on the emergence of rock 'n' roll and its backlash, see Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed* America (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1988). For more on rock music and youth in Southern California, see Jorge N. Leal, "*Aquí y Allá ¡Yo voy a Existir*: Young Latina/o Ingenuity, Sounds and Solidarity in Late Twentieth Century Los Ángeles," PhD diss., (University of California, San Diego, 2018)

[168] Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[169] Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004).

neighboring other communities such as Santa Ana with growing numbers of Latino residents.[170] By 1980, local communities like Costa Mesa, where residents were reported as more than eighty percent non-Hispanic white in the 1980 Census, continued to be dominated by the same racial, political, and cultural politics that overtook the area in the immediate post-World War II decades.[171] With a background of grassroots conservatism, the county remained staunchly conservative. In both the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections, Orange County voted more heavily for Reagan than any other county of its size nationally.[172] By 1980, country music–by then a symbol of whiteness, suburbanism, and Reagan-era conservatism–had enjoyed decades of popularity in Orange County, and continued to provide a soundtrack for this conservatism and appealed to a predominantly white, middle-aged demographic.[173]

It was within and against Orange County's dominating character that hardcore punk rock took root in the region in the late 1970s. Hardcore punk's loud and aggressive sound, combined with the likes of intentionally distressed clothing or blue or red hair of punks, sought to shock and subvert the social norms of the local community when it came to music, fashion, and civility.

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[170] For more on the changing racial demography of Orange County during the second half of the twentieth century, see Kristen Hill Maher, "Borders and Social Distinction in the Global Suburb," *American Quarterly,* Volume 56, Number 3, September 2004, 781-806.

[171] Dowell Myers and Julie Park, "Racially Balanced Cities in Southern California, *Race Contours 2000 Study*, Public Reseach Report No. 2001-05. https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.usc.edu/dist/6/210/files/2018/08/2001_Myers-Park_Racially-Balanced-Cities-1a1cxya.pdf ; Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, eds., *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County Since World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 3.

[172] McGirr, 270.

[173] Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007), 113-58; Jason Mellard, *Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 171-198; Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 179.

Though both country music fans and punks shared similar backgrounds with regard to race, class, and gender, being predominantly white, middle-income, and heavily male, the two differed in how they conceived of the space they shared, and in generational outlook. Where mostly teenage punks rejected the suburban culture that had been fostered in the area, the region's middle-aged country music fans sought to protect it. By 1980, the rebellion invoked by hardcore punk came as a direct affront to older, conservative local residents, who saw little reason for these predominantly middle-class white youth to rebel, and who viewed punk rock as a threat to local order that needed to be eradicated.[174]

By the late 1970s, no genre of music defined Orange County more than country music. At the time, few areas outside Texas celebrated the "Urban Cowboy" craze with greater vigor. "The country and western flavor has definitely hit Orange County," declared *Orange Coast* magazine in November of 1980, the same month Reagan was elected president.[175] By the end of the year, hundreds of bars and nightclubs in Orange County alone considered themselves country and western.[176] Earlier that year, the theme park Knott's Berry Farm introduced its "Urban Cowboy Days," providing family-friendly entertainment with live country music performances and cowboy-themed activities.[177] For punk rockers, the overwhelming presence of country music and

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[174] For more on the long legacy of racial and cultural protectionism in suburban spaces, see Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[175] Craig Rousselot, "Commercial Cowboy," *Orange Coast*, November 1980, 144.

[176] Rousselot, 141.

[177] No author, "Knott's Farm Goes Urban Cowboy," *Billboard*, August 30, 1980, 32.

the urban cowboy fad was unavoidable. “The world was so redneck at that time,” explained Casey Royer, singer of the punk band D.I.[178]

Orange County’s embrace of the “Urban Cowboy” craze was part of a longer legacy of country music and cowboy culture in Southern California. By the 1970s, country music had enjoyed decades of popularity throughout California.[179] Though California’s Central Valley is credited with fostering country music’s “Bakersfield Sound,” Los Angeles and its surrounding areas were vital for country music consumption and production. Country music was an integral part of Capitol Records’ musical repertoire since its founding in 1942, and even provided the label with its first multimillion seller, Tex Williams’s 1947 song “Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette).” Throughout the 1950s, many of Capitol’s country artists could be seen and heard on the country music variety show *Town Hall Party*, which was first a radio program and later a television show that taped on Long Beach Boulevard in Compton. By the 1960s, with artists like Merle Haggard and Glenn Campbell, Capitol Records rivaled Nashville as country music’s leading recording center. Popular songs by these artists helped define country music nationally during this period as a symbol for conservative, backlash politics, and middle-class respectability. Hits like Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee” and “The Fightin' Side of Me” spoke to the desires of President Nixon's Silent Majority, while Campbell's pop-country sound reflected the growing mainstream embrace of country music. During this time, Nudie Cohn of North

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[178] Eric Eberwein, “The Class of ’81: Whatever Happened to Orange Country’s Punk Rock Rebels?” *Orange Coast* magazine, September 1991, 93.

[179] For more on California’s country music history, see Gerald W. Haslam, *Workin’ Man Blues: Country Music in California* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999) and Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2007).

Hollywood also provided tailoring services for many of the genre's leading stars like Porter Wagoner and Hank Snow, who famously wore the designer's bright and bedazzled "Nudie suits." And just a couple miles from Cohn's shop was The Palomino, one of country music's leading nightclubs on the West Coast from the 1950s through the 1980s. But while much of country music's consumption and production was centered in Los Angeles in the post-World War II period, increasingly, the music was enjoyed outside of the city and became more established in nearby suburbs by the 1970s. Disneyland began regularly booking country acts in the mid-60s, and between 1950 and 1970, country music clubs moved from being concentrated in city centers to suburban areas like South Los Angeles and North Orange County.[180]

Not only did country music have a long legacy of popularity in Southern California, but it had also evolved into a uniquely suburban type of music by this time. During a period of white flight in the post-World War II decades, country music shared a story of social mobility with millions of white, blue-collar migrants who moved to the suburbs and overcame marginality defined by class and ethnicity.[181] Like these migrants, country music, long ridiculed as "hillbilly" music and associated with a lowbrow type of whiteness, increasingly gained mainstream respectability by the 1960s and '70s. Scholars such as Diane Pecknold and Jeffrey J. Lange have documented how the country music genre was looked down upon for its associations with its predominantly Southern, white, and rural fanbase within the music industry and by the greater American public from the 1920s onwards, and how the genre's business forces mobilized and

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[180] LaChapelle, 120, 137.

[181] Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); David Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

achieved mainstream, middle-class respectability by the 1960s.[182] Perhaps no other area better defined country music's journey towards mainstream acceptance and suburbanization in particular than Southern California. Fueled in large part by the millions of Okie migrants who fled states like Oklahoma and Arkansas and moved to California in search of better jobs and living prospects during the Great Depression and World War II, country music remained popular throughout the state from the 1930s onwards.[183] As Okies achieved respectability through suburban homeownership, so, too, did their music of choice become respectable and popular within mainstream music tastes.

In Nashville, the center of the country music industry, business leaders worked consciously to brand country as the sound of suburbanism, and move the genre away from its associations with poor, rural Southern whites. Regardless of one's regional upbringing, the country music industry nevertheless branded the affluent white suburbanite of the post-World War II decades as a prime and coveted demographic by the 1960s. At an influential marketing presentation in 1965 by the Country Music Association (CMA), a trade organization for members of the country industry, country music was presented as a genre intended for suburban consumption to thousands of advertising executives. During the presentation, CMA president Tex Ritter spoke of strategies that could be implemented to "retain the suburban audience," and introduced performers like the Anita Kerr Singers by saying, "this talented group demonstrates

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[182] For more on country music's journey towards respectability, see Jeffrey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me Hillbilly: Country's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), and Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham and London: University of Duke University Press, 2007).

[183] James Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in* California (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 222-45.

some of their urban sounds with suburban songs."[184] In 1967, the popular songwriter John D. Loudermilk expressed his understanding of country music's regionality by releasing his Grammy-winning album *Suburban Attitudes in Country Verse*. By the 1970s, the idea that country music was meant for suburban consumption was commonplace and went far beyond the calls of Nashville. In 1977, one article declared that country music had fully moved to the suburbs, saying: "Middle America now has two cars, two television sets and two Johnny Cash albums. Country music, nurtured in Appalachia, has crept out of the shacks and into the suburbs."[185]

By the 1970s, country music not only stood as a symbol of suburbanism, but conservatism and patriotism. This understanding of the genre was elaborated on in an article by journalist Richard Goldstein, who understood the rising popularity of county music to be part of a time when "the values of Southern, Caucasian, Protestant, suburban, adult Americans have assumed supremacy."[186] Though country music in Southern California had previously been associated with more progressive voices like Woody Guthrie and Gene Autry, who championed New Deal policies throughout the Great Depression, the genre's political affiliations evolved during the post-World War II decades. By the 1960s and 70s, conservative values like those espoused by Goldstein proved especially resonant in a place like Orange County, where a conservative movement organized and became active in California elections in the post-World

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[184] Joe Allison, "The Sound of Country Music," Presented July 7, 1965 in Chicago, 8, 18, Country Music Association Sales and Marketing Programs (microfiche: fiche 1).

[185] Associated Press, "From Appalachia to Affluence: Country Music Scales Heights," *Panama City News-Herald*, May 5, 1977.

[186] Richard Goldstein, "My Country Music Problem–and Yours," *Mademoiselle*, June 1973, 114.

War II decades, and where popular images of the cowboy and conservatism shared a mutual history. During the 1960s, when grassroots activism in Orange County helped propel Ronald Reagan to become governor of California in 1966, singing cowboys Roy Rogers, Tex Ritter, and even Gene Autry, all emerged as supporters of the new Republican party that helped elect the new governors.[187] Autry's presence in local culture had also become particularly pronounced when the entertainer moved the Los Angeles Angels baseball team, which he had purchased in the early 1960s, to Anaheim in 1966. The legacy of silver screen cowboys in Orange County reached new heights in 1979, when the region's airport was renamed John Wayne Airport. The decision came after months of consideration that Los Angeles International Airport – not Orange County – should refashion itself under the name of the Western film actor. But upon Wayne's death, it was the O.C.'s Board of Supervisors that quickly capitalized on the actor's legacy, saying, "With a proclamation that John Wayne 'brought pride to all Orange County citizens,' the Board of Supervisors today will rename Orange County Airport in honor of the actor who died last week at 72."[188]

By the late 1970s, however, celebrations of cowboys and conservatism went far beyond Orange County's borders. Beginning in the late 1970s, widespread appropriations of the cowboy dominated popular culture as the "Urban Cowboy" craze overtook the country. Western fashion, country nightclubs equipped with mechanical bulls, and country music sales enjoyed unprecedented popularity. But while the fad was popular in urban pockets throughout the country, few areas outside Texas embraced the trend as strongly as did Southern California. At

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[187] For more on this transition to conservatism, see La Chapelle.

[188] Times Staff Writer, "Airport Given Wayne's Name," *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 1979.

the peak of the craze, an estimated one thousand nightclubs considered themselves country-western themed in Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego counties combined.[189] For many, including one of country music's biggest stars, Merle Haggard, the genre's popularity was a reflection of a wave of conservatism that overtook the country at the time. As the singer explained:

> I think we're experiencing a feeling of patriotism that hasn't surfaced for a long time … and I'm glad to see it. We had dipped to an all-time low on the other side not too long ago. But you have to remember that it's happened before. Every time patriotism comes to the surface, you'll find country music, cowboys and so on becoming popular.[190]

In October of 1980, Haggard witnessed the popularity of country music in Orange County firsthand, when he recorded a live album at Anaheim Stadium, *Rainbow Stew Live at Anaheim Stadium*. The raucous crowd of 30,000 "was the largest turnout ever for a country music show" in the area, explained the *Los Angeles Times*.[191]

But just as Urban Cowboy gained steam, another genre of music was sprouting in the L.A. suburbs: punk rock. Unlike earlier periods of punk that were defined by urban spaces, this new type of punk, referred to as hardcore punk rock, was defined by a rejection of suburban life. As much scholarship has revealed, suburban spaces during the second half of the twentieth century proved to be stifling, anxious environments for some suburban residents, and hardcore

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[189] Dennis McLellan, "'80s Cowboy Dressing Up, Kicking Back," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1980.

[190] Robert Palmer, "The Pop Life; Riding the Country's Wave of Patriotism?" *New York Times*, May 13, 1981.

[191] Robert Hilburn, "Willie, Merle Cause Stadium to Sway," *Los Angeles Times,* October 28, 1980.

punk emerged out of such unease.[192] Orange County punk intended to shock local orderliness with loud and angry sounds, and fashion along the likes of nontraditional hair colors and intentionally distressed clothing. Not only did such fashion choices reject local politics of respectability, but they also defied conservative, heteronormative gender expectations, as young punk women frequently wore their hair short and dressed in traditionally masculine clothing, and young men wore makeup like eyeliner. In one article on the Orange County punk scene, a male punk was described as "dressed in a belt-cinched, leopard-spotted coat over black and gold stretch pants, his hair standing out like a six-inch sun visor over his stark-white, made up face," explaining that the teen had achieved look with "hairspray, corn syrup, vaseline and stage make up."[193] Lyrically, songs like the Adolescents's "I Hate Children" and Social Distortion's claim "I just wanna give you the creeps" in their song "The Creeps" were unmistakable testaments to hardcore punk rock's intentions to subvert Orange County's overwhelmingly conservative and family-friendly culture. Antithetical to country music's synonymity with the region's overwhelming conservatism, hardcore punk overall evoked an unorganized, anarchistic politics, as heard in songs like the Vandals's "Anarchy Burger," and was detached from the working class politics associated with much of earlier punk rock. But while hardcore punk lacked a cohesive

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[192] For more on suburban discontent in the second half of the twentieth century, see Richard E. Gordon, Katherine K. Gordon, and Max Gunther, *The Split-Level Trap* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961); Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2004); Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011); Martin Dines, *The Literature of Suburban Change: Narrating Complexity in Metropolitan America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Kevin M. and Thomas J. Sugrue, eds., *The New Suburban History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Matthew D. Lassiter, "Impossible Criminals: The Suburban Imperatives of America's War on Drugs," *Journal of American History*, Volume 102, Issue 1, June 2015, 126-140.

[193] Donna Davis, "Punkers Jubilant, Neighbors Displeased at Club's Reopening," *The Register*, May 3, 1981, A3.

political agenda beyond suburban rebellion, historian Dewar MacLeod explains that Reagan's election in 1980 was key to energizing hardcore punk, saying this was "not only because punks opposed his conservative politics, but because here was an enemy with a face."[194]

Punk rock first emerged in the mid-1970s in New York City and England with bands like the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, and the Clash. The stripped-down, minimalist sound of punk rejected the high brow designation music journalists had espoused on the sixties generation of rock music and the overall idealism of that era. As a genre, it was defined by subversion, a type of music that represented a rejection of the status quo's definitions of fashion, art, and respectability. By 1977, punk rock arrived in Los Angeles with bands like X and the Germs, and increasingly, punks and their unusual clothing and hairstyles could be spotted along Hollywood Boulevard. An integral force in the growth of the L.A. punk scene was D.J. Rodney Bingenheimer, whose weekly radio show, *Rodney on the ROQ*, first aired on station KROQ in 1976. It was here where Angelenos had their first encounters with little-known punk and new wave bands like the Ramones, Blondie, the Runaways, and other local bands who did not have a contract with a record label. Soon, the show became a cultural lifeline to neighboring L.A. suburban communities, where life felt stagnant and dull for some teenagers.[195]

As remnants of the Hollywood punk scene fizzled, Orange County emerged as a new epicenter for California punk, and gave way to the emergence of hardcore punk rock. By 1979, bands like Black Flag, the Adolescents, and Social Distortion coalesced with a harsher sound and

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[194] Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010, 103.

[195] Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Port Townsend, Washington: Feral House, 2010), 19.

fashion, and accompanied by the rise of slam dancing at local shows. The growth of punk in Orange County came as a shock to the region. Not only did many believe punk rock overall was dying out, but the fact that it could reemerge in an area most defined by Disneyland and master-planned communities caused even more surprise. As an article on the Southern California punk scene in an Orange County newspaper stated with bewilderment, "the [punk] scene has been delineated to all but the lowest order of miscreants who frequent Hollywood Boulevard. Not here surely?"[196]

Similar to earlier expressions of white youth rebellion during the 1950s with the initial introduction of rock 'n' roll, hardcore punk emerged in Orange County as the product of predominantly white, middle-class teens.[197] While a number of punks from broken troubled homes certainly existed, most acknowledged that the scene was not defined by marginalization based on class.[198] As Steven Blush, a former punk and author of the punk history *American Hardcore*, recalls: "Most of these kids came from suburban beach towns or the heart of Orange County. Those places, safe and sterile, in 1978-1979 spawned angry bands like Hermosa Beach's Black Flag, Huntington Beach's The Crowd, and Long Beach's Vicious Circle."[199] According to T.S.O.L. singer Jack Grisham, hardcore punk emerged out of class privilege and racial exclusion.

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[196] Michael Paskevich, "Punk Rockers Find Roosting Place in Mesa," *Daily Pilot*, June 15, 1979, C6.

[197] Despite the Orange County punk scene being predominantly white, it is important to note that the scene did include some Latinx teens, including members of the bands Black Flag, Saccharine Trust, and Suicidal Tendencies. For more on Black and Latinx punk musicians in neighboring Los Angeles, see Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2013), 123-167.

[198] Daniel S. Traber discusses the ironies of hardcore punk's rebellion in greater detail. See Traber, Daniel S. "L.A.'s 'White Minority': Punk and the Contradictions of Self-Marginalization." *Cultural Critique*, 48, Spring 2001, 30-64.

[199] Blush, 20.

"I think if we all lived in the ghetto, punk rock would've never started … a lot of us wrote about politics and change, but we didn't do anything about it.… We just did it to piss our parents off," he later recalled. Though some areas of the county, including cities like Santa Ana and Fullerton, were growing more racially diverse with a substantial Mexican American population, cities where the punk scene was concentrated, like Huntington Beach and Costa Mesa, were predominantly white areas.[200] Grisham conceded that most punk rockers in Orange County came from predominantly white communities, saying: "I don't think some of these kids from Huntington Beach saw a black man until they were 18 or 19 years old."[201]

Whereas English punk rock had emerged by the mid-1970s as an explicit expression of British working-class culture, and as a reaction to the country's recession and growing unemployment, initially, punk rock in Orange County appeared to be little more than a symptom of boredom on the part of predominantly white, middle-class suburban teens.[202] Cuckoo's Nest owner Jerry Roach summarized his feelings on punks by saying: "I just think they're rebelling, but I don't think they know what they're rebelling against. I just think it's the nature of youth to rebel." Punks themselves often explained their attraction to the subculture in a similar vein. "I didn't like being like everybody else," said one teenage girl. Meanwhile, Casey Royer of the band D.I. explained, "It's just pretty fun to be into something that people don't like."[203]

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[200] Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, eds., *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County Since World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 3.

