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

by

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2006
For my parents, Stan and Judy Feder, who gave me a love of learning and taught me that scholarship can be force for change.
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—Glenn Campbell, “Country Boy,” 1975

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PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS


Abstract of the Dissertation

“Song of the South”

Country Music, Race, Region, and the Politics of Culture

1920-1974

by

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This dissertation explores how country music in the United States came to be considered a “white” genre and associated with political conservatism by examining two pivotal periods, 1920-1933 and 1959-1974. Part I focuses on the years during which the recording industry created a marketing category—“hillbilly”—to sell records to southern whites. It argues that this industry’s decision to pursue a segregated marketing strategy did not simply replicate southern Jim Crow, but rather created a new kind of cultural sphere for southern whites, separated from their black neighbors in a way unknown before mass mediation. Illuminated by the accounts of early industry executives Frank Walker and Ralph Peer, this section largely focuses on two of the new genre’s most
defining acts—Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family—to explain how country music synthesized the South’s heterogeneous musical traditions to create an imagined community of white southerners.

Part II explores how country music became affiliated with the conservative movement of the late twentieth century. Chapter 4 asks why two important African American interventions in country music during the 1960s—those of country’s only black superstar, Charley Pride, and the genre-bending Ray Charles—failed to change the music’s racial connotations. Pride insisted that he found his natural expression in country music, strictly adhering to the genre’s conventions in a way that did not open the music up to African Americans who felt excluded from the genre. Charles, in contrast, remained an outsider to country musical while invoking to critique segregation. Chapter 5 analyzes at Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee,” framed by its inclusion on a recording custom-made by the Country Music Association for President Richard Nixon pairing country songs with excerpts of Nixon’s speeches. It argues that country music helped draw a new “geography of values” in the late 1960s that used southernness to claim moral authority for a conservative political agenda.
Introduction
“Song of the South”
Popular Culture and the Burden of Southern History

The idea of the South—or, more appropriately, the ideas of the South—belong in large part to the order of social myth. There are few areas of the modern world that have bred a regional mythology so potent, so profuse and diverse, even so paradoxical, as the American South.

—George Brown Tindall

Prologue

Side A: “You’re writing about race in country music?! But there’s only one race!”

This comment was made to me by David, an African American man I met in a Los Angeles bar in late July of 2002. In seeing “only one race”—the white one, of course—in country music, he is hardly alone. Indeed, this impression has largely attained the status of conventional wisdom. Yet the history of country music’s production and reception is much more colorful. African Americans have made and enjoyed country music since its beginnings, as have Asian Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans.

Nevertheless, non-white country fans and musicians—perhaps especially African Americans—have been marginalized by country media, and are often regarded as “odd”


2 Language note: Preferred racial terms changed a great deal over the time period covered by this study. I therefore have chosen to use terms common in recent historical writing. “African American” and “black” are used interchangeably to refer to Americans of African descent, while “white” is used to refer to Americans of European descent.
by the broader culture. One black country music enthusiast, journalist Pamela E. Foster, felt the need to devote two whole books to “stimulate[ing] the pride and validation in [sic] the many black fans of country music who heretofore have hesitated to share their musical tastes with others for fear of reproach.”

I recently heard a listener whose rebellion against this stigma led her to phone Washington, D.C.’s WMZQ to proclaim on the air, “I just want you to know I’m black … and I love country music!”

Side B:

In December of 2003, as the Democratic primaries for the 2004 presidential nomination were beginning in earnest, I accompanied a friend to a holiday party in Washington, D.C.’s Mt. Pleasant neighborhood. All I knew about my host I learned from his yard signs: he supported Vermont Governor Howard Dean, the early favorite for the nomination who had energized progressive voters across the country. In talking to this “Deaniac,” I learned that his political commitments led him to join a progressive network extending beyond the Governor’s campaign.

Our conversation eventually turned from politics to music. When I told him of my fondness for country music, he and the others who had joined our conversation began to combatively interrogate me. “What about the jingoism?” they asked, alluding to the songs

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that had rocketed up the country charts after the September 11th attacks and during the build up to the Iraq War, “What about how conservative country music is?”

I have had versions of this conversation countless times—country music’s conservatism is almost as universally assumed as its whiteness. And I am not the only one: at about the same time as I was defending myself from liberal holiday revelers, a group of dissenting “Nashville industry leaders” who got “fed up with feeling as if they had to apologize” for their politics organized the Music Row Democrats, an organization dedicated to combating country’s association with the Right and to “dispel[ing] the notion that the country music community is predominately Republican.”

Introduction

This study is my attempt to understand how country music got to this point. Why did country evolve as a “white” music; how did it become associated with the political Right; and what impact have these racial and political associations had on the way Americans think about race and politics? My argument is divided into two parts. In the 1920s, the decisions made when the music was first recorded created a separate cultural sphere for southern whites. This prepared country music to cater to the political and

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cultural attitudes of the middle- and working-class Americans who came to identify with the conservative views of their southern brethren in the late 1960s.

Part I, “Making Whiteness Resonate: Hillbilly Music’s Southern Circle of Resonance, 1920-1933,” looks at the concrete historical and musical processes that carved out a separate space for southern whites in popular culture. The first of three chapters dealing with this era, “ ‘The Hillbilly and the Nigger Stuff,’ ” argues that the recording industry followed a model developed by other northern businesses to balance their goal of reaching as many southern consumers as possible with a need to respect white supremacy. It segregated its market, institutionalizing separate categories (and catalogs) of black and white music. Early “race” music has been extensively studied; its complement, a motley collection of regional styles dubbed “hillbilly” that often bore little resemblance to one another, presents a complex and less well documented narrative. The second chapter, “Was Whiteness Born in Bristol?” examines how one of this era’s most important acts, the Carter Family, helped to transform this melange of local styles into a coherent musical genre marketable across the entire South. The last chapter in Part I, “

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‘Talk about Your Trouble,’ examines how the first great hillbilly star, Jimmie Rodgers, found a way to accommodate the age-old fondness for black music among southern whites within the newly and rigidly segregated world that evolved into “country music.”