[201] Eric Eberwein, "The Class of '81: Whatever Happened to Orange Country's Punk Rock Rebels?" *Orange Coast* magazine, September 1991, 92.

[202] For more interpretation on the meanings of early English punk, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Methuen, 1979).

[203] *Urban Struggle: The Battle of the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Paul Young (Endurance Pictures, 1983), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMarsBr2PKA.

Despite the contemporary tendency to dismiss punk as mindless rebellion, others offered a deeper understanding about the subversive potential about the growth of punk rock in Orange County. As Chuck Dukowski of Black Flag explained: "Before it was a threat, someone could laugh it off. When it became something that looked like it was an actual replacement for what other people were doing … they put a culture tariff on it, they try to get rid of it."[204] In no place was this presumed threat more glaring than in Costa Mesa, where country music fans at Zubie's witnessed firsthand on a nightly basis the disruption punk rock brought to the local community as they glanced across the parking lot they shared with punk rockers and the Cuckoo's Nest.

By 1980, Ronald Reagan, local cops, "rednecks," jocks, and suburban cowboys – who collectively represented the local culture which hardcore punk had first rebelled against – became the definitive, explicit enemies of SoCal punks. By this period, being a punk came with serious risks to personal safety. "Every party we went to there was a fight with people who didn't like the way we looked," said Mike Roche of the band T.S.O.L. "It was constant, and if you got caught somewhere along, three jocks would hop out of a car and chase you and beat [you]."[205] For Social Distortion frontman Mike Ness, this violence came as the result of a conscious choice, recalling: "Where we lived in Southern California, if you walked down the street with a leather jacket and dyed red hair, you were making a decision to get into some sort of confrontation"[206]

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[204] *Urban Struggle: The Battle of the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Paul Young (Endurance Pictures, 1983), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMarsBr2PKA.

[205] Mike Boehm, "Kids of the Black Hole: The 1970s Were Waning When Orange County's Punk Rock Scene Roared Its Dark, Hostile Message," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1989, 49-C.

[206] Blush, 27.

For some punks, these enemies only invoked more pride in punk identity. "People hated us, but we fed off it," said Casey Royer.[207]

By the end of the 1970s, violence became an integral part of the Southern California hardcore punk scene. This violence began with attacks against punks, though violence also existed among punks themselves. A key turning point occurred on St. Patrick's Day of 1979, in an event at the Elks Lodge in downtown Los Angeles and later referred to as the "Elks Lodge Massacre," when police inexplicably beat and arrested several punks at a show in Los Angeles.[208] Soon, media reports incited panic over the violence, suggesting that punks and punk rock instigated it. In the summer of 1980, a *Los Angeles Times* article touched on the anxiety the scene provoked, reporting that "accounts of senseless violence, vandalism and even mutilation at some area rock clubs read like reports from a war zone."[209] The article had an unforgiving impact on punks and local bands like Black Flag and Fear. Club managers refused to book their acts, and fears of mayhem arose wherever punk acts performed. In Huntington Beach, police even began to refer to punk bands as "gangs" (a term previously reserved for organized criminal activity). They targeted punks and punk rockers, collecting photographs and dossiers for police files.[210]

During this period, the Cuckoo's Nest in Costa Mesa emerged as the leading venue for hardcore punk. When owner Jerry Roach opened the club in 1976, he did so without intending to make the Nest a punk spot. But at a time when few places were willing to book punk acts, Roach

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[207] Boehm, 49-C.

[208] Dewar MacLeod, *Kids of the Black Hole: Punk Rock in Postsuburban California* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010,110.

[209] Patrick Goldstein, "Violence Sneaks into Punk Scene," *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 1980.

[210] Belsito and Davis, 46.

capitalized on the opportunity, saying his "club has found kinetic energy and increased cash by booking advocates of a supposedly dying style."[211] Within months, however, the Cuckoo's Nest drew fear and outrage among nearby business owners and other members of the local community. Soon, the club received more citizen complaints than any other area in the city as reports of violence, vandalism, and drug use mounted against the venue. By 1981, such concerns led to concerted efforts to shut the club down.[212]

No one was more invested in closing the Cuckoo's Nest than John Zubietta, owner of Zubie's, which shared a parking lot with the punk club and attracted a somewhat older crowd of country music fans and followers of the Urban Cowboy fashion craze. According to Zubietta, punk rockers stole food from his establishment, ripped out bathroom fixtures, and covered walls with graffiti.[213] Still, both attendees of the Cuckoo's Nest and the local media attested that trouble was often initiated by Zubie's customers and local police, not punk rockers. According to Casey Royer, nearly all of the punk club's issues with police stemmed from altercations between punks and Zubie's customers. "A lot of it had to do with this place next door where all the suburban cowboys went all the time and hung out," said Royer. "They used to hang out there and they used to hate the punks."[214]

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[211] Michael Paskevich, "Punk Rockers Find Roosting Place in Mesa," *Daily Pilot*, June 15, 1979, C6.

[212] Herman Wong, "Embattled Punk-Rock Club Still Open–Barely," *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 1981, 6.

[213] Jerry Clausen, "Mesa Punks Protest as City Pulls Permit," *Daily Pilot*, February 24, 1981, A2.

[214] *Urban Struggle: The Battle of the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Paul Young (Endurance Pictures, 1983), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMarsBr2PKA.

"Customers from Zubie's, 1712 Placentia Ave.," reported one local newspaper, "have been arrested for illegal activity in the same net that has caught up the younger crowd [of punk rockers]." At a city council meeting regarding the club, another article documented how "A parade of 'witnesses,' most of them patrons or employees of the Cuckoo's Nest, told the council that crowds at the rock club are no problem.… They conceded that many problems are prompted by 'hippie' and 'cowboy' patrons of nearby bars."[215]

Despite trouble caused by Zubie's patrons, local police, nearby business owners, and the Costa Mesa City Council generally expressed a solidarity with the country music fans of the area and worked together to eradicate the Cuckoo's Nest. According to some reports, local police even coordinated with the country music fans against the punk club. In one instance that resulted in local cops opening fire on the punk club, a local newspaper indicated that "the action centered initially around an off-duty police officer dressed like a cowboy driving his own car," adding that "it sounds like the police acted poorly in the incident," and that "the Cuckoo's Nest cannot be held accountable for the problem."[216] According to Casey Royer of D.I., collaboration between the cops and cowboys was common.

> The police conspired with [them]. They dressed their officers up as cowboys and they tried to trap punks into trusting them by the cowboy cops handing them beers. And then if they pull something out and they're under 21, if they pull out a joint or something they bust them.[217]

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[215] Clausen, A2.

[216] No author, "Trouble at the Cuckoo's Nest," *Daily Pilot*, February 27, 1981, 26.

[217] *Urban Struggle: The Battle of the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Paul Young (Endurance Pictures, 1983), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMarsBr2PKA.

Despite all the complaints leveraged at the Cuckoo's Nest, many invested in shunning the club admit they had not personally been negatively impacted by the punks. Instead, issues with the nightclub came following hearsay and suspicions about the spot. One woman in her early 50s who worked near the club explained that police had been the ones to confirm her fears about the Cuckoo's Nest, saying: "He told me it was just like I read about in the papers and see on TV. You know – violent dancing, people ripping at each other and slashing their bodies with knives and other things. Go in there? No, I've never been in there, but I hear it's really something." For others, the simple nonconformist image of punks was enough. "They're spooky," said one local businessman. "They scare the hell out of me."[218]

Soon, complaints leveraged at the Cuckoo's Nest evolved into a battle over the cultural image of the area. "They call this area we're in the cultural capital of Orange County, but I guess it depends on whose culture you're talking about," said Jerry Roach. As the Costa Mesa City Council prepared to hold a public meeting regarding complaints over the club, Roach encouraged punks to mobilize to voice dissent at the meeting. "Come and see the trial of punk rock!" urged Roach on the recording machine at the Cuckoo's Nest, where punks would call to hear updates on which bands would be playing the venue that week. "They're trying to make punk rock illegal in Costa Mesa – set a national precedent," the recording concluded.[219]

The council voted 4-0 to temporarily shut down the Cuckoo's Nest by revoking its entertainment permit. Thereafter the club's attorney, Ron Talmo, successfully appealed the

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[218] Donna Davis, "Punk Rock Showdown," *The Register*, February 22, 1981, B3.

[219] Donna Davis, "Punk Rock Showdown," *The Register*, February 22, 1981, B3.

decision to the California Supreme Court in May of 1981, alleging that club patrons' First Amendment rights had been violated.[220] As he explained,

> We've got sort of a social phenomenon over there. We've got a group of ex-jocks … who simply don't like the sights or sounds of nonconformist-type groups. It's nothing new. The police had the same difficulties with the beatniks, the hippies, the flower children and the surfers.[221]

Word of the Cuckoo's Nest's legal victory over the city council came as unwelcome news to Zubie's customers. "Look, you don't see a regular person over there," said one Zubie's regular. "It's sad to see it open," said another customer. "To me it's an exhibition of violence and unhappiness rather than happiness. A person would like to go out and have a beer and be happy and not have to look at something like that."[222] To these country music fans, the bleached hair, tattered clothes, and loud sounds of punks was too much to endure.

Costa Mesa officials changed tactics. Members of the city council held that the Cuckoo's Nest had no dance permit and refused to issue one. The Nest closed by the end of 1981. As one of the few punk venues in Southern California at the time, the club's closure caused a substantial blow to the local punk rock scene. "Since the demise of the club, hard-core punk has all but vanished in Orange County," reported the *Los Angeles Times* in 1983. As Jerry Roach reflected

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[220] Donna Davis, "Punkers Jubilant, Neighbors Displeased at Club's Reopening," *The Register*, May 3, 1981, A3.

[221] Donna Davis, "Punk Rock Showdown," *The Register*, February 22, 1981, B4.

[222] Donna Davis, "Punkers Jubilant, Neighbors Displeased at Club's Reopening," *The Register*, May 3, 1981, A3.

on the club's closing, he remarked: "Maybe this will be the first time in history that a fad is stamped out by the authorities."[223]

But almost as soon as the Cuckoo's Nest closed, efforts to capitalize on punk rock finally bore fruit. Local bands and record labels were beginning to make money off punk music. The Adolescents' debut album in 1980, for instance, sold around 90,000 records.[224] Locally, the record label Posh Boy records, founded in 1978, also found opportunity in recording punk rock. As the label's founder, Robbie Fields, explained: "I felt the kids in the suburbs had a greater feel for popular culture, and the popular culture that swept Orange County in 1978 to 1981 was punk."[225] By the end of the 1980s, Social Distortion became the first Orange County punk band signed to major label, Epic Records. Most ironically, Social Distortion incorporated heavy county music influences in some of its most profitable releases, as heard on songs like "This Time Darlin'," and the band's cover of the classic country song "Making Believe" (recorded by several country artists, but made most famous by Kitty Wells's 1955 recorded version) on its 1992 release *Somewhere between Heaven and Hell*. Though new punk bands like the Offspring and Pennywise emerged in Orange County throughout the 1980s, no longer did they face fierce resistance or represent the shock and threat to local space that the Cuckoo's Nest represented at the beginning of the decade. By the 1990s, rather than be eradicated, punk rock became commodified and mainstream. The punk rock store Hot Topic opened its first location in Montclair, California, in 1989, and within a handful of years the store could be found in

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[223] Randy Lewis, "Film Insightful on Punk Phenomenon," *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1983.

[224] Eric Eberwein, "The Class of '81: Whatever Happened to Orange Country's Punk Rock Rebels?" *Orange Coast* magazine, September 1991, 96.

[225] Boehm, 51-A.

thousands of shopping malls throughout the county. In 1995, the Vans Warped Tour likewise commodified the punk rock experience with national tours that continue into the present. Like white migrant groups including the Okies, and like country music, punk rock, too, overcame its marginality.

But while the shock of punk rock in Orange County increasingly wore off following the closing of the Cuckoo's Nest, the attack on punk in Costa Mesa foreshadowed a national culture war lead by conservative politicians and groups like the Parents' Music Resource Center throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s that sought to censor popular music and warn parents about the corrupting effects of some popular bands and musicians, while at the same time defining country music as the sound wholesome, Reagan-era conservatism. Though little evidence exists to suggest Ronald Reagan actively listened to country music on his own, he nevertheless identified the genre's listeners like those in Orange County as his voting base and found value in associating himself with the music. The country music industry likewise saw use in latching itself to the president, and collaborated with him on a number of key events throughout his terms of office. As the urban cowboy craze faded, it still found a welcome audience in the president in 1983, when Reagan joined with the Country Music Association to celebrate the organization's 25th anniversary in an event hosted at the White House. At the celebration, the president lauded the genre as both wholesome and definitive of the era's conservatism, saying: "Country music…is a goodwill ambassador for the country's high standards, our strong spirit and self reliance."[226]

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[226] Bob Millard, "Reagan Entertains Country Music Stars at White House," *Nashville Banner*, March 16, 1983, B-18.

The Parents' Music Resource Center, a committee formed in 1985 to create awareness for parents about what their children were listening to, also heralded country music as a beacon of wholesomeness in relation to other genres of popular music, including some lingering elements of punk rock. One of the group's founders, Pam Howar, even identified punk culture as a reason for what compelled her to organize the group, saying: "One day at the breakfast table my daughter was listening to the music, and I noticed this punk look about her. I started thinking, 'We'd better get a peer group together." Lead by the wives of prominent Washington politicians, the PMRC created a "Filthy Fifteen" list of artists, including Madonna, Def Leppard, and AC/DC, to alert the public about what they viewed as music too sexual or violent for youth to listen to. As tensions rose throughout the 1980s between the group and others who critiqued the organization for limiting free speech, country music was immediately understood to be an ally of the PMRC. Susan Baker, one of the group's leaders, for instance, was reported as a "devout Christian who favors classical and Country & Western music."[227] Though the PMRC was founded nearly four years following the closing of the Cuckoo's Nest, it was created with the same intentions behind punk rock's resistance in Orange County, and represented the roots of a culture war within popular music that persisted throughout the 1980s and and into the 1990s, resulting in the introduction of "parental advisory" stickers to alert consumers about an album's contents in 1990.

Though punk rockers and country music fans violently clashed in the parking lot between the Cuckoo's Nest and Zubie's, both groups of music listeners ultimately shared a similar legacy, one fostered by their shared suburban space. Analyzing how each group interpreted this space,

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[227] Roger Wolmuth, "Has Rock Gone too Far," *People*, September 16, 1985.

and how each group was received by the local community, reveals much about not only Orange County's culture and politics in the early 1980s, but about the state of national and cultural political trends during this period. At a time when conservatism appeared to dominate social, cultural, and political life, hardcore punk rock offered one of the first cultural waves of resistance to the conservatism of the Reagan era, and foreshadowed the larger culture wars that emerged between Reaganites and youth culture in the 1980s and beyond.[228]

[228] For more on the cultural and political resistance to conservatism in the 1980s, see Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011) and Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Cool Town: How Athens, Georgia Launched Alternative Music and Changed American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

Chapter 4

The Rise and Fall of Urban Cowboy:
The Country Music Industry's Marketing Practices in the Reagan Era, 1978-1988

In 1980, country singer Hank Williams Jr. released "Dinosaur," a song that proved definitive of key transformations and sites of conflict occurring in popular culture and politics at the time. The track tells the story of a man upset and uncomfortable by recent changes made to a bar that once played country music, where he once "had a lot of fun in this old hang-out," and where he would "get stoned at the jukebox and stay out of fights." To his disappointment, the nightclub has become a place that resembles a spaceship, with flashing lights, or, in other words, became a disco. The man's homophobia (revealed in the line saying, "gay guitars pickers don't turn me on") ultimately leads him out of the bar, distraught over displays of masculinity in a place where rugged, straight men like him once dominated.

Despite Williams's anxieties over the state of manhood, transitions in popular music and the presidency appeared to signal an aggressive return to more rigid, heteronormative definitions of masculinity. In fact, by the time "Dinosaur" was released, many of the discos like the one Williams described were in the process of turning back into country bars, only this time they'd be bigger and more popular than ever before. "It was the year of the urban cowboy," reported one article describing the year "Dinosaur" was released. It was "the year the disco gave way to patrons wearing giant cowboy hats and freshly polished boots, people who danced to western swing music rather than the increasingly tiresome beat of disco."[229]

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[229] Joe Edwards, Associated Press, "A Year for Urban Cowboys," *The Record*, January 2, 1981.

Between 1978 and 1982, country music experienced its largest gains to date in terms of both record sales and overall popularity.[230] The rise of country music's dominance (following disco's abrupt crash in sales in 1979) also provided a soundtrack to the related "Urban Cowboy" fashion craze that swept the country by the end of the decade. Many interpreted the fall of disco–a symbol of racial and sexual liberation–-and the subsequent ascent of country music and the cowboy–-symbols of white heteronormativity–-as symptomatic of the country's turn to conservatism that resulted in the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. But despite country music and the cowboy's synonymity with conservatism, neither were exclusively the product of white heteronormativity. Country music sounds continued to borrow from Black music (including disco), while the cowboy was invoked in both gay and straight communities. And like disco, the urban cowboy fad didn't dominate for long. By the early 1980s, reports rolled in about the death of the urban cowboy, as Americans again demanded more inclusive images of race and gender in popular culture, seen in figures like Michael Jackson, Prince, and Madonna, and the introduction of MTV. But even after the fall of urban cowboy, the country music industry in Nashville revitalized and continued to lean in to definitions of the genre as white and conservative, making the music a cultural symbol for the era's conservatism and the antithesis of youth culture above all else.[231]

In the years of transition between disco and country music's cultural dominance, during the mid-to-late 1970s, anxiety abounded surrounding gender and sexuality. As feminists and

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[230] John Lomax III, *Nashville: Music City USA* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 8.

[231] Jocelyn Neal has explained that during this period, "allegiance to country was primarily displayed in its political and sociological content rather than its musical style." Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 303.

conservative activists like Phyllis Schlafly battled over the fate of the Equal Rights Amendment, concerns also mounted over masculinity. For many, the rising popularity of disco and the 1977 film that launched its dominance, *Saturday Night Fever*, spoke to such anxieties. Disco had first emerged in nightclubs in cities like New York and Philadelphia in the late 1960s, and was associated most with the African American and Latino gay men who enjoyed the music. By the time the genre became mainstream in the mid-1970s, it remained a symbol of racial and sexual liberation, and as such received criticism, particularly from rock music fans. The backlash against disco came to a head in the summer of 1979, when thousands (almost all young, straight, white, and male rock music fans) convened at Comiskey Park in Chicago for "Disco Demolition Night," when crates of disco records were detonated as the crowd chanted "disco sucks!" from the stands. Within months, disco sales plummeted and the music was declared dead by news outlets around the country.[232]

In its place, country music and the "urban cowboy" craze spoke to the evolving desires of many Americans following years of mounting cultural conflict, and political and economic unease. By the late 1970s, a dark mood overtook the country as Americans were disillusioned after years of economic recession and political mistrust following the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. Media fascinations with serial killers like Ted Bundy and the Jonestown massacre exemplified the gloom of the period. By 1979, as the country endured continued stagnating wages and an energy crisis, President Jimmy Carter responded by scolding Americans for their overconsumption and spoke to an overall lack of hope for the future. Following Carter's failure

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[232] Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash Against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (May, 2007), 276-306.; Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 204-8.

to effectively respond to the Iranian hostage crisis, Americans became certain they wanted a new president. And though Carter's soft-spoken and cardigan-wearing ways had initially appeared refreshing to many Americans at the beginning of his presidency, by the end of his term, he was instead viewed as weak and effeminate.[233]

Amid such discomfort, Americans expressed a growing interest in nostalgia and political leadership which offered faith in the future without the sacrifice demanded by President Carter. Under these circumstances, country music and the cowboy increasingly resonated. Films like *Grease* and the television show *Happy Days* offered easygoing memories of the post-World War II period, while the record-breaking popularity of *Star Wars* offered a revamp of the Western films that dominated earlier generations. Politically, the rise of the New Right and its connections to the Christian Right, and their allegiance to the protection of "family values" predicated on heteronormativity and the nuclear family (along with attacks on feminism, abortion, and gay rights), complemented country music and the myth of the cowboy's optics of wholesomeness. In 1978, an article in *Esquire*, "The Ballad of the Urban Cowboy," made links between the state of the country, religion, and the symbolism of the cowboy, noting: "In these anxious days, some Americans have turned to God; others to gurus. But more and more turn to the cowboy hat."[234] In 1979, as disco sales faded and music sales overall suffered, country music and religious music sales fared the best.[235] By the election of Reagan in 1980, no figure dominated American culture

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[233] Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 25.

[234] Aaron Latham, "The Ballad of the Urban Cowboy: America's Search for True Grit," *Esquire*, September 12, 1978, 22.

[235] Gerry Wood, "A Steady Port Prevails in a Stormy Year," *Billboard's World of Country Music*, October 13, 1979, 3.

more than the cowboy. “These days, there are cowboys everywhere, all kinds of ‘em,” reported *Country Music* magazine.[236] A former cowboy of the silver screen, Reagan provided a stark contrast to President Carter, and personified the heroic figure of American myth with his charismatic rhetoric of strength and hope. The celebration of the cowboy was just one of many factors that helped propel the genre most associated with the figure to new heights. Television shows like *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *Dallas*, and films like *Coal Miner’s Daughter* (documenting the life of Loretta Lynn), *9 to 5* (starring Dolly Parton), *Honeysuckle Rose* (starring Willie Nelson), and of course, *Urban Cowboy* (based on the 1978 *Esquire* article), likewise contributed to country music’s popularity.

By 1980, the country music boom had many making the prediction that the genre would become the “pop music of the future” and “the trend of the Eighties.”[237] By the time *Urban Cowboy* was released in the summer of 1980, country music and invocations of the cowboy evolved into a full-on fad. Though the film wasn’t a box office hit, its soundtrack topped the charts and triggered spikes in country music record sales and radio play. By the end of the year, country music replaced pop music as the second-best selling music in the nation (second only to rock music), and over twenty percent of radio stations played country music full-time.[238] Around the country, former disco clubs transformed into country bars with mechanical bulls, sales of cowboy boots and hats rose dramatically, and white collar workers became part-time cowboys. “Today it is chic to be a cowboy,” explained one article, “even if you are an executive

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[236] Ed Ward, “Bionic Cowboy,” *Country Music* magazine, March 1978, 37.

[237] Betty Franklin, “Country Cashes In,” *Forbes*, October 13, 1980, 181.

[238] John Lomax III, *Nashville: Music City USA* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 158.

for a large corporation or live in the city or suburbs."[239] In Southern California alone, an estimated one thousand clubs were country-themed at the peak of the craze. "Trendy city folks, who last year wouldn't be caught dead wearing cowboy hats and boots, now sport $500 hand-tooled boots," reported the *Los Angeles Times*, adding: "Neiman Marcus in Beverly Hills and Newport Beach, for example, has a full complement of men and women's western wear clothing under its own Red River brand."[240] In New York City, reports observed that "The Big Apple is country to the core. They're even wearing western boots on Broadway…Yessir, partner, the Yankees in the Northeast are feeling the urge to saddle up and hit the trail, even if it stops at the Lincoln Tunnel."[241] In 1981, country singer Barbara Mandrell's number-one hit "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool" commented on the urban cowboy craze and expressed pride in being country before the fad, saying: "I took a lot of kiddin', 'cause I never did fit in, now look at everybody tryin' to be what I was then. I was country, when country wasn't cool."

Participants in the urban cowboy trend proved eager to separate themselves from the disco fad it appeared to replace. At the premiere of the film *Urban Cowboy*, the fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg appeared in cowboy boots and a sheriff's badge which read "disco sucks," while regular patrons of Gilley's, the nightclub at the center of the film, arrived in cars which bore bumper stickers with the same slogan deriding disco.[242] Others suggested country music was more substantive than disco. Whereas disco had been seen as the ultimate symbol of

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[239] Drew Crouthamel, "Stampede Catches Up With Him," *Democrat and Chronicle*, August 2, 1982.

[240] Dennis McLellan, "'80s Cowboy Dressing Up, Kicking Back," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1980.

[241] Hugh Foley, "City Slickers are Becoming City 'Kickers,'" *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XV, No. 7, July 1982, 16-17.

[242] Michael Ennis, The Conqueror Worm," *Texas Monthly*, August 1980, p. 124.; Associated Press, "Urban Cowboy Craze Lingers," *Lansing State Journal*, November 22, 1980.

superficiality, country music and its rise were interpreted as a return to more serious times. Frances Preston, the vice-president of Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI) in Nashville, and one of the country music industry's most respected leaders, explained, "People all over the country feel that we're in serious times right now. It's not an era of frivolity, and people aren't looking for frivolous entertainment. There's a simplicity and down-to-earth quality about country music that people look for even more when times are hard."[243] Singer Mickey Gilley echoed this interpretation, saying: "Disco had no variety. There was just one beat to it so it all sounded the same," adding: "The kids are enjoying country music because songs are being written that they relate to."[244]

In Nashville, country music industry leaders proudly welcomed the boost in sales experienced by the urban cowboy craze. Frances Preston proudly reported 1980 as the "best year the Nashville industry has ever had," saying the city now played a leading role in the global music industry. "People in New York and Los Angeles—and increasingly in foreign countries—are looking here for ideas."[245] For Jo Walker-Meador, the executive director of the Country Music Association, the rise of country music provided validation of what she'd long anticipated, saying the craze "offered irrefutable proof of what we have been saying all along—country music is fast becoming one of the most dominant music forms of the decade. Country music has become a vital part of American culture, as evidenced in fashion, media, motion pictures, and

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[243] Laura Eipper Hill, "Country Music's Never Been Bigger," *The Tennessean*, January 11, 1981.

[244] Associated Press, "Urban Cowboy Craze Lingers," *Lansing State Journal*, November 22, 1980.

[245] Laura Eipper Hill, "Country Music's Never Been Bigger," *The Tennessean*, January 11, 1981.

even best-selling books."[246] Meanwhile, a review of *Urban Cowboy* in one of Nashville's newspapers praised the film for its sincerity, saying: "There is a reality in this two-hour plus movie…Whether that reality stems from the music, the hard-working, hard-drinking cast of the very real people who provide the background and life of this film…It is simply very real."[247]

Initially, country music's spike in popularity appeared to occur so rapidly that its newfound dominance perplexed some at the time. "Only sociologists may be able to figure out the country music boom," reported *Forbes*.[248] Still, most equated the genre's popularity with the new sense of conservatism that came with the Reagan presidency and the rise of the influential conservative New Right. "The phenomenal popularity that country music has enjoyed recently… may have something to do with the general resurgence of political conservatism and patriotic fervor," observed the *New York Times.* Country music star Merle Haggard echoed this interpretation, saying: "I think we're experiencing a feeling of patriotism that hasn't surfaced for a long time…and I'm glad to see it. We had dipped to an all-time low on the other side not too long ago. But you have to remember that it's happened before. Every time patriotism comes to the surface, you'll find country music, cowboys and so on becoming popular."[249]

For others, country music's rise was also symptomatic of anxiety over the declining state of the United States on the world stage, and a nostalgia for the peak years of prosperity following World War II. As Merle Haggard pined for a time "before microwave ovens when a girl could

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[246] No author, "Country Soars to Highest Sales Ever," *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XIV, No. 6, October 1981, 9.

[247] Dick Wolff, "'Urban Cowboy' Offers a Slice of Reality," *Nashville Banner*, June 12, 1980.

[248] Betty Franklin, "Country Cashes In," *Forbes*, October 13, 1980, 181.

[249] Robert Palmer, "The Pop Life; Riding the Country's Wave of Patriotism?" *New York Times*, May 13, 1981.

still cook, and still would" in his popular song, "Are the Good Times Really Over," others also expressed nostalgia for previous decades. Sandy Brokaw, the agent of Mickey Gilley, a country music artist who played a central role in *Urban Cowboy*, believed economic and political anxiety were at the heart of craze, citing concerns that countries like Japan and others in Europe had surpassed the United States in industries like auto manufacturing. "Subconsciously," he observed, "we began to look for a music that would take us back to the '40s and '50s when Americans felt they had the greatest country on earth."[250] Such interpretations welcomed the conservative leadership of Ronald Reagan. "He's the only chance this country has," said country music star Marty Robbins of the president.[251]

The urban cowboy craze wasn't the first time country music's popularity had been linked to nostalgia for a previous time period. While country music's dominance in the late 1970s may have appeared sudden to some, the genre had enjoyed steady popularity throughout the 1970s before exploding to new levels by the end of the decade. Just a few years prior to the peak of the urban cowboy craze, another fad related to country music had triggered romanticism for the yeoman farmer of Jeffersonian myth. As celebrations of the nation's bicentennial took place in 1976, many Americans also participated in the trend of "redneck chic" and dressed up as the stereotypical white Southern farmer figure, the redneck.[252] As white Americans transitioned from appropriating images of the redneck to the cowboy by the end of the 1970s, some commented on

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[250] Jack Hurst, "Thanks, Cowboy! Nashville Loved That Urban Dude," *Chicago Tribune*, February 7, 1982.

[251] Joe Edwards, Associated Press, "Marty Robbins Directs Salvo at 'Urban Cowboy' Craze," *The Missoulian*, January 9, 1982.

[252] Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 114-7.

a lingering desire among white Americans to learn more about their roots after such interests had dominated American culture and peaked after the release of the enormously popular television series *Roots* in 1977. One article reasoned that the celebration of the cowboy had come "thanks to the cyclical nature of popular culture and the search for white folks roots."[253]

Like the redneck figure, appropriations of the cowboy alluded to mythic, celebratory renditions of the American past with a rustic white male figure at the center. The urban cowboy craze became yet another moment that revealed the role country music played in falsely verifying myths about the American past, even though the genre was far from the first to perpetuate myths about the cowboy. Since the 19th century, myths about the American West placed a white cowboy at the center of heroic tales of American conquest. From literature including both popular dime novels and what was considered more serious literature on the West, to Buffalo Bill Cody's "Wild Wild West Show" of the late 19th and early 20th century, to the Western films that dominated the film industry during the first half of the 20th century, the imagined West has played a dominant and reoccurring role in the cultural consciousness of Americans.[254] By the time of the urban cowboy fad, Roy Rogers understood the moment to be a celebration of the country's actual past, saying: "I think it's our history; the winning of the West. It's really the only true history that America has."[255] During his first year as president, Reagan also leaned on the urban cowboy craze to perpetuate a whitewashed version of U.S. history,

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[253] Bob Claypool, *Saturday Night at Gilley's* (New York: Delilah/Grove Press, 1980), 5.

[254] David Brion Davis, "Ten-Gallon Hero: The Myth of the Cowboy," in Patrick Gerstner and Nicholas Cords, eds., *Myth America: A Historical Anthology, Volume II* (St. James, Ny: Brandywine Press, 1997); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

[255] Dennis McLellan, "'80s Cowboy Dressing Up, Kicking Back," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1980.

saying: “Country music represents the story of out nation. It tells of our way of life and the men and women who built this nation and made it the greatest land on earth.”[256] Such interpretations played well to the era’s conservative rhetoric of self reliance and antigovernment assistance. In New York City, the manager of the popular country bar, Lone Star Cafe, said: “Americans want to feel that they’re in control once again…The country was built by people like that…They want to be on their own, no welfare, working like their folks did…We all, as Americans, want to be able to say that we can make it on our own. Country music and country dress reflect those values, the heart and soul of our country.”[257]

But despite widespread interpretations that the urban cowboy moment was a symptom of growing white, heteronormative conservatism, country music and the cowboy were in truth perhaps more undefinable than ever before. While country music appeared to symbolize conservatism in musical form, its identity was in limbo. “1978 has been the most topsy-turvy, unpredictable, frustrating, enjoyable, daffy, successful year in the annals of country music success,” explained *Billboard*.[258] Audibly, the genre had never been more indistinct. Longtime country artists like Bill Anderson and even George Jones were cutting disco songs, Dolly Parton (who also graced the cover of *Playboy* in 1978) and Eddie Rabbitt songs were crossing over and topping the pop charts, Willie Nelson’s *Stardust* (a number one album in 1978) was a collection of jazzy pop standards, performers like Hank Williams Jr. and Charlie Daniels carried strong

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[256] “White House Message on Country Music Month,” reprinted in *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XIV, No. 6, October 1981, 3.

[257] Hugh Foley, “City Slickers are Becoming City ‘Kickers,’” *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XV, No. 7, July 1982, 17.

[258] Gerry Wood, “Most Topsy-Turvy, Frustrating, Successful Year in Country Music,” *Billboard’s World of Country Music*, October 21, 1978, 3.

rock influences in their music, and sexy male stars like Kenny Rogers were also branded as adult contemporary artists.[259] As the *New York Times* summarized, "Country music no longer knows what it is or should be."[260] Country music historian Bill Malone also described a confused state for the genre, saying: "Country music today is trying to be all things to all people. Some of it appeals to the kinds of people who used to listen to Dean Martin and Perry Como, some of it attracts blue-collar working people, and some of it–'progressive' country and bluegrass–is big on college campuses."[261]

Like country music sounds, the cowboy was also invoked by different groups of Americans. Though Jim Salem, an American Studies professor at the University of Alabama, reasoned that the urban cowboy craze signaled a "return to traditional sex roles," the cowboy still remained the source of gender fluidity and anxiety by the early 1980s.[262] Not only was the cowboy embraced by those who identified with conservatism and heteronormativity, but the figure was also invoked within gay communities.[263] An article in *Country Music* magazine spoke to the widespread use of the cowboy, saying:

> "Cowboy. Now there is one confusing word. These days, there are cowboys everywhere, all kinds of 'em. You've got your cosmic cowboys, your Dallas Cowboys, your Clonakilty cowboys over in Eire, your cowboy boots, your cowboy hats, your cowboy

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[259] For more on the persistent multiracial presence in country music, see Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

[260] Ken Emerson, "Country Music–Confusion in Profusion," *New York Times*, November 18, 1979.

[261] Harold Kennedy, "America Sings Along with Country Music," reprinted in *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XV, No. 9, September 1982, 11.

[262] United Press International, "Traditional Sex Roles Seen in American 'Cowboy Craze,'" *The Tennessean*, August 25, 1980.

[263] Echols, 121-57; Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

> shirts and cowboy belts and cowboy string ties, and you've even got your Frye-booted female followers of novelist Tom Robbins who walk around with a book called *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. Imagine–cowgirls! There are other usages, too/my father calls reckless drivers 'cowboys,' and there are some cities in this nation where, if you ask for a 'cowboy bar,' you'll be directed to a place where male homosexuals strut around wearing denim and looking weathered. I tell you, cowboy is sure a mixed-up word these days."[264]

Perhaps the best example of the cowboy's mixed imagery and evidence of lingering gender anxiety was found in the film *Urban Cowboy*, based on the 1978 *Esquire* article, "The Ballad of the Urban Cowboy," by Aaron Latham.[265] The film, like the article, documents the after-hours entertainment sought at Gilley's, a country music nightclub in Pasadena, Texas, a suburb of Houston. At the heart of the story is the mechanical bull, the source of constant conflict between men, and particularly between men and women. For men, the machine is the ultimate way to perform masculinity: "Bragging about your injuries is another important part of being an urban cowboy. The more banged up you are, the more of a he-man you are," noted Latham.[266] But tension arose especially in instances where women rode the bull better than men. In both the article and film, divorce between the main characters results after the woman rides the bull better than her husband. As cowboy nightclubs overtook American nightlife by the early 1980s, similar anxieties around gender continued to manifest. "In the cowboy nightclubs, men can play the role of the macho cowboy by riding a mechanical bucking bull or slugging a punching bag," reported *The Wall Street Journal*, before adding: "It turns out that some women can ride the mechanical

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[264] Ed Ward, "Bionic Cowboy," *Country Music* magazine, March 1978, 37.

[265] Jason Mellard, *Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 171-93.

[266] Aaron Latham, "The Ballad of the Urban Cowboy: America's Search for True Grit," *Esquire*, September 12, 1978, 24.

bull just as well as men can."[267] Meanwhile, others observed possible alternate masculinities in *Urban Cowboy*. Despite the womanizing exterior of the film's main character, reports from its premiere observed that "One shockingly cynical observer said that despite all the philandering, he thought the movie was about a cowboy trying to come out."[268]

But what was most striking about widespread understandings that the rise of country music was linked to conservatism was the fact that both country and disco music shared much more in common than was initially observed. Both genres played a role in popularizing social dancing after it had become less common over previous decades. Though dancing had been popular in the era when jazz dominated music listening, rock and roll's emergence in the 1950s triggered an end to dancing. As disco made dancing mainstream again by the mid-1970s, the transition to country dancing and even country discos by the end of the decade should not have appeared all that unusual.[269] In many instances, discos successfully blended disco culture with country and cowboy styles. In New York City, one headline from 1979 stated that "Cowboy Disco" was the "Latest Dance Craze to Hit NY," while in Dallas the same year a popular bar named Diamond Jim's also opened and branded itself as a country disco.[270] Evolutions in the sounds of country music likewise made dancing more appropriate for the genre, and several country artists even adopted disco sounds to do so. Even the most traditional country artists had

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[267] Earl C. Gottschalk Jr., "New Nightclubs Are Different: The Bull Throws the People," *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 1980, 1 and 19.

[268] Michael Ennis, The Conqueror Worm," *Texas Monthly*, August 1980, 126.

[269] Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 306-7.

[270] Nancy Trachtenberg, "Cowboy Disco: Latest Dance Craze to Hit N.Y.," *Country Music* magazine, November 1979, 15.

capitalized on the disco trend, including the George Jones track, "I Ain't Got No Business Doin' Business Today," and other delightfully bizarre songs like Bill Anderson's "Double S" and Glenn Sutton's "Redneck Disco."[271] The films that helped launch each genre's dominance–*Saturday Night Fever* and *Urban Cowboy*, both starring John Travolta– also shared much in common in their story lines. Both were about young, working class men caught in a difficult world to navigate, where they faced anxieties surrounding their masculinity and more difficult economic prospects than earlier generations had.

But also like disco, the country music fad came on strong before abruptly crashing. While the urban cowboy may have been riding high at the time Reagan was elected, it wasn't long before there were signs the ride was coming to an end. As early as 1981, country nightclubs reported sharp declines in patronage. In Atlanta, a booking agent for country bands explained, "I'm getting cancellations everywhere. The urban cowboy fad is dead," adding: "It is no longer fashionable to be a Peachtree cowboy."[272] In Michigan, a local newspaper on the country music scene celebrated the decline of the mechanical bull and enthusiastically reported: "THE BULL IS DEAD–THE BULL IS DEAD!!! HOORAY!!!"[273] Around the country, sales of mechanical bulls dropped dramatically. In 1981, Gilley's, the club at the center of *Urban Cowboy*, reported selling 25 mechanical bulls per week to clubs across the U.S., but sold just one each week by 1982.[274] The abrupt decline of urban cowboy may have had something to do with the lack of economic

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[271] Hughes, 167-88.

[272] Ron Hudspeth, "Era of Urban Cowboy Fades at Nightspots," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 9, 1981.

[273] No author, "The Bull is Dead–The Bull is Dead!!! Hooray!!!" *Country in the City News*, June 1981, p. 11.

[274] Janet Scudder, "Stores Say that the Urban Cowboy Has Galloped Off Into the Sunset," *Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 1982.

relief Americans felt under a new president. While many looked to Reagan for relief, the country instead entered another recession within months of the new president taking office, lasting from the summer of 1981 to the end of the following year.

The rapid fall of the urban cowboy fad came amidst widespread concerns voiced by the country music industry. While the growth of the genre was initially welcomed by industry leaders in Nashville, concerns soon mounted that the music had grown too popular, too fast. While Country Music Association (CMA) executive director Jo Walker-Meador took a realistic but still optimistic outlook on the urban cowboy craze, saying "it would not surprise me to see it end, but again, it's just one more step in the growth of country music," others held less hopeful views.[275] Anxieties about the future of the industry were on full display at the CMA's annual Talent Buyer's Seminar in 1981, where attendees heard country artists "describe the growing pains and areas of concern associated with the rapid rise in popularity of country music." Artist Brenda Lee described growing pressures she faced, saying, "Audiences are demanding better shows for their entertainment dollar," while singer Bobby Bare explained: "If an artist does have a great product, he has to get out there and promote it, be visible. The days of laying back and doing nothing are over. We must all work our asses off."[276] Meanwhile, members of the radio industry expressed similar worries. After the number of county music radio listeners doubled over a handful of years by the early 1980s, Don Nelson, a radio industry executive, expressed concerns over the inevitable fall back to reality for country radio."There will be a shake out of

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[275] Jim Sparks and John Word, "*Advantage* Interviews Jo Walker," *Advantage*, October 1980, 35.

[276] No author, "'What is Country Music,'" *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XIV, No. 7, November 1981, 16.

Country Music radio stations within the next few years. The Country listener…has been buffeted by a bewildering choice of stations to listen to."[277]

Once it became clear the urban cowboy fad was indeed on its way out, the country music industry was quick to write-off the trend as unrepresentative of the core country music audience. Though Barbara Mandrell had scored a number-one hit in 1981 with "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool," industry leaders in Nashville now reasoned that the genre had simply become too fashionable for its own good. According to them, country music was never actually cool, despite what many had briefly believed. Buddy Killen, a prominent song publisher and producer in Nashville, saw the trend as out of rhythm with country music culture, saying it quickly fell out of style because it "was incompatible with the normal lifestyle of the hip crowd it briefly diverted."[278] Rick Blackburn, head of CBS Records in Nashville agreed, concluding: "Country music as a fad, as part of a lifestyle, is very 'out,' particularly with young people."[279] As both Killen and Blackburn suggested, the younger, hip individuals drawn to the urban cowboy craze were simply unrepresentative of what they understood as the more typical, mature, adult country music audience.

By the mid-1980s, the country music industry's assertions that country music was not a product of the young and hip became glaringly obvious in the face of a new and revitalized youth culture that was broadcast on the new cable television channel, Music Television (MTV), which

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[277] Don Nelson, "The Acceptance of Country Music Radio Myth or Reality," *CMA Close-Up, Vol. XV, No. 3, March 1982, 2.*

[278] Jack Hurst, "Thanks, Cowboy! Nashville Loved That Urban Dude," *Chicago Tribune*, February 7, 1982.

[279] Robert K. Oermann, "Industry Rallies to Fight Country Music Slump," *The Tennessean*, January 24, 1985, p. 1-D, 2-D.

launched in 1981. As country music sales declined during the first half of the 1980s, evolutions in popular culture again pitted the genre against competing music trends that, unlike country music, represented racial and gender multiplicity. New artists like Madonna and Prince defined a new era for pop music, and their expressive sexuality was on full display in the newly introduced and revolutionary music videos which aired on MTV. As parents and conservative leaders reacted in shock to what they deemed as music unsuitable for teenagers, country music was meanwhile heralded as a much needed bastion of wholesomeness in the face of a growing music culture that they believed was corrupting youth. Amidst a growing culture war, country music was embraced as the ultimate symbol of the era's conservatism and wholesomeness, despite suggestions the genre was not always as wholesome as its supporters claimed. Despite lagging sales, the country industry and leading conservatives worked together to lean in to the genre's associations with Reagan-era conservatism, and in the process recouped lost record sales by branding their music as the antithesis of period's youth culture. As the Nashville industry reacted and regrouped in response to the country music slump, it refocused its efforts on homing in on the affluent, adult white audience it had traditionally targeted, and set its sights on the affluent baby boom generation in particular.

While country music record sales began to drop after 1982, it was not until 1985 that the industry was forced to regroup its marketing efforts. In January of 1985, *The Tennessean* described a dire situation for the country music industry, reporting: "Country music's downslide has happened during a year when the record business as a whole was booming. A strong comeback for black music, the success of movie soundtracks, and the surge in popularity of heavy metal music made for a record-setting year in music sales." As a result, the newspaper

concluded: "The 'Urban Cowboy' boom era is definitely over."[280] Shortly after, *Billboard* reported that "Label executives are admittedly concerned by the defection of younger record buyers to newly revitalized black and pop music"[281] As months passed, several more troubling reports followed. "The urban cowboy has been heading for the last roundup for years," explained one article. "Sales of country records have been slipping since 1982. They had a 15 percent share of the market that year. In 1984, they had just 9 percent."[282]

But it wasn't until the *New York Times* reported on the downslide that the country industry really took offense. In September of 1985, Robert Palmer reported: "Audiences are dwindling, sales of country records are plummeting and the fabled Nashville Sound…may soon sound as dated as the ukulele."[283] To many in country music industry, the article was an unwarranted death sentence. Singer Charlie Daniels said, "Now I don't have a college education and I don't understand computers worth a dern, so who am I to be disputing the word of such as the *New York Times*. However, I read an article in the *Times* predicting the death of country music. Hey boys, before you get the chiseling done on the tombstone…[know that] Country Music ain't dead. Hell, we're just starting to scratch the surface."[284] Others, meanwhile, touched on the nuances of the apparent country slump. CMA President Dick McCullough fired back,

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[280] Robert K. Oermann, "Industry Rallies to Fight Country Music Slump," *The Tennessean*, January 24, 1985, p. 1-D, 2-D.

[281] Kip Kirby, "'More Excitement' Planned for '85: Labels Seek Ways to Reverse Slump," *Billboard*, February 2, 1985, 40.

[282] Cliff Radel, "Has Yuppie Dry-Gulched Image of Urban Cowboy?" *The Courier-News*, May 15, 1985.

[283] Robert Palmer, "Nashville Sound: Country Music in Decline," *The New York Times*, September 17, 1985.

[284] Charlie Daniels. "Big Charlie Reviews Miller's 'Big River.'" *The Tennesseean*, November 10, 1985.

saying: "has the Nashville Dream died? Is Country dying? Hell no! Country is very much alive and well and living in Nashville, and New York…and all over the U.S.A. Is it still at the urban cowboy levels? No, but Country is at the same percentage of the U.S. music business as it was before the people in New York and LA bought their cowboy hats."[285]

Despite the country industry's intense defensiveness, Palmer wasn't off target. Looking closer at his article, he touched on the industry's immediate need for a makeover, and he focused on the fading popularity of the Nashville Sound, specifically–what he described as "the saccharine string arrangements, the note perfect but utterly bland vocal choruses," and "the excessive sentimentality that have become characteristic of the Nashville Sound."[286] In the face of new outlets like MTV and a whole host of new artists who appealed to younger listeners, this brand of country music just couldn't compete. It wasn't cool, even if it seemed like it was just a few years earlier. An example of the country industry's dated marketing instincts came with its response to MTV and the revolutionary introduction of the music video. In March of 1983, it launched the CMTV network, an all too obvious riff on MTV.[287] Unlike MTV, however, it was clear a younger demographic was not the initial target of the channel, which was evidenced by the type of "music videos" that initially aired on CMTV, including the very first clip the channel aired, a 1971 video of Faron Young performing "It's Four in the Morning."

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[285] Dick McCullough, "McCullough Raps New York Times," *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XIX. No. 11, November-December 1985, pg 5.

[286] Robert Palmer, "Nashville Sound: Country Music in Decline," *The New York Times*, September 17, 1985.

[287] By the following summer, MTV filed a trademark infringement lawsuit over the initials CMTV, and the network name was changed to CMT.

CMTV and its videos were symptomatic of a large and aging sector of the country music audience. What was problematic about this demographic was that they just didn't buy records. As Rick Blackburn of CBS Records explained: "We're seeing the 'graying' of country music. The aging process is taking place. It's always been an adult music medium, but now you have a shift upward in the median age from 31-32 to over 37 years of age. That's dangerous because when you get into that upper demographic, you're reaching what we term 'inactive buyers.' It's not that they're not fans of country music, but they don't purchase as many discs and tapes as youngsters." In another act of defensiveness, the country industry put the blame for this on the culture of record shops, claiming the stores weren't hospitable to country's aging audience. As Blackburn said, "The [country] consumer is…perfectly happy to listen to Lee Greenwood on the radio, but not go out of his way to buy it in a record store or K-Mart, particularly if he's knocked down by a Tina Turner display in the front of the store that diverts his attention and attracts him more."[288] CMA executive director Jo Walker-Meador echoed this sentiment, saying, "I think a more conservative person feels intimidated by the record shop today – because most record shops have rock music blaring and the salespeople for the most part are young and have their hair dyed green or fuchsia."[289] Blackburn and Meador's comments spoke to the conservative politics they associated with the country music audience. These listeners, in their view, represented the antithesis of those flocking to the new music of the MTV generation.

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[288] Robert K. Oermann, "Industry Rallies to Fight Country Music Slump," *The Tennessean*, January 24, 1985, p. 1-D, 2-D.

[289] Jack Hurst, "CMA's Executive Director Soft-Spoken but Also Shrewd," *The Daily Home*, October 3, 1985.

Conservative leaders of the period likewise aligned themselves with country music. Though little evidence exists to suggest Ronald Reagan actively listened to country music on his own, he nevertheless identified the genre's listeners as his voting base and found value in associating himself with the music. The country music industry likewise saw use in latching itself to the president, and collaborated with him on a number of key events throughout his terms of office. As the urban cowboy craze faded, it still found a welcome audience in the president in 1983, when Reagan joined with the Country Music Association to celebrate the organization's 25th anniversary in an event hosted at the White House. At the celebration, the president lauded the genre as both wholesome and definitive of the era's conservatism, saying: "Country music… is a goodwill ambassador for the country's high standards, our strong spirit and self reliance."[290] The following year, an election year, the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville welcomed Reagan in an unabashed campaign event in support of the president. As Reagan criticized what he described as the pessimistic attitude of his Democratic opponents–saying: "You could invite them here… But…they couldn't perform here anyway because all they do is sing the blues"–he ended the evening with a raucous display of jingoism with the crowd. "In a stirring finale," stated one report, "he joined singer Lee Greenwood in his rendition of this unofficial campaign anthem–'God Bless the U.S.A.'–to the cheers of the audience of 4,000 Republicans.[291] The president wasn't the only one to herald country music as a symbol of wholesomeness. Like Reagan, the major sponsor of the annual CMA Awards, Kraft Foods, found value in the optics of country music's supposed morality. According to James R. Block, director of advertising and

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[290] Bob Millard, "Reagan Entertains Country Music Stars at White House," *Nashville Banner*, March 16, 1983, B-18.

[291] John Harwoord, "Reagan Stirs GOP Crowd in Nashville," St Petersburg Times, September 14, 1984.

marketing services for Kraft, "the wholesomeness of country entertainment fit right in with Kraft's idea of a proper advertising vehicle," adding: "our advertising policy is simple…Kraft messages are intended to emulate the good taste a well-mannered guest would show in the consumer's home."[292]

Country music was also celebrated by the Parents' Music Resource Center, a committee formed in 1985 to create awareness for parents about what their children were listening to. One of the group's founders, Pam Howar, explained what compelled her to organize the group, saying: "One day at the breakfast table my daughter was listening to the music, and I noticed this punk look about her. I started thinking, 'We'd better get a peer group together." Lead by the wives of prominent Washington politicians (including the wife of Al Gore, Tipper Gore), the PMRC created a "Filthy Fifteen" list of artists, including Madonna, Def Leppard, and AC/DC, to alert the public about what they viewed as music too sexual or violent for youth to listen to. The group's efforts ultimately resulted in the use of "parental advisory" stickers to alert consumers about an album's contents, but the PMRC faced resistance in the process. As tensions rose throughout the 1980s between the group and others who critiqued the organization for limiting free speech, country music was immediately understood to be an ally of the PMRC. Susan Baker, one of the group's leaders, for instance, was reported as a "devout Christian who favors classical and Country & Western music."[293]

Meanwhile, others highlighted the PMRC's hypocrisy for not also targeting immoral themes common in country music. In a statement to Congress at a PMRC hearing in 1985, Frank

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[292] Nancy Millman, "Kraft Liked Country Before it Was Cool," *Advertising Age*, April 18, 1983.

[293] Roger Wolmuth, "Has Rock Gone too Far," *People*, September 16, 1985.

Zappa attacked the leaders of the group, saying: "Shouldn't the ladies be warning everyone that inside those country albums with the American flags, the big truck, and atomic pompadours there lurks a fascinating variety of songs about sex, violence, alcohol and the Devil, recorded in a way that lets you hear every word, sung for you by people who have been to prison and are proud of it?" But despite such valid criticism, both the PMRC and the country music industry wrote off claims that country's immorality should be censored. While Tipper Gore conceded "country has explicit lyrics too," she added: "I don't think they have the violence or any of these other things to quite the degree that we've talked about." Meanwhile, in Nashville, CMA Executive Director Jo Walker-Meador claimed: "We don't have the cleanest lyrics in the world, but it's never been a real big problem. There's a little bit of drinking, and cheating and making love in our songs, a reflection of life in general, but not to the point of the violence and explicit language in rock."[294]

But perhaps the best defense the PMRC could have offered in defense of country music was that, unlike pop music and heavy metal, the country music industry was emboldening its efforts to brand its music as that for conservative, white adults only. As the 1980s progressed, country music was defined as the anti-youth culture. Though the new MTV generation and its new uses of technology initially only contributed to country music's lagging popularity and sales, by the end of Reagan's presidency, the genre emerged as the soundtrack of aging, white baby boomers. To a growing majority in the country music industry, the key answer to the music's lagging sales lay with a group they viewed as increasingly neglected by larger cultural forces: the baby boomers. Songwriter Bob McDill claimed that Nashville was "one of the last places on earth where music that is palatable to the adult ear is being created," adding, "I don't think the

[294] Quoted in Richard Harrington, "Is it Cleaner in the Country?" *The Washington Post*, October 16, 1985.

answer is taking old Hank Williams songs and dressing some guy up in fashionable clothing and trying to woo the 12-16 middle class white girl…There's an audience of 25-35 year olds out there that can't find anything to listen to. Nobody's tapped that yet."[295] Market research confirmed that "Country Music is particularly popular with baby boomers,"[296] and an article in *CMA Close-Up* (the trade magazine of the Country Music Association) picked up on this promise, reporting: "The greatest potential for new listeners and buyers lies within the baby boom generation. These are the folks who grew up on Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, The Beatles, Buddy Holly, etc. These are what I call disenfranchised listeners. Because of current trends in contemporary music, these listeners have nowhere else to go unless Country opens its arms and says 'come on in."[297]

A marketing executive for the growing television channel, The Nashville Network (TNN), described his understanding for why this generation was increasingly drawn to country music, saying: "The electric impression of the sixties…has given way now to the realities of life. We're all married, we've got responsibilities and we're worried about our job, sex and all the things that grown up people worry about, that we didn't worry about when we were twenty years old. There is a definite movement in the baby boom generation towards Country Music, because Country Music speaks to the experienced."[298] This analysis describing a maturing of the baby

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[295] No author, "Bob McDill: I Write the Songs," CMA Close-Up, Volume XXI, No. 2, February 1987, 9, 12.

[296] No author, "Country Music Most Popular; Rock Second," *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XX, No. 4, April 1986, 15.

[297] No author, "Perspective", *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XX, No. 2, February 1986, 12-13.

[298] No author, "Country 'SuperConsumers' Confirmed by Research", *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XIX, No. 2, February 1985, 10-11.

boomers was echoed by a number of popular songs of the time period, including The Bellamy Brothers' song, "Old Hippie," a number-two hit in 1985. They followed this with an even bigger hit, "Kids of the Baby Boom," two years later, and K.T. Oslin also had a big hit with her anthem for the women of the baby boom, "80s Ladies."

To the country music industry, the wealth of the baby boom generation made them all the more attractive as consumers. Though country music has always been associated with poor whites, since the 1970s in particular, market research revealed a growing affluence among country music listeners. Conclusions from one 1983 study explained: "The stereotype of the country music fan–southern/western, older, blue-collar male–is dead. Country listeners are younger, richer and living in 'non-country' regions of the U.S.," adding, "these listeners are 'not only younger and richer than they were two years ago, but they also have better jobs…country listeners buy more wine, do more foreign and domestic travel and buy more cars than do listeners to other formats."[299] Two years later, further research showed that country listeners "have money, and they spend it," and were "35% more likely to have a MasterCard."[300] By 1989, the baby boomers were the specific target of a marketing video by the Country Music Association entitled *Go for the Heart*. The soundtrack to the 10-minute video featured both "Kids of the Baby Boom" and "80s Ladies," and stated that "The baby boomers are making country's audience even bigger." It described listeners as "upscale urban professionals," as younger families with children and new homes, and stated that "the country music audience is a

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[299] Douglas E. Hall. "Study: Country Audience Moving Further Upscale." *Billboard*, February 12, 1983, 12.

[300] No author, "Country 'SuperConsumers' Confirmed by Research", *CMA Close-Up*, Volume XIX, No. 2, February 1985, 10-11.

diversity of city and suburban professionals and working people," who had "country music in their heart," and "money in their pocket."[301]

As the country music industry emboldened its efforts to capture an affluent, baby boomer audience, it also grew to very explicitly define its music as the product of whites only. In 1986, *Billboard* reported on a study conducted by the Country Music Association and noted that, to qualify for the study, "subjects had to be white and have purchased a record within the past three months." The magazine expressed surprise at this strategy and commented, "White? It's a well-known fact that blacks also frequent malls and record stores. Why did the survey exclude them?" According to those conducting the research, "'It's known that the predominant country market is white people, and we wanted to get the greatest utility out of the study.'"[302] The following year, Country Music Association executive director Ed Benson discussed a survey aimed at potential markets, and specifically acknowledged that "blacks are not considered a potential market."[303]

Despite open possibilities for more inclusive definitions of country music that existed at the dawn of the urban cowboy craze, by the early 1990s, the country music industry's marketing efforts had successfully branded the genre as the ultimate symbol of white, affluent baby boomers, and the antithesis of youth culture. By 1992, more than half of country music's record sales came from baby boomers, while just 13 percent was accounted for by college-age listeners.[304] And yet again, new trends in popular music (particularly relating to hip hop and rock

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[301] *Go for the Heart*, Country Music Association.

[302] Gerry Wood, "Nashville Scene," *Billboard*, August 23, 1986, 34.

[303] United Press International (no author), "Country Music's Market," *Newsday*, April 12, 1987.

[304] Maria Elizabeth Grabe, "Massification Revisited: Country Music and Demography, *Popular Music and Society*, 21: 4 (1997), p. 72.

bands like Nirvana) pit country music as its opposite, while the country music industry continued to brand the genre as a symbol of whiteness, wholesomeness, and adulthood.

Chapter 5

"The Industry Is Playing the People Cheap": Race and the Failure to Diversify Country Music in the 1990s

In 1992, uprisings in Los Angeles following the unpunished murder of Latasha Harlins and the brutal beating of Rodney King forced Americans to confront the issue of racism at every level of society.[305] Among them were prominent figures from the country music industry. Garth Brooks, the genre's biggest star, reacted with "We Shall Be Free," a song encouraging tolerance and love for everyone regardless of social status. But the single fell flat compared to the singer's previous string of record-breaking chart success, failing to inspire listener enthusiasm in the same ways. By the 1990s, country music's troubling associations with whiteness and conservatism complicated well meaning, albeit idealistic, calls for colorblindness from the genre. The head of Brooks's record label, Jimmy Bowen, one of the most influential figures in Nashville at the time, later chastised the singer for releasing the track, saying it "sounded like warmed-over protest music from the late sixties and early seventies," explaining: "People tried to make him understand it wasn't the time in the world to be putting out a 'We Shall Be Free.' It might have been too liberal for country's demographics, or too simplistic and idealistic for America after the social and racial upheaval of the riots."[306] To Cleve Francis, who was produced by Bowen and the only contemporary Black country artist signed to a major record label at the time, the uprisings didn't signal the need for calls for unity, but instead confirmed dashed hopes for his acceptance within the exclusively-white country music business. As he later recalled, "In

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[305]Brenda Stevenson, *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[306] Jimmy Bowen and Jim Jerome, *Rough Mix: An Unapologetic Look at the Music Business and How It Got That Way–A Lifetime in the World of Rock, Pop, and Country as Told by One of the Industry's Most Powerful Players* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 257.

1992 I was at the [Academy of Country Music Association] Awards, and on television was the riots in LA. And it was Rodney King," adding: "I thought really in the 1990s, that the country was ready [for a Black country artist], but obviously they weren't."[307]

The experiences of Brooks, Bowen, and Francis reflected much of the racial tensions that existed within the country music business in Nashville by the 1990s, and served as a broader symbol for cultural and racial anxieties within American society at the time. In the early-to-mid 1990s, country music became firmly mainstream and more popular than ever been before. The unprecedented growth of the country audience magnified an already-present but expanding racially and ethnically diverse audience of Black and Mexican American listeners for the genre. In response, Black country artists mobilized to push the country industry to cater to a nonwhite demographic for the first time in its roughly seventy-year history. But despite a clear potential to foster a growing, multiracial and multiethnic audience, the business overall proved unwilling or uncertain how to reach out to nonwhite artists and listeners. The industry's failure to alter its marketing practices, in conjunction with broader cultural conflicts, and the effects of consolidation in the radio business, meant country music instead emerged an even greater synonym for whiteness by the turn of the twenty-first century.

While country music had been equivalent with whiteness since it was first created as a marketing category in the 1920s, it evolved into a symbol of *suburban* whiteness by the 1990s. The *New York Times* reported on the genre's listeners in 1990, noting that a once predominantly rural, working-class demographic had now firmly suburbanized, saying the music "purveys pop escapism in spiffy rented cowboy garb for an audience that has expanded into the suburbs,"

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[307] "The 'Country Music Doctor' Is In," *Tell Me More*, NPR, May 25, 2009. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104479357

adding: "The only thing in country that hasn't changed is its complexion."[308] At a time when white suburbanites were an especially coveted demographic in American politics and by television and radio advertisers, the country music business had no incentive to expand popular understandings of the genre's audience as anything other than white, affluent, and suburban. As social conservatism dominated popular issues like same-sex marriage, concerns over parental censorship of television and music, anti-immigrant sentiment, and battles over affirmative action, country music was embraced as a cultural signifier for wholesome social conservatism and whiteness.

By the mid-1990s, country music had never been more popular or mainstream. Between 1989 and 1994, country record sales quadrupled, and at the peak of the genre's popularity in 1994, nearly 42% of all Americans regularly listened to country on the radio.[309] In 1991, new technology confirmed what the country music business had long suspected: the genre's record sales were much higher than had previously been reported. Where record sales had long been monitored by lackadaisical reports from record store employees, the introduction of SoundScan in 1991 tracked sales through barcode scans of each unit sold. This much more accurate technology transformed the popular music charts, heavily favoring country music. Garth Brooks's *No Fences* album, for instance, jumped from No. 16 to No. 4 on the *Billboard* charts.[310]

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[308] Jon Pareles, "When Country Music Moves to the Suburbs," *New York Times*, November 25, 1990, H1.

[309] No author, "Country Music Sales Reach Record Make in '94," *Country Music Association Media Information*, March 28, 1995, 30. Country Music Association clippings file, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.; No author, "Marketing News: Country Radio Increases Lead as America's Top Format," *CMA Close-Up*, January 1994, 6.

[310] Stephen Holden, "The Pop Life: Billboard's New Charts," May 22, 1991, Section C, 13.

As SoundScan provided concrete evidence of country's wide appeal, the genre's consumer power had never been stronger or more undeniable.

The rise of country music in the 1990s came after a tumultuous decade for the genre. Following the quick rise and fall of the "Urban Cowboy" fad of the early 1980s, country had firmly emerged as a symbol for family-friendly, Reagan-era conservatism by the end of the decade. While Reagan's personal taste for the music was never certain – instead appealing to the music because he recognized the value in conflating his voters with country music listeners – his vice president's love of country music was clear. George H.W. Bush's appreciation for the genre was evidenced by his multiple visits to the Grand Ole Opry as vice president, and his enthusiasm for the music carried over into his time as president. Bush's reverence for country was reciprocated by the business. As the United States deployed military forces to Saudi Arabia in 1990 for Operation Desert Shield, it found a welcome ally in the country music industry, who had long courted armed service members as country music listeners.[311] Songs like Eddie Rabbit's "American Boy," which President Bush heralded as "the new anthem of our military troops stationed in Saudi Arabia," spoke to country music's relationship with militarism at the time.[312] Synonymous with patriotism, the president summarized his understanding of the music by saying "country music is at the very core of what it means to be an American."[313]

Country's conservative appeals to militarism paralleled the music's links with cultural conservatism. At a moment when hip hop and rap had emerged as the music of choice for

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[311] Joseph M. Thompson, "Sounding Southern: Music, Militarism, and the Making of the Sunbelt," PhD diss., (University of Virginia, 2019).

[312] Photo on back cover of *CMA Close-Up*, January 1991, 28.

[313] George H.W. Bush, "White House Statement on Country Music Month," reprinted in *CMA Close-Up*, October 1990, 5.

America's youth, parental anxieties about the music abounded, and country music was positioned as its cultural, moral, and racial antithesis – a beacon of wholesomeness in light of the corrupting influences of rap and hip hop.[314] Just as country music was presented as the moral alternative to jazz in the 1920s, and rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, the genre was again touted as the pious choice for popular music in the 1990s. To many in the country music business, concerns about rap benefited country's bottom line. "Thank God for rap," said Jimmy Bowen. "Every morning when they play that stuff, people come running to us." Ralph Emery, host of The Nashville Network's (TNN) *Nashville Now* television show, didn't mince words when he explained why he believed listeners would deflect from rap to country, saying: "Rap music speaks only to black issues, and that has turned a lot of white people off."[315]As Emery suggested, country music's appeal was understood as limited to white people, an idea widely shared throughout the country music industry. "Country these days is fundamentally based on the white experience," said Edward Morris, the former country editor of *Billboard*. "It's about where whites live, what they read, what they see, what they like, how they relate to one another."[316]

Country music's position as antithetical to rap thus also defined it as the opposite spatially. Where rap was synonymous with urban centers, country was understood as the sound of the suburbs. Country's link to the suburbs came as Americans lived on city outskirts more than ever before, with just 12 percent of individuals living in cities of 500,000 or more, and 50

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[314] For more on the moral panic incited around hip hop during this time, see Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop – and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

[315] Priscilla Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time*, March 30, 1992, 66.

[316] Bruce Feiler, "Has Country Become a Soundtrack for White Flight?" *New York Times*, October 20, 1996, H38.

percent of all Americans living in the suburbs.[317] As country sales soared to new heights, the music was interpreted as the soundtrack of middle-age, white suburbanites. In the early 1990s, this demographic was defined by the baby boom generation. In 1992, a *Time* cover story reported on the rise of the music with the headline "Country Rocks the Boomers," saying "the nation's 76 million baby boomers continue to determine America's music preferences. And what America currently prefers is country."[318] To the country music business, the affluence, combined with the sheer number of baby boomers, made these listeners an especially attractive and coveted audience. Though Walt Wilson, Senior VP of Marketing & Sales at MCA Records in Nashville, acknowledged "Country's demographics are all over the map," he nevertheless admit that, "as far as the target marketplace, where you put most of your dollars, we tend to follow the baby boomers because they are still the largest market out there."[319]

No one embodied this new spirit of country music more than Garth Brooks, who achieved unprecedented album sales that earned him status as nearly the best-selling artist of all time by album sales, second only to The Beatles. Born in 1962, at the tail end of the baby boom generation, Brooks represented a fresh face for the genre and brought a rock-influenced sound to country music that appealed to others who had also grown up on rock 'n' roll. When producer Tony Brown first heard the singer, he was impressed but not yet convinced Brooks was trying to make it in the right genre. "Boy, he was good," Brown reportedly said. "But he's not very

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[317] Bruce Feiler, "The Voice of Suburban America," *The New Republic*, February 5, 1996, 19-24.

[318] Priscilla Painton, "Country Rocks the Boomers," *Time*, March 30, 1992, 62.

[319] David M. Ross, "The Target Audience: New Chapter in Country's Marketing Textbook," *Music Row*, June 8, 1994, 9.

country."[320] More and more, however, popular country artists like Brooks began to incorporate rock sounds into country as a consequence of their musical upbringings. As Thom Schuyler, the head of RCA Records Nashville explained: "Twenty years ago, country music was being created by people who were steeped in country music and now we have songwriters, musicians and producers who cut their teeth…on rock and roll and folk music."[321] As rock sales declined from 42.9 percent to 32.6 percent of all album sales between 1989 and 1994, country music was the clear beneficiary, bringing in former rock listeners who now purchased rock-tinged records by artists like Travis Tritt, Brooks and Dunn, and Dwight Yoakam.[322]

The infusion of rock sounds into mainstream country music further suggested the genre was not so much defined by its sonic elements, but cultural representation in the eyes of the industry.[323] Instead, the music represented a way of life, as the Country Music Association (CMA), a trade organization for members of the country music industry, described it in 1994. "Country Music is a lifestyle trend that is continuing to gain popularity," explained the CMA.[324] As the marketing practices of the industry suggested, this lifestyle was defined as white, suburban, family-friendly, and seemingly apolitical. High-profile sponsorships for country artists and the annual CMA Awards at the time, including Trisha Yearwood's partnership with Discover

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[320] Jimmy Bowen and Jim Jerome, *Rough Mix: An Unapologetic Look at the Music Business and How It Got That Way–A Lifetime in the World of Rock, Pop, and Country as Told by One of the Industry's Most Powerful Players* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 219.

[321] Michael Hight, "Label Heads: Keeping Country's Clout," *Music Row*, June 8, 1993, 10.

[322] No author, "Marketing News: Country Album Sales Increase in 1993," *CMA Close-Up*, April 1994, 11.

[323] David Bracket also discusses the country music genre primarily as a cultural signifier rather than a sound. See David Bracket, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

[324] No author, "Marketing News: Country Radio Increases Lead as America's Top Format," *CMA Close Up*, January 1994, 6.

Card and Revlon Cosmetics, and Vince Gill's endorsement deal with Kraft Foods, were indicative of a music with financially comfortable, family-friendly listeners.[325] Rather than being consciously politically active, explained one article, "Country became the de facto soundtrack of white flight," and was "not angry at the world, just oblivious to it."[326] Country artists also commonly claimed to be apolitical figures. "We try to stay out of politics as much as possible and stay tuned into country music," explained singer Ronnie Dunn, while ironically attending an event with the former President Bush in 1994.[327]

The definition of the CMA's "country lifestyle" as something socially conservative, suburban, and family-friendly was also reflected in the industry's efforts to target women listeners in particular. Country's pursuit of white, suburban wives and mothers paralleled growing interests in women as a coveted voting demographic in national politics, as the campaign for "soccer mom" voters in the 1996 Clinton presidential campaign revealed.[328] By the 1990s, however, the country music business had consciously prioritized white women with healthy incomes as its prime audience for decades. Key to this evolution was the dominating presence of country radio, arguably the most powerful wing of the country music business for decades until this period. As Jimmy Bowen explained in his autobiography in 1997, radio had long guided every part of the recording process for country music. When Bowen first arrived in

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[325] Will Pinkston, "Country Almost Scandal-Free," *The Tennessean*, May 15, 1997.

[326] Bruce Feiler, "Has Country Become a Soundtrack for White Flight?" *New York Times*, October 20, 1996, H38.

[327] Gerry Wood, "Appearance by President Bush Highlights: Country Music Party," *Country Weekly*, December 6, 1994, 43.

[328] For more on the Clinton campaign's pursuit of suburban women voters, see Mary Douglas Varvus, "From Women of the Year to 'Soccer Moms': The Case of the Incredible Shrinking Women," *Political Communication*, Volume 17, 2000, Issue 2, 193-213.

Nashville in the late 1970s, he explained that "radio came first, label second, artist last," adding that, by the 1990s, it was still "radio first, with artist and label battling for second place."[329] By the 1990s, other industry leaders agreed that the dominance of radio had increasingly overtaken every aspect of the recording and marketing process of country artists. As Tim DuBois, head of the record label Arista Nashville, explained in 1997, his "wonderful, naive dreams were smashed many years ago when [he] realized radio basically is using our music to get from one commercial to the next."[330]

Country radio had long desired women for one reason: these listeners were perceived to have more buying power than any other demographic. In terms of radio, this translated into advertising revenue, the principal generation of income within the business. In the eyes of advertisers, these women were the listeners most likely to be receptive to buying the products in their commercials. Even when the bulk of the radio audience was proven to *not* be women, female listeners were nevertheless prioritized. This had been explicitly true in many instances since at least he 1970s, when stations narrowly focused on women listeners, in spite of the fact that surveys showed country radio listenership was predominantly male.[331] By the 1990s, the prevalence of attractive male country stars like Billy Ray Cyrus and George Strait, among many others, was evidence of the industry's efforts to target women listeners. A report from the 1992 Fan Fair, an annual event for country music fans in Nashville, spoke to the abundance of female

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[329] Jimmy Bowen and Jim Jerome, *Rough Mix: An Unapologetic Look at the Music Business and How It Got That Way–A Lifetime in the World of Rock, Pop, and Country as Told by One of the Industry's Most Powerful Players* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 205.

[330] Chuck Aly, "Same Game, Different Rules: A Conversation with Tim DuBois," *Music Row*, August 8, 1997, 14.

[331] Richard A. Peterson, "The Production of Cultural Change: The Case of Contemporary Country Music," *Social Research*, Summer 1978, Col. 45, No. 2, pp. 298.

fans, saying: "Those who have doubts about whether country music dollars are female driven had only to listen to the squeals each time a male artist turned around."[332] Tim DuBois, head of Arista Records echoed this definition of country listeners, saying, "Most of the dollars are female dollars, both ticket sales and record sales, and the same old strategy still works that to get the females out you give them the good looking guy who sounds great."[333]

But at the moment when the country music industry was churning out a clear vision of who the typical country music listener was supposed to be – white, adult, suburban, mostly women – and when many in the music industry and the broader public purported country music had never been more white, evidence of the very opposite became unavoidably apparent by the mid-1990s. As market research on listeners became more thorough and more precise than ever before, studies revealed that as many as a quarter of Black adults regularly tuned in to country radio.[334] Meanwhile, growing evidence of Mexican American listeners also emerged, as artists like Rick Trevino earned success on the country charts, and the neighboring genre of Tejano music achieved peak popularity with artists like Selena and Emilio Navaira. The undeniable presence of these Black and Brown artists and listeners complicated country's racial definitions, pressuring the country industry to seriously consider a nonwhite audience for the first time in its seven decades of existence.

No artist was more central to pushing the racial boundaries of country music in the 1990s than Cleve Francis. In 1992, Francis became the first Black country artist signed to a major label in roughly a generation. The singer's race wasn't the only thing that set him apart in Nashville.

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[332] David M. Ross, "Wrangler Butts Drive Me Nuts: Fan Fair '92," *Music Row*, June 23, 1992, 13.

[333] David M. Ross, "Building the Nashville Sound," *Music Row*, June 23, 1994, 9.

[334] Jack Hurst, "Country's Silent Minority?"*Chicago Tribune*, January 29, 1995.

Francis was a well-respected cardiologist living in Mount Vernon, Virginia when his country music career unexpectedly launched. Francis caught his big break after treating a heart attack patient who had a brother in the music industry. After casually mentioning his music to the patient, Francis was put in touch with Playback, an independent record company in Florida. With the label he recorded an album and also a music video which landed on Country Music Television (CMT). The high production quality of the video was largely funded by Francis himself, a feat not financially feasible for most emerging artists, but an ability available to the singer based on his medical career. One night the video caught the attention of producer Jimmy Bowen, arguably the most influential figure in Nashville at the time. "I was watching CMT in the background and as the video came on, I looked up…and I never looked back till it was over," Bowen later recalled.[335] Taken with Francis's music, the producer flew the singer to Nashville and signed him to his label, Liberty Records. Dubbed the "Country Music Doctor," and under the wing of one of Nashville's most powerful figures, Francis was given an extraordinarily rare and concerted promotional push by a major record label for a Black country artist. Given Francis's race, both he and Bowen were aware of the odds stacked against him, and Francis was all the more grateful that such a chance was taken on him. "Bowen deserves a lot of credit," he later recalled. "He sat me down and said, 'I don't know if this is going to happen. It's been a long time since a black man pulled this off. But you sound genuine to me.'"[336]

Bowen's reassurance to Francis that he sounded sincere was part of a long legacy of skepticism directed at the thought of a Black artist performing in a genre historically

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[335] Richard Harrington, "Cleve Francis, Country Doctor," *Washington Post*, March 15, 1992.

[336] Bruce Feiler, *Dreaming Out Loud: Garth Brooks, Wynonna Judd, Wade Hayes, and the Changing Face of Nashville* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 246.

unwelcoming to people who were not white. But in many ways, Francis was nevertheless initially given ample reason to be optimistic about his music career. Despite concerns about his race in the eyes of listeners, he explained: "The fans didn't mind. I've got rooms full of letters that prove it."[337] At a time when affirmative action was a hotly contested issue and increasingly under attack, Francis remained hopeful his presence in country music would continue to be accepted.[338] "I tell people there's no affirmative action in country music…Hopefully I've answered the question that if you find a black singer who can sing good country music – not as a gimmick – then you can go with it because country fans love country music," he explained. "This is 1992 and it's inconceivable to me that someone would hear a record and decide not to play it because I was black."[339]

As Francis earned a string of small hits on the country music charts, questions arose about the presence of Black country listeners and why they were understood as so anomalous. According to Francis, the divide between country music and Black Americans had become a mutual effort. "Maybe Nashville did discriminate against black singers," he suggested at one point, before extrapolating, "Right now, the [country music] industry feels it's locked out of the African American community, and the African American community feels it's locked out of the industry, so nothing moves."[340] In 1994, a *New York Times* op-ed by one of the paper's writers, Lena Williams, a Black woman, echoed Francis's analysis of country's race problem. In "A

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[337] Bruce Feiler, *Dreaming Out Loud*, 247.

[338] For more on the attacks on affirmative action in the early 1990s, see William L. Taylor and Susan M. Liss, "Affirmative Action in the 1990s: Staying the Course," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 523, Affirmative Action Revisited (Sep. 1992), 35-37.

[339] Richard Harrington, "Cleve Francis, Country Doctor," *Washington Post*, March 15, 1992.

[340] Richard Harrington, "Cleve Francis, Country Doctor," *Washington Post*, March 15, 1992.; Jack Hurst, "Country's Silent Minority?"*Chicago Tribune*, January 29, 1995.

Black Fan of Country Music Finally Tells All," Williams explained the lifelong shame she had felt for enjoying the music. "For most of my life, I was a closet country music fan," she said, remembering how she'd once kept her Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson albums hidden. "As a child growing up in the 1950s, in a predominantly black community, I wasn't allowed to play country-and-western music in my house," she went on. "Blacks weren't supposed to like country."[341]

Despite the unease Black listeners were made to feel for liking country music, growing evidence showed they were anything but unusual. At a time when country had never been more popular, studies by Simmons Market Research revealed that as much as a quarter of all Black adult listeners embraced the format on a regular basis.[342] To those in Nashville conscious of the music's history, the abundance of Black listeners did not come as a surprise, but a long held suspicion and unspoken assumption. As Bill Ivey of the Country Music Foundation, the overseer of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, said: "I have thought for a long time that just as there is a significant white audience for blues, rhythm and blues and jazz, there is very likely a significant audience for country music among the black population."[343] After all, Ivey explained in another instance, country music evolved out of both European and African music traditions in the American South, saying the music "was carried here from Africa and from traditional folk music brought here from the British Isles."[344]

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[341] Lena Williams, "A Black Fan of Country Music Finally Tells All," *New York Times*, June 19, 1994, 26.

[342] Bruce Feiler, "The Voice of Suburban America," *The New Republic*, February 5, 1996, 19-24.

[343] Jack Hurst, "Country's Silent Minority?"*Chicago Tribune*, January 29, 1995.

[344] Carrie Ferguson, "Black Culture Rooted in Country Music," *The Tennessean*, February 2, 1995.

To Francis, the statistics on Black listeners provided all the evidence the industry needed to seriously consider and cater to a Black demographic. "I think blacks now are at a point where they can be marketed to (by Nashville)…something has moved." he explained. To the singer, the sheer volume of this Black demographic offered the industry an undeniable opportunity for financial growth, explaining that "The industry doesn't need to go out of its way. It just needs to make some overtures and let African Americans respond."[345] As part of a larger effort to push the business to reach out to Black listeners, Francis published a piece in *Billboard* in 1995 called "Country & Black Listeners: Not An Oxymoron," urging the industry to reach out to these fans. The essay touched on the ironies that the business failed to appeal to a potentially large market within the U.S. while fruitlessly attempting to grow the country music audience in Europe and Japan. "Country music is enjoying its biggest boom ever and has spent millions to attract new fans, even reaching out to Europe and the Far East for them. Yet it neglects a potentially large market at home," he explained, before making a call for the industry to act, saying: "I challenge the industry to do the marketing research necessary to take full *economic* and *artistic* advantage of this growing group of country music lovers."[346]

Despite Francis's well-founded efforts to convince the broader industry to diversify racially, his appeals often fell on deaf ears within a business that had never, in its seven decades, been pressed to consider prioritizing diversity. Though Ed Benson, the associate executive directory of the Country Music Association (CMA), claimed his organization was planning marketing strategies for nonwhite listeners, skepticism dominated conversations within the

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[345] Jack Hurst, "Country's Silent Minority?"*Chicago Tribune*, January 29, 1995.

[346] Cleve Francis, "Country & Black Listeners: Not An Oxymoron," *Billboard*, February 4, 1995, 5.

business about appealing to Black listeners.[347] After all, this was an industry whose members were virtually all-white at all levels. Not only were country music artists on major labels almost exclusively white, but so, too, were all other members of the business. Country music only featured one prominent Black record executive, just a handful of Black background singers, one notable Black session player, and hardly any Black musicians in road bands or country music videos.[348]

To many powerful figures in the country industry, the genre's race problem was rationalized by a continued presumption that the music simply didn't appeal to people who were not white. "I'm not saying that bigotry and racism don't exist in our business, because they do," explained Tim DuBois, head of Artista Nashville, before adding: "But I guarantee you that if there were a marketplace and if there were a talented person out there, few people in this town wouldn't sign that talent," referring to nonwhite country artists. Tony Brown, president of MCA Nashville echoed this assessment, claiming he had long and unsuccessfully searched for a Black country artist, saying "It'd either be some black artist for years trying to sing like Charley Pride…only a really bad version of that."[349] Still, even when such industry leaders were presented with evidence of Black interest, their skepticism endured. When confronted with market research on Black listeners, DuBois explained, "I've seen those data…but I've also been

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[347] Carrie Ferguson, "Black Culture Rooted in Country Music," *The Tennessean*, February 2, 1995.

[348] Cleve Francis, "Country & Black Listeners: Not An Oxymoron," *Billboard*, February 4, 1995, 5.

[349] Bruce Feiler, "Has Country Become a Soundtrack for White Flight?" *New York Times*, October 20, 1996, H38.

to the concerts. Those people are invisible to the process…I am just not convinced that that percentage of black fans is real."[350]

Despite DuBois's skepticism, his analysis of the racial makeup of country concerts correlated well with the documented shame and discomfort many Black fans were made to feel for openly liking the music, as discussed by Cleve Francis and Lena Williams in her *New York Times* article. Still, the issue of Black artists and listeners was also reacted to with doubt by country radio. According to Francis, radio responded to his presence with extreme unease. "I would go to some of these radio stations," he later recalled, referring to the common practice of country artists visiting radio stations for promotional purposes, adding: "I'd walk in and you could feel the tension, although I tried to break it. But it was there."[351] Elsewhere, station program managers also responded to the thought of Black listeners with uncertainty. Though Dean McNeil of Chicago's WUSN acknowledged receiving calls from Black listeners reporting feeling uncomfortable with publicly expressing their love of the music, he too expressed disbelief that such listeners existed in substantial numbers. In one instance, he recalled one Black female listener who called in and said "She loved country music and really enjoyed the station but said [she'd] feel so out of place if [she] went to Whiskey River [the local country bar] on a Saturday night." Nevertheless, and without data on his own listeners, McNeil continued to presume his listeners were entirely white, estimating his Black listeners were measured at "less

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[350] Bruce Feiler, "Has Country Become a Soundtrack for White Flight?" *New York Times*, October 20, 1996, H38.

[351] "The 'Country Music Doctor' Is In," *Tell Me More*, NPR, May 25, 2009. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104479357

than 1 percent."[352] Because radio was arguably the most influential presence in the country music business, failures to promote nonwhite artists and reach out to nonwhite listeners via radio had a ripple effect that only compounded skepticism within the broader music industry about diversifying the format.

Even for those in the country music industry who were receptive to reaching out to Black artists and fans of country, major questions about how to do so lingered. To Theda Sandiford of WYNY-FM in New York, one of the few Black program directors in country radio, there was confidence in the presence of nonwhite listeners, saying "I do believe the audience has been there all along." In spite of this, however, she believed the issue of reaching out to Black listeners was simply too challenging for radio to take on. "I don't think they know how to market to them…I don't want to fault anybody, because I think this is brand-new for them."[353] To Jim Ed Norman, president of the Warner Bros. Nashville, he was convinced that the market potential of a Black audience should be pursued. At the same time, however, he remained disillusioned about how to upend long held understandings about country music and race. "This new information coming out about black people listening to country is exciting, but it is so new, not only in data, but even in consciousness, that it will take some time to address," he explained. "For so long, country was associated with a redneck consciousness that some of the marketing

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[352] Jack Hurst, "Country's Silent Minority?"*Chicago Tribune*, January 29, 1995; for more on the historic unease Black individuals have felt in country bars, see Jocelyn R. Neal, "Dancing around the Subject: Race in Country Fan Culture," *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (Winter, 2006), pp. 555-579.

[353] Jack Hurst, "Country's Silent Minority?"*Chicago Tribune*, January 29, 1995.

opportunities don't occur to us as an industry because we have the Greek chorus out there telling us who we are."[354]

The hesitation of figures like Norman pointed to a broader sense of resistance within Nashville at the thought of doing anything differently in the business, especially at a time when country's record sales and overall popularity had never been higher. To Music Row executives, issues of how to package and sell a song or artist were openly prioritized above all else. As Kyle Lehning, producer and executive VP/GM of Asylum Records explained about marketing and signing a new act: "For me, an emotional response is then quickly followed by an intellectual response. I ask myself is this something which is going to be easy to market?"[355] Any artist who fell outside of the genre's conservative race, gender, or sexuality standards was therefore all the more difficult to market within the country music category – a risk few industry executives were willing to take. After all, record sales and critical acclaim did not guarantee acceptance within the country music establishment. Issues of not only race, but sexuality, hindered artist success. Such was the case for singer k.d. Lang, who was pushed out of Nashville because of her sexuality. As Lang racked up awards for her 1989 *Absolute Torch and Twang* album, one article noted how "questions about her sexuality also lingered as they could only in the conservative music circles of Nashville." As she explained, "Coming to the end of the *Torch and Twang* tour, I felt it was time for me to move on from country. I mean, here I had won the Grammy but I still wasn't getting airplay."[356]

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[354] Pamela E. Foster, *My Country: The African Diaspora's Country Music Heritage* (Nashville: My Country, 1998), 22.

[355] David M. Ross, "Summit Coverage: Creating and Marketing the Music," *Music Row*, June 8, 1993

[356] Chris Botta, "k.d. Lang: Kissin' Country Goodbye," *Country Spectacular*, #6, December 21, 1992, 62-63.

While the business proved unwilling or uncertain about how to reach out to Black artists and listeners in country music, a notable effort was made to cater to another demographic: Latinx artists and listeners. Key to the pursuit of these listeners was an awareness of their growing numbers in the United States. To the music industry, this broadening demographic represented a clear financial incentive to make their buying power feel welcome. Even while Tim DuBois of Artista Records remained uncertain about the Black audience for country, he acknowledged, "Now in the South we have a big Hispanic following."[357] Attention to this demographic was likewise addressed by Allen Butler, Senior Director of Promotion and Artist Development at Artista, who explained, "We're especially interested in the Hispanic market. It is a growing population in the US."[358] Still, despite the conscious effort to market country to Latinx listeners, this undertaking failed to take hold. The inability to successfully integrate Latinx identities within the country music format reveals how difficult it had become to separate the genre from its synonymity with whiteness by the 1990s. This failed attempt to diversity country pointed to the historic difficulty to market the genre as anything other than a signifier of whiteness, and reveals the obstacles in attempting to do so within the historic Black and white racial binary of the music industry.

By the early 1990s, country music had gone nearly a generation since it had had a Mexican American star. Not since Freddy Fender and Johnny Rodriguez topped the country charts in the mid-1970s had the genre featured a significant commercial presence of Latinx artists. This changed when Mexican American singer and Texan Rick Trevino was signed to

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[357] Bruce Feiler, "Has Country Become a Soundtrack for White Flight?" *New York Times*, October 20, 1996, H38.

[358] David M. Ross, "Arista Promo Man Allen Butler," *Music Row*, October 23, 1991, 9.

Sony Records Nashville in 1993. According to Trevino, his addition to the country music community had come after a long, conscious search for a Latinx country artist. "There had always been this talk of finding a Latino country singer," he later recalled. "Folks were probably just looking for the next Freddy Fender…that's what Steve Buckingham (who signed me) was looking for, to capitalize on the growing Mexican American population."[359] To some in the music industry at the time, Trevino's ethnicity offered an extra avenue of appeal for the singer, who conceivably could bring in typical country music fans with his neotraditional country sound, while also appealing to a presumably new Mexican American demographic. "Take Rick's base as a country artist, add crossover appeal and bilingual ballads and you have a triple musical threat," reported one article.[360]

Like Francis's early optimism, Trevino was initially hopeful country music was shifting away from its associations with whiteness and racism. "I think country music has gotten away from any kind of redneck stereotypes, where there's some sort of racial thing involved," Trevino explained. Assurance that the music was becoming more inclusive came after his positive experience opening for Hank Williams Jr. At the time, perhaps no other artist better personified country's links with racism than Williams Jr., whose popular songs like "If the South Woulda Won" celebrated the confederacy. As Trevino explained, "I opened for Hank Williams Jr., I did my songs bilingual in front of a Hank Jr. audience, and nobody threw tomatoes, I even saw the confederate flag go up while I was singing 'Un Momento Alla.'"[361] Francis had also agreed the

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[359] Rick Trevino Phone Interview with Martinez, July 7, 2020.

[360] Bruce Honick, "Rick Trevino: Fan Favorite Rakes in the Gifts," *Country Weekly Special Issue 1995's Top Fifty Stars*, September 19, 1995, 64.

[361] Jack Hurst Interview with Rick Trevino, July 30, 1996, Vanderbilt Special Collections, Jack Hurst Collection, Box 14, Folder 28.

genre appeared to be moving away from its "redneck" imagery, saying: "The image has changed a lot recently and it even had to move away from that to attract some white people."[362]

But despite an interest in pursuing Latinx artists, the broader country industry couldn't help but view Trevino's Mexican American identity with skepticism as well, or successfully market him within the country music genre. One *Billboard* article explained how "Rick Trevino could have come across as just a novelty," before offering a more reassuring message, saying: **"**However, programmers and retailers say that the Mexican-American singer's talent is no gimmick."[363] Such comments revealed the inextricable links between country and whiteness, and the inability to imagine the genre as anything other than white. The unavoidable issue of race within the country music business was compounded by the strategies used to initially market Trevino as an artist. Though the singer was a third-generation Mexican American who had grown up in Texas listening to rock music and country and did not speak Spanish, the country music industry nevertheless insisted Trevino record his first album in Spanish. Before recording the album, Trevino's record label sent the singer to Mexico for six weeks to learn Spanish, resulting in the release of his *Dos Mundos* album in 1993. The industry's demands that he learn Spanish paralleled similar marketing strategies a handful of years prior when it came to the Tejano music star Selena, who like Trevino did not grow up speaking Spanish.

According to Trevino, the strategy to release his first album in Spanish was not a tactic he felt comfortable with or felt properly represented him as an artist. "The record company decided to release the Spanish album first, which I thought was a mistake," he later recalled. "My

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[362] Carrie Ferguson, "Black Culture Rooted in Country Music," *The Tennessean*, February 2, 1995.

[363] Carrie Borzillo, "Columbia Newcomer Trevino Is a Hit in Two Languages," *Billboard*, March 26, 1994, 14.

concern at the time was that people would perceive me as a Tejano artist trying to crossover to country," he explained.[364] The decision to release the Spanish album was pushed by Trevino's producer, Steve Buckingham, who had been the one long seeking a Latinx artist and who had signed the singer. Trevino explained that, according to Buckingham, the decision to initially release the Spanish album was thought of as a move in ingenuity on the part of the music industry. **"**There's no format for that," Trevino explained of Buckingham's reasoning. "There's Tejano music, and there's Salsa, and Rancheras, and country music, and that's it. There's no country music with Spanish lyrics, there's no such thing."[365] Rather than attempt to consciously market Trevino's music to Mexican Americans like him, his record label promoted the album in Mexico, Brazil, Spain, and Puerto Rico.

In spite of the efforts to promote Trevino's music abroad, he nevertheless resonated most with Mexican American listeners when it came to a Latinx demographic. At the peak of his success in the mid-1990s, Trevino reasoned that "it was was the Mexican American culture identifying with what I was doing, that's all it was," as he discussed concerts that had immediately sold out in places like San Antonio and the New Mexico State Fair. Still, the singer suggested it wasn't just his presence within country music that had lured Mexican American listeners. He described how artists such as George Strait had crowds in places like Tuscon with "Hispanics as far as you can see," explaining how Strait "has a very large Hispanic bond." Like Trevino, Strait was also from Texas, a state where both country music and Mexican American

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[364] Federico Martinez, "Country Star Rick Trevino Gets Personal with New Album," *San Angelo Standard-Times*, July 5, 2017. https://www.gosanangelo.com/story/entertainment/2017/07/05/country-star-rick-trevino-gets-personal-new-album/443086001/

[365] Rick Trevino, July 30, 1996, Vanderbilt Special Collections, Jack Hurst Box 14, Folder 28.

culture were inextricable parts of life. “Country music is just a part of life in Texas, and half of Texas is Mexican American,” explained Trevino.[366]

Nashville’s attempts to reach a Latinx demographic paralleled a related effort with regard to another bustling market in the 1990s: Tejano music. As some members of the country music industry tried to capitalize on a growing Latinx population within the United States, others saw potential to create a Tejano branch of the music industry in Nashville. Though Tejano music had a long and rich history in Texas by the end of the twentieth century, and was heavily influenced by a blend of country music and Mexican music, it reached its commercial pinnacle in the 1990s. The financial incentive to capitalize on this market became all the more clear following the death of Selena in early 1995, after which the singer’s record sales reached incredible heights that helped make her the best-selling Latinx artist of the decade. The effort to pursue the Tejano market in Nashville was defined by an attempt to link the clear sonic relationship between Tejano and country, while also attempting to develop a separate and defined Tejano business in Nashville.

Following the commercial success of Rick Trevino, efforts were made to market a another Mexican American singer in Nashville, Emilo Navaria. But while Navaria had a deep love for country, his existing links within the Tejano genre limited his potential to be embraced as a country music artist. While Selena was heralded as the “queen” of Tejano music, Navaria was touted as the music’s king. His joint interest in defining himself as a country artist, however, presented challenges for his career. In Nashville, management instructed him to drop his last

[366] Rick Trevino, July 30, 1996, Vanderbilt Special Collections, Jack Hurst Box 14, Folder 28.

name to appeal to white country listeners, branding him simply as Emilio.[367] Still, reports indicated the singer already had a multiracial and multiethnic appeal, saying "The audience at his concerts are mostly Hispanic, but one can also spot numerous Anglo country music listeners and young pop/dance fans sprinkled among the crowd." The article went on to predict "it won't be long before Emilio Navaria becomes a household name to the rest of the United States and Mexico."[368]

Aside from the push to repackage Navaria as a country artist, a new record label subsidiary, Artista Texas, was created to exclusively focus on the Tejano market in Nashville. Chief within these efforts was Cameron Randle, VP/GM of the label, who had previously worked with bands like the Texas Tornadoes and Dwight Yoakam, and who expressed optimism about Tejano's potential to become linked with the country music industry in Nashville. To Randle, a clear relationship existed between country music and Tejano, and he anticipated this was something country's presumably white listeners would be receptive to. "Tejano Country has every reason to think that an audience exists for it out there among conventional Anglo fans of country music" he explained. Randle's optimism about fans also applied to his hopes that this new market would be embraced by the broader country music industry. According to Randle, Tejano **"**should be welcomed with open arms on the part of country music insiders," before adding: "There is an enormous constituency of Latin American citizens who are long-time hard-

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[367] Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 52-53.

[368] No author, "Tejano Music is Hot, and So is Emilio Navaria," *Texas Country Music* magazine, March 1994, 57.

core country music fans and would also like to see an acknowledgement of their unique heritage."[369]

By the second half of the 1990s, however, the prospects of creating racial and ethnic diversity within country music came to an abrupt halt on the part of the industry. Francis was dropped from his record label after his 1994 album, *You've Got Me Now*, failed to chart well, and Trevino was asked to leave his record label after the release of his 1996 album, *Learning as You Go*. And according to some onlookers, the potential for growth within the Tejano music market trickled off, rather than accelerated, following Selena's death. The "Tejano market died with her," explained John Lannert at *Billboard*.[370] The overall failure to reach out to Black and Latinx artists and listeners on the part of the country music industry resulted in the largest mobilization on the part of Black country artists in the genre's history. These artists demanded substantial structural change on the part of the music industry, while also pursuing alternative avenues of success for artists not welcome by the Nashville music establishment.

To Cleve Francis, frustrations about the country music business reached a turing point after he was dropped from his record label. Reflecting on his inability to achieve sustained commercial success in country music, Francis mused his limited success didn't come from a lack of fan acceptance, but from an insufficient embrace from the music industry. "I'm not talking about the fans. The fans could care less what color you are," he explained of his exasperation. Instead, it was a matter of the business proving unwilling to accept him as a Black artist. Despite

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[369] David M. Ross, "Tejano Takes Aim at Tennessee: Country Gains Diversity," *Music Row*, October 23, 1995, 9-11.

[370] Fix footnote: From Wikipedia: John Lannert of Billboard said in an interview with Biography in 2007 that when Selena died the "Tejano market died with her." (despite rise in sales immediately after her death: Lannert, John (July 29, 1995). "Latin Music Has New Challenges At Anglo Market" in Billboard)

earlier optimism, Francis nevertheless concluded: "Race did play a very significant role in me not making it," citing a lack of airplay on radio as key to his commercial failure.[371] And in the process, he explained, the industry was making listeners look poorly by presuming they would not accept a Black artist. "The industry is playing the people cheap," he said. "They're portraying the white country music audience as a bunch of bigots that don't like black people or would be uncomfortable with a black artist. It isn't true." To Francis, the music industry's exclusionary marketing practices not only hurt Black artists and fans, but white fans who continued to be labeled as racist for their interest in country music, and the country music genre itself. "It's giving a bad message as we come into the 21st century that this is the only segregated music form we still have," he explained.[372] Reflecting on the broader state of society, he said: "The only thing as a black person you cannot become is a country artist. You can be chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, you can be governor of Virginia, but you cannot be a black country artist."[373]

Though Francis understood his music career in Nashville had come to an end, the singer nevertheless found it essential to help mobilize a community of Black country artists for the future. "I just feel like God gave me this talent to sing, and I should have had a better shot at it," he explained. "I hope these kids get a better shot, but until the attitude changes about this music,

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[371] Brad Schmitt, "Cleve Francis: Get More Blacks in Country Music," *The Tennessean*, September 17, 1995.

[372] Phyllis Stark, "Cleve Francis Unearths Black Experience in Country for Warner Bros. Compilation," *Country Airplay Monitor*, February 20, 1998, 6.

[373] Tom Roland, "Push Is on to Recognize Blacks' Contribution to Country," *The Tennessean*, February 19, 1998, 1D, 4D.

it won't happen."[374] Francis's efforts lead to the creation of the Black Country Music Association (BCMA) in 1995. In creating the BCMA, Francis leaned on the precedent of his medical career. Like country music, the field of cardiology was also almost exclusively white when he had began his career in the 1980s. When he was not able to find a job at any medical practice, he started his own. Given this experience, Francis brought the same reasoning to country music, saying: "maybe Black people need to not keep trying to knock on the door in this industry, and we need to start our own industry," adding: "I thought if Blacks could come up with sponsors then we could get money and set up our own thing."[375]

To Francis, it was also imperative to educate the country music community about the constant and essential presence of Black musicians and fans in country music history, while also bringing together contemporary Black country artists. As a result, Francis was also instrumental in creating and pushing the release a box set called *From Where I Stand: The Black Experience In Country Music*, released by the Country Music Foundation and Warner Bros. Records in 1998. According to the singer, country music was in jeopardy of becoming a genre forever defined by whiteness without conscious, sustained action to remember its multiracial roots. "Its so far out there it's almost the truth," Francis said, referring to the idea that country only appealed to white people. "It you let it become truth you're in trouble. It's based on erroneous conclusions somebody has reached and the industry is marketing based on those 1920s erroneous assumptions."[376]

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[374] Phyllis Stark, "Cleve Francis Unearths Black Experience in Country for Warner Bros. Compilation," *Country Airplay Monitor*, February 20, 1998, 6.

[375] Cleve Francis Interview with Martinez August 6, 2020.

[376] Tom Roland, "Push Is on to Recognize Blacks' Contribution to Country," *The Tennessean*, February 19, 1998, 1D, 4D.

Francis's mobilization efforts were substantially aided by a number of Black women country artists, including singers Frankie Staton and Venita Lewis, and the writer Pamela E. Foster, who published the book *My Country: The African Diaspora's Country Music Heritage* in 1998. Collectively, these efforts provided further evidence of Black country music artists and fans. After Francis was dropped from his record label and returned to Virginia to resume his career as a cardiologist, it was Staton who took over leadership of the BCMA. For years, Staton had tried to make it in Nashville as a country singer, but unlike Francis, was not given the opportunity to do so as an artist signed to a major label.[377] "I don't care what color you are. I sing country music because I can relate to that single mother, that waitress, that trucker. That's my crowd. I've always wanted to sing for the working people," Staton said of her country music aspirations.[378] Calling herself the "chocolate cowgirl," Staton, like Francis, reported on the fierce skepticism she also faced as a country artist.[379] To her, it was a matter of creating awareness about Black artists to foster a more welcoming environment for the future. "I realized how few people on Music Row know that there are many black country performers out there," she explained. "They don't know if there is a market for black country. I truly believe there is."[380]

Following the creation of the Black Country Music Association, singer Venita Lewis also founded the Minority Country Music Association (MCMA) in 1997. The organization was open

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[377] Andrea Williams, "Why Haven't We Had a Black Woman Country Star?" *Nashville Scene*, August 6, 2020.

[378] Robert K. Oermann, "Nashville's Trade Secrets: Black Country Artists Lift Up Their Voices," *The Tennessean*, February 18, 1997, 3D.

[379] Mike Kilen, "'The Chocolate Cowgirl: Frankie Staton Speaks Out for Black Country Singers," *The Tennessean*, February 28, 1999, 1K-2K.

[380] Robert K. Oermann, "Nashville's Trade Secrets: Black Country Artists Lift Up Their Voices," *The Tennessean*, February 18, 1997, 3D.

to not only Black artists, but also featured artists of of Japanese, Chinese, and American Indian descent, and even included one white member who considered himself a minority for being overweight.[381] Like Staton, Lewis had tried to make it in Nashville as a country singer, but was not granted the opportunity for commercial success. She explained why she organized the MCMA, saying "We want minorities all over the country to know that when they come to Nashville, they'll have a platform."[382] For many of the group's members, their first meeting was an emotional affair that validated their presence within country music. "At the first meeting of MCMA, it was almost like a tear-jerker," Lewis explained. "We all realized we were normal."[383]

Alongside the mobilization of Black country artists, writer Pamela E. Foster published *My Country: The African Diaspora's Country Music Heritage* in 1998. The book not only documented the constant and broad presence of Black country artists and fans, but also included an organized plan that could be used by the industry to reach out to the Black community, which she presented to the Country Music Association (CMA) in 1995. Foster provided her list of suggestions to Ed Benson, associate executive director of the CMA, who initially appeared receptive to viewing the plan and considering how to reach out to Black fans. The report suggested a substantial, sustained, and wide-ranging effort would be necessary to open country music up to Black listeners. Among them, Foster suggested the trade organization should do the following: encourage record labels, music publishers, management companies, concert

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[381] Phyllis Stark, "MCMA Spotlights Minority Country Talent," *Country Airplay Monitor*, February 20, 1998, 6.

[382] Bonna M. de la Cruz, "Minorities Knocking on Country's Door," *The Tennessean*, January 21, 1997, 1A.

[383] Tom Roland, "Push Is on to Recognize Blacks' Contribution to Country," *The Tennessean*, February 19, 1998, 4D.

promoters, country radio stations and other companies to hire/sign black people; encourage radio programmers to play Black artists; encourage the film, commercial, and television industry (particularly those aimed at the Black community) to portray Black people as fans of country music; implement youth education on country music; develop a traveling museum exhibit on black people in country music; and hire a staff person to focus on broadening the Black audience.[384] But despite Foster's substantial efforts, she explained that Benson and the CMA "decided to wholly ignore a 35-page analysis, plus appendices, on the subject."[385] According to Foster, the CMA's failure to take her plan seriously would prove detrimental to country music in the long run. "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that what are minority markets today in America will not be minority markets tomorrow," she said. "We have to look at the cultural implications for the long term."[386]

By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, the country music industry instead reasserted its commitment to defining itself as a genre for whites only. Despite the pressure mounted by campaigns by Black artists and writers, the industry failed to substantially support any nonwhite artists by the end of the 1990s. As for the Black Country Music Association, the organization became difficult to sustain for Staton, who largely oversaw it on her own and without financial assistance.[387] In 1996, the Telecommunications Act provided another blow to Black artists, or anyone else trying to make it in country music who was not white, male, and

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[384] Pamela E. Foster, *My Country: The African Diaspora's Country Music Heritage* (Nashville: My Country, 1998), 368.

[385] Pamela E. Foster, *My Country: The African Diaspora's Country Music Heritage*, 21.

[386] Pamela E. Foster, *My Country: The African Diaspora's Country Music Heritage*, 22.

[387] Cleve Francis Interview with Martinez August 6, 2020.

straight.[388] While in theory the deregulating act intended to encourage competition within the radio business, in practice it did the very opposite. Increasingly, the law allowed for more radio stations to enter the hands of fewer and fewer broadcasting companies. As a result, radio programmers were put under greater pressure to keep profits and ratings high for shareholders. More and more, these ratings were ensured by limiting radio playlists to only the most popular artists, which all but limited airtime in country music to white male artists. As Tim Classon, Chancellor Media Vice President of Country Programming, explained: "Because of the high dollar amounts being paid to assemble some of these big companies, the expectations to the bottom line and cash flow are very aggressive."[389] As a consequence, the broader country music industry in Nashville grew less and less inclined to take a risk on signing and promoting artists who did not fit the typical white and male framework that performed well on country radio.

In the decades since the 1990s country boom, studies have revealed how the country music format has only became more white, and more male.[390] With a rapidly diversifying U.S. population, one must question how sustainable such an investment in whiteness is, while also considering how the country music industry has capitalized on feelings of white anxiety in recent years. To some retired members of the country music industry, there are few expectations the

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[388] Nicole Hemmer discusses the dominating effects of consolidation in radio brought about by the Telecommunications Act in her book on conservative media. See Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 266-67. For more on the historic consolidation of radio, see Alec Foege, *Right of the Dial: The Rise of Clear Channel and the Fall of Commercial Radio* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008).

[389] Chuck Aly, "The Pay For Play Inferno: Making Sense of Consolidation," *Music Row*, May 8, 1998, 10.

[390] Braden Leap, "A New Type of (White) Provider: Shifting Masculinities in Mainstream Country Music from the 1980s to the 2010s," *Rural Sociology*, 85 (1), 2020, pp. 165-189; Jada Watson, "Gender Representation on Country Format Radio: A Study of Published Reports from 2000-2018," *SongData Reports*, April 26, 2019. https://songdata.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/SongData-Watson-Country-Airplay-Study-FullReport-April2019.pdf.

business will change. “The whole purpose of [the business] is to make money, and I don’t think it’s any more complicated than that. People individually may feel a certain social responsibility, but that’s more a moral thing than it is a business thing,” explained Edward Morris, the former country editor at *Billboard* and a longtime member of the Nashville music business community.[391]

Meanwhile, decades after his country music career in Nashville had faltered, Cleve Francis reflected on whether anything could be done to change the racist marketing practices of the business. “It’s the institutional racism,” he explained. “You have to start with the programmers, some label heads, you start with the venue owners,” referring to the wide-ranging, sustained effort that would be required to change the system. “The only way that it’s gonna ease up is that these people have to go on and be replaced by more liberal thinking people…but if the current crew stays in place, you won’t ever get beyond that.”[392]

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[391] Edward Morris Phone Interview with Martinez, September 11, 2020.

[392] Cleve Francis Phone Interview with Martinez, August 6, 2020.

CONCLUSION

By the 1990s, the business behind country music brought it to a new level of respectability, one that epitomized ideals of middle-class whiteness. In a post-Cold War era where Clintonian consensus politics reigned and popular culture was often a source of feel-good escape, as visible in things like the romantic comedies that dominated American film, chart-topping country resonated with Americans like never before. As one writer explained in 1996, "Country became the de facto soundtrack of white flight," saying "it's not angry at the world, just oblivious to it."[393] The story behind the music's journey into the suburban imagination shows the central role culture has played in reconstructing whiteness over time, just as it had done in earlier generations. Grace Hale has discussed how in the Jim Crow era a segregationist Southern white culture was built while violently suppressing Blackness to the margins.[394] By the post-World War II period, Eric Avila has shown how a uniquely suburban whiteness emerged, where a new popular culture was created to cater to white suburbanites and came at the expense of Black and Brown communities.[395] This work directly builds on this literature, revealing how, by the 1990s, the country music industry created a new definition of what whiteness looked like, one that represented the sound of middle America and white suburban adults.

What is most striking about country's reliance on whiteness, however, is that it has fundamentally never been entirely white. From its inception, the genre has been built on a

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[393] Bruce Feiler, "Has Country Become a Soundtrack for White Flight?" *New York Times*, October 20, 1996, H38.

[394] Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

[395] Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004).

multitude of influences and presences, Blackness especially. Still, country's reliance on whiteness is most clear when considering the the racial disparity between which artists have been accepted as country acts, regardless of sound, personal background, or thematics.[396] As Cleve Francis later recalled about his time in Nashville in the 1990s, the business "would accept a white guy from New Jersey who puts on a cowboy hat and wears the costume, and somehow it's ok for him to be here…and so the only difference [about who is accepted as a country artist] is whether you're white or Black."[397] As top artists bridged the gap between country and pop like never before, Black country artists and fans were shut out while being unquestionably more country in traditional practice than many chart-topping artists. "I don't care what color you are," said Frankie Staton, who at the time ran the Black Country Music Association. "I sing country music because I can relate to that single mother, that waitress, that trucker. That's my crowd. I've always wanted to sing for the working people."[398] Despite the fact that Staton epitomized common definitions of country music—as a Southern artist who identified with working-class America—her race nevertheless barred her from acceptance as a country artist.

Over the course of its existence, suppression of Black and Brown inclusion has been a key strategy the country music business has employed in striving for mainstream respectability, one that reached new levels of success by the end of the twentieth century. In this sense, the industry is hardly unique. By the 1990s, country music was far from the only product in American culture that was nearly universally interpreted as entirely white. Other contemporary

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

[397] Cleve Francis Interview with Martinez August 6, 2020.

[398] Robert K. Oermann, "Nashville's Trade Secrets: Black Country Artists Lift Up Their Voices," *The Tennessean*, February 18, 1997, 3D.

lifestyle brands like Tommy Hilfiger, Liz Claiborne, and Ralph Lauren similarly built identities around selling ideals of whiteness.[399] How country music differs from other examples, however, is the ways the music has always drawn heavily from multiracial and multicultural sources. Rather than being something like a clothing label created solely as a brand, country music's roots have fundamentally been built on a multitude of influences, Blackness especially.

By the turn of the century, despite the organizing efforts of Black country artists, fans, and writers, it was clear Black buying power and the idea that country could expand its audience racially was of no interest to the country music business.[400] Once again it was evident that country in the eyes of the industry was most characterized not by sound, region, or any other theme but race and whiteness. At a moment when profits had never been higher, there was added disincentive to alter a white-only business model that had never been more successful. This was a period when country produced some of the best-selling artists and albums of *all-time*—regardless of genre—including Garth Brooks, who continues to rank as the highest-selling solo artist ever (only the Beatles have sold more records), and Shania Twain, whose 1997 album *Come On Over* still stands as the best-selling album by a solo female act. How these artists achieved such unprecedented popularity revealed much more about the music's racial and class politics in late-twentieth century America than it did about the music itself.

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[399] In the 1990s, rumors frequently circulated that both Tommy Hilfiger and Liz Claiborne stated that they only wanted whites to wear their clothing. Jeannine Stein, "When Rumors Are Clothed as Truth," *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1997.

[400] A broad business historiography has revealed the central role race played in marketing practices throughout the 20th century, and has often pointed to the challenges of marketing to a Black demographic especially. See Keith Wailoo, *Pushing Cool: Big Tobacco, Racial Marketing, and the Untold History of the Menthol Cigarette* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021); Marcia Chatelain, *Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America* (New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020). Lizabeth Cohen has also discussed the rise of marketing segmentation in the post-World War II period, including Pepsi's marketing campaign targeting Black consumers. See Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

Artists like Shania Twain and Garth Brooks brought country music to a new commercial pinnacle while fundamentally pushing the stylistic boundaries of what defined the genre, showing how country music represented not a musical choice, but a lifestyle brand predicated on middle-of-the-road whiteness. In Brooks's early years of success, in the early 1990s, his music created heated debates about whether his rock-influenced sound was indeed country.[401] When producer Tony Brown first heard the singer, he was impressed but not yet convinced Brooks was trying to make it in the right genre. "Boy, he was good," Brown reportedly said. "But he's not very country."[402] By the late 1990s, Shania Twain set off similar debates about whether her pop/rock sound and image had gone too far. When she released *Come on Over* in 1997, one review explained that the album "is essentially a mid-80s rock record that reflects the pedigree of Twain's husband and producer, Robert 'Mutt' Lange," who worked previously with rock acts like Bon Jovi and Def Leppard.[403] In music videos for popular songs off the album like "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" and "You're Still the One," gone were images of boots or blue jeans that had previously marked Twain as a country singer, exchanged now for short cocktail dresses and beach-tousled looks. Twain followed the record-breaking success of *Come On Over* with the album, *Up!*, where she and Lange adopted an even more genre-defying image and sound. In an attempt to appeal to multiple markets, three different versions of the record were released, each packaged differently and with alternate song mixings, including: country (featuring Twain

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[401] A cover story for *Country America* in May 1996 continued to addressed the question of whether artists like Brooks had gone too far to be considered country, asking, "Where Do We Draw the Line Between Country and Rock?"

[402] Jimmy Bowen and Jim Jerome, *Rough Mix: An Unapologetic Look at the Music Business and How It Got That Way–A Lifetime in the World of Rock, Pop, and Country as Told by One of the Industry's Most Powerful Players* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 219.

[403] Greg Ket, "Garth Brooks, Shania Twain Have Changed the Twang of Country Music," *Chicago Tribune*, November 23, 1997, Section 7, 18.

wearing a cowboy hat), world, and pop-rock (showing a midriff-bearing Twain). Perhaps more than ever before, the evolution of Twain's career and marketing revealed the lengths to which the country music business was willing to push the boundaries of what, in theory, defined country music in the name of high record sales.

By 1997, one music writer concluded that "country has clearly become something else: middle-American pop," adding: "Country is no longer rural music made by coal miners' sons and sharecroppers' daughters…The new country is decidedly middle-class and conservative, God-fearing and mother-loving, but even more crucially it places a premium on catchy choruses and strong voices."[404] Missing from this description was implicit: country music was white, above all else—the "soundtrack of white flight," as defined elsewhere.[405] Though it had always been identified as white music, the former "hillbilly" music had reached a new, firmly middle-class identity. By the turn of the century, country's evolution into "middle-American pop" caused it to dominate popular culture like never before. Perhaps no better place to identify the genre's mainstream presence was in popular films, where country songs were frequently heard in top-grossing releases. In movies ranging from action blockbusters to romantic comedies, country's inclusion in such films helped further cement the genre as family-friendly at a time when the New Right, Republican, and neoliberal politicians broadly championed family-friendly

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[404] Greg Ket, "Garth Brooks, Shania Twain Have Changed the Twang of Country Music," *Chicago Tribune*, November 23, 1997, Section 7, 18.

[405] Bruce Feiler, "Has Country Become a Soundtrack for White Flight?" *New York Times*, October 20, 1996, H38.

politics.[406] Songs like Faith Hill's "There You'll Be" in *Pearl Harbor* and Trisha Yearwood's "How Do I Live" in *Con Air* were featured prominently in some of the era's highest-earning films. At a moment when romantic comedies had perhaps never been more popular, it was often country songs heard in the feel-good films, including Shania Twain's "You've Got a Way" in *Notting Hill*, Martina McBride's "I Love You" and The Chicks's "Ready to Run" in *Runaway Bride,* and Faith Hill's "This Kiss" in *Practical Magic*.[407] The lovable, often wholesome personas of the female country singers heard in romantic comedies aligned well with the films' popular actresses like Julia Roberts or Sandra Bullock, revealing how country music's dominance by the mid-to-late nineties was also a broader reflection of American ideals of femininity and the highest standards of beauty.

Beyond racial and cultural politics, impacts of neoliberalism and business-friendly legislation further compounded country's reliance on whiteness, as consolidation of the radio industry—the most influential wing of the country music business—quickly felt the impacts of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. By 1997, an article in *Music Row* reported that "an ever shrinking group of consultants continues to control an increasing number of [radio] stations," leading to pressures for radio programmers to produce greater profits for station owners.[408] This shift resulted in stations with ever-shrinking artists and songs played on radio stations, as

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[406] Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012); Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017); Marjorie J. Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

[407] Megan Day, staff writer at *Jacobin*, has discussed how romantic comedies during the nineties reflected broader political complacency and neoliberal policies from the time period. See Megan Day, "The Romance of American Clintonism," *Jacobin*, October 21, 2020.

[408] David M. Ross, "Country at the Crossroads: Cookie Cutter Stations, Fragmenting Formats, or Localized Leadership?" *Music Row*, March 8, 1997, 36.

programmers increasingly relied on the most popular artists to ensure higher ratings—a strategy that inevitably prioritized overwhelming white male artists. The effects of the Telecommunications Act even came as unwelcome to some of the most powerful figures in Nashville at the time, including Joe Galante, head of RCA Nashville, who explained: " "It does concern me to have greater media control in less and less hands…The more centralized the control, the more you have one person or a group telling you what should be happening, and that scares me."[409]

By 2001, the impact of 9/11 cemented country's whiteness even further, as the music again became the soundtrack of fervent American patriotism, just as it had been during previous conflicts such as the Gulf War and Vietnam War. The country music industry's blacklisting of The Chicks in the post-9/11 era bridged the gap between earlier generations of a business that was built on not only whiteness, but also sexism and misogyny. In recent years, backlash by fans following an appearance by The Chicks alongside Beyoncé at the 2016 Country Music Association (CMA) Awards highlighted the racism and sexism still very much at the heart of country music in the public imagination. The performance marked the return of The Chicks to the CMA stage for the first time since Maines's anti-war comments about President Bush in 2003 had provoked their swift banishment from Nashville. They joined Beyoncé, a Houston native, in performing the singer's "Daddy Lessons," a song that drew upon Beyoncé's Southern roots and a track that includes many markers of a country song for its instrumentation and lyrical content.[410]

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[409] Ross, 38.

[410] Even prior to Beyoncé's CMA appearance, "Daddy Lessons" had already sparked conversations about the track's links to country and the historic and continuing Black presence in country. See Victoria M. Massie, "Beyoncé's 'Daddy Lessons' is a Reminder of Country's Black and West African Roots," Vox, April 17, 2016; Mark Guarino, "Beyoncé's Daddy Lessons is a Shrewd Wink to Country," *The Guardian*, June 1, 2016.

Despite a strong performance, the appearance was widely attacked by country music fans in following days, leading to discussions about the racism and sexism at the heart of such uproar.[411]

The racial double standard Beyoncé faced proved especially glaring when considering how she was received compared to Justin Timberlake, another pop outsider, who performed on the CMA Awards the year prior in 2015 and was conversely met with universal embrace and celebration by country fans. The conflicting receptions Beyoncé and Timberlake received were indicative of the white, largely conservative fan base the Country Music Association had prioritized for several decades by the 2010s—revealing why it is not surprising that Beyoncé, a Black woman who had spoken out against police violence against Black communities, was not embraced, while Timberlake, a white pop star with Tennessee roots, was meanwhile warmly accepted. Before the performance, CMA Awards host Brad Paisley enthusiastically introduced Timberlake as the "soul of Memphis" in what sounded like a reference to the city's historic Black culture and music, given how Timberlake and Stapleton's performance of "Tennessee Whiskey" leaned on Black vocal and sonic styles. Following the performance, both country fans and deejays expressed widespread hope the pop star would go country, and ever since the event Stapleton, who sings in a soul-influenced style, has become one of the most beloved singers in country music.

The influence of Black music as heard in the stylings of an artist like Stapleton is hardly new to country music. In many ways, the evolution of country music and the ways it's managed to continually adopt modern sounds and styles (often a synonym for Black culture), has been a

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[411] Joe Coscarelli, "Beyoncé's C.M.A.Awards Performance Becomes the Target of Backlash," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2016; Dave Paulson, "Beyoncé, Dixie Chicks Wow CMA Audience Despite Backlash," *The Tennessean*, November 3, 2016; Randall Roberts, "Conservative Country Music Fans Lash Out at CMA Performance by Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks," November 3, 2016.

key part of its endurance. From the reliance of jazz heard in western swing in the 1930s and 40s, to Hank Williams's influence from blackface minstrelsy, to country soul crossovers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to the incorporation of rock music from the 1970s onwards, and the heavy reliance on hip hop styles in contemporary country, it's always been clear how much the genre takes from Black culture. Over the past decade, appropriations of Black style and music by white male country artists have elsewhere dominated the business, as heard in the use of hip hop beats and rapping vocals by top artists like Jason Aldean, Luke Bryan, Florida Georgia Line, Sam Hunt, and many others.[412] What continues to also be far from unique, however, is how these white (and almost always male) artists continue to revere Black culture and be celebrated as innovative for their use of it, just as the business fails to support actual Black individuals within country music.

Beyond displaying country's ongoing racial and gender discrimination, the appearance of Beyoncé and The Chicks on the CMA Awards also proved significant in its timing. The women performed on the show on November 2, 2016, less than a week before Donald Trump was elected president. While Trump represents a symptom and not a cause of America's deeply systemic racism and sexism, his influence in American political life has emboldened often violent and deadly displays of white supremacy, helped fuel attacks on the history of racism and things like Critical Race Theory, and enflamed backlash against "cancel culture," which conversely has also created a more vocal resistance. The country music business has not been immune to such movements, as it has been forced to confront its many layers of historic

[412] In 2013, Jody Rosen identified a growing group of male country stars who increasingly incorporated hip hop into their music, labeling the trend bro-country. See Jody Rosen, "Jody Rosen on the Rise of Bro-Country," *Vulture*, August 11, 2013.

inequality. As the #MeToo movement became mainstream in the year following Trump's election, the country music business was pressured to face systemic sexism, as organizations such as such as Change the Conversation, which is devoted to supporting women in country music who have received dwindling airplay on country radio over the past two decades, has gained growing support and publicity.

Industry efforts pushing for gender equality, while well intentioned, have revealed the difficulties of confronting widespread inequalities in a business set up to only allow white, straight, able-bodied men can succeed. While research has revealed that women have received shrinking airplay on country radio in recent decades, falling from representing 34.1% of artists on the *Billboard* Hot Country Songs Chart in 1999, to 13.6% in 2016, Emphasis on this statistic alone suppresses the reality that every other minority based on race/ethnicity, sexuality, and ability have been nearly non-existent on the country charts, leading to a strategy where only a handful more white women receive marginal additional support in the business.[413] Since 2020, however, the country music business has been forced to reckon with its racism in entirely new ways. Never before has it so publicly had to wrestle with its striking levels of systemic racism, leading to pledges by groups like the Grand Ole Opry, Country Music Television (CMT), Academy of Country Music, and the Country Music Association to do more to create opportunities for artists of color.[414]

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[413] Jada Watson, "Gender on the Billboard Hot Country Songs Chart, 1996-2016," *Popular Music & Society* 2019, 42 (5): 546.

[414] On June 9, 2020, the Grand Ole Opry took to social media saying that it rejected racism, saying: "Racism is real, It is Unacceptable. And it has no place at the Grand Ole Opry." Meanwhile, the CMA commissioned a study on fans of color. See: Jessica Nicholson, "CmA-Commissioned Study Examines Country Musics Multicultural Audience Opportunities & Barriers," Billboard, December 9, 2021. CMT announced an Equal Access initiative to support artists of color. See: Cindy Watts, "CMT and theory Team for Equal Access Development Program to Champion Unheard Voices," CMT, April 15, 2022.

While some pledges have been made to support Black and Brown artists moving forward, time will tell whether the business, overall, is willing to alter the whites-only business model its relied upon for nearly a century. Considering many of the most profitable acts the industry continues to support, evidence suggests little hope remains that Nashville will become a more racially inclusive space. Since the uprisings of 2020, two of the most popular acts in country, Morgan Wallen and Jason Aldean, have found increased success after explicitly aligning themselves with racism and far right politics. In February 2021, Wallen was caught on camera shouting out a racial slur, leading to his brief removal from country radio and Spotify, and the suspension of his record contract. Rather than serve as disciplinary, such efforts actually helped the singer's career, as fans rallied against the "cancel culture" they interpreted as being lashed out against Wallen. As a result his *Dangerous: The Double Album* broke the record for the most weeks at #1 on the *Billboard* Country Albums chart. At the same time, Jason Aldean and his wife Brittany have boosted their careers as proponents of the far right and staunch Trump supporters. Brittany Aldean even started a clothing label (alongside Kasi Rosa Wicks, Jason Aldean's sister) selling shirts and hoodies with slogans like "UNsilent Majority: Speaking Up to Protect Our Freedom," "Military Lives Matter," "Unapologetically Conservative," and, in a style modeled by Jason Aldean, a shirt that reads "This is our F-ing Country," featuring an American flag in the middle of the slogan. In turn, Aldean continues to be among the most supported artists on country radio, and even received the 2022 Artist Humanitarian Award by the Country Radio Broadcasters (CRB).[415]

[415] LB Cantrell, "Jason Aldean Named Country Radio Broadcasters 2022 Artist Humanitarian Award," *Music Row*, January 25, 2022.

Despite an industry that has largely fumbled in creating a more equitable business for the future, there have also been moments of hope in the modern era. In 2020, Rissi Palmer, one of just two Black women to have charted on the *Billboard* country charts over the past two decades, started a podcast, Color Me Country, documenting the stories of Black, Brown, and Indigenous women of country. In 2021, Holly G, a Black woman who loves country music, created the Black Opry, which has created a growing community for Black artists and fans from all walks of life. Since 2020, author and journalist Andrea Williams has also wrote extensively on the deeply systemic racism that has always rested at the heart of the country music business. Williams's work on the 2022 documentary *For Love and Country: Country Music Has Always Been Black Music* also revealed the lengths to which today's Black country artists continue to create deeply beautiful and innovative contemporary country music. While the collective work of these Black women offers hope for a more inclusive future for country music, their efforts point to the glaring reality that it is labor they should not have to perform: As some of the most marginalized figures in the country music business—shut out for not only their race, but status as women—they should not have to bear the burden of doing such work.

It is yet to be determined whether the broader industry will continue to broadly support efforts towards longterm equity. But at a moment when white backlash politics continue to be emboldened, there is little incentive for the country music business to stray from its historically loyal white, largely conservative base of listeners.

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