Though hillbilly music had been a part of local and regional politics since its inception—Fiddlin’ John Carson, for example, who made the first hillbilly record in 1923, campaigned for the populist politicians Tom Watson and Eugene Talmadge—it had its most profound political impact on national politics almost a half-century after its inception.⁷ Part II, “The Enduring Whiteness of Country Music and the Southernization of America, 1959-1974,” argues that country music’s southernness positioned it to capture the loyalties of conservative non-southerners who felt unrepresented in the popular culture of the 1960s. Country music helped transform the region that the Civil Rights Movement had managed to label as un-American for its combative and resistance to the federal government into a place with a plausible claim to being the heartland of American values.⁸ The first of this section’s two chapters, “‘Because You’re Mine, I Walk the [Color] Line,’” explores some of the musical reasons that country music remained associated with the white South at a time when the Civil Rights Movement and rock and roll were integrating white-only spaces from the voting booth to the dance floor. Though two African American musicians achieved considerable success in country music at the time—Charley Pride and Ray Charles—their musical strategies

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⁸ Also important, but outside the scope of this study, are agrarian-themed TV shows like The Andy Griffith Show, Green Acres, and The Beverly Hillbillies.
for doing so did not fundamentally change the music’s whiteness. Pride’s strict adherence to country conventions and his insistence that he found his natural expression in country music did not open the music up to African Americans who felt excluded from the genre. Charles used country music to critique segregation, but he did so as an outsider to country music.

The dissertation concludes with “‘The Whole United States is Southern,’” which examines the links between country music and conservative values through the intimate relationship between an increasingly centralized and Nashville-based country music industry and Richard Nixon. Framed by an extraordinary recording, custom-made by the Country Music Association for the President, pairing country songs with excerpts of Nixon’s speeches, this chapter centers on the song that became the touchstone of country conservatism, Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee” (1969). The presidential election of 1968 inaugurated a new era in American politics, dominated by cultural antagonisms famously labeled the “Social Issue.” Richard Nixon and the conservative movement his presidency energized championed their values as “traditional” and “American,” asserting greater moral authority than those calling for social change. Country music, which catered to conservative consumers after “Okie,” helped draw a new geography of values in Americans’ imagination. Southern recalcitrance became patriotic old-fashionedness, appealing to the non-southerners who now identified with the defiant intransigence the region had made its brand in the 1960s.
“Digging Up Bones”
Historiography, Methodology, and Country Musicology

When I initially proposed this dissertation, I had hoped to write two additional chapters illuminating the forty-some years between the time periods that became its centers of gravity. But like most doctoral students, my academic eyes were bigger than my writerly stomach—I was forced to set aside many of the things I had wanted to cover in order not to bite off more than I could chew. The absence I feel most keenly in preparing the final draft is an examination of how country preserved its whiteness as it differentiated itself from rock and roll in the 1950s and 1960s. But I also miss other topics: how country adaptations of Hawaiian slide guitar negotiated the incorporation of Asians immigrants and Pacific territories; the “singing cowboy” and the way American Indians have used country music to construct racial and national identities; the connection between Mexican Americans and white southerners in western swing and honky-tonk; race and the post-war expansion of the middle-class; country music and hippie dissent; the problem of southern rock—just to name a few. I was also forced to abandon my plans to extend my thesis to country music of the present, leaving Garth Brooks, the Dixie Chicks, and modern-day flirtations with rap by Gretchen Wilson, Toby Keith, Big and Rich, and Cowboy Troy for another time.

Many counseled me to devote my entire dissertation to either the 1920s-1930s or the 1960s-1970s. Such an approach might have given me a more satisfying sense of thoroughness (and made it unnecessary to include this disclaimer in my introduction), but
it would have rendered unanswerable my project’s core historical and conceptual questions. For most of American history, the South has occupied a position in the national imagination as an “American problem.” As sociologist Larry Griffin writes, until recently the South was widely regarded as a place “at odds with the nation’s self-understanding,” the home of the dark secrets that gave lie to many of the attributes of which the country was most proud. At the end of the nineteenth century it was an island of agricultural servitude in a country on industrialism’s cutting-edge; in the 1920s it was a poverty-infested colony in a nation that congratulated itself for being a “land of opportunity”; and after World War II it was a swamp of bigotry festering in “the land of the free.” The South’s marginalization in the American imagination was paralleled in national politics. While southerners periodically had great power in the U.S. Congress in the century following the Civil War, not a single southerner occupied the White House in the century between Andrew Johnson’s departure from office in 1869 and Lyndon Johnson’s inauguration in 1962.

The South’s fortunes began to change in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is in large part due to the fading of the stigma under which it had suffered for over a hundred

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9 The history of this intellectual tradition is considered in The South as an American Problem, edited by Larry J. Griffin and Don H. Doyle (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995); quotes from introductory chapter by Larry J. Griffin’s contribution to this collection, “Why Was the South an American Problem,” 12-13. See also C. Vann Woodward’s ruminations on the differences between southern and national experience in “The Search for Southern Identity,” The Burden of Southern History, third edition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 3-26.

10 Woodrow Wilson could be considered the exception to this statement, but only somewhat. While it is true that he was a Virginian by birth, he spent his adult life and began his political career in New Jersey. Though many have seen echoes of his southern upbringing in the segregationist policies he introduced to federal personnel practices, his association with northeastern politics and the cultural elite—he served as the president of Princeton University—placed him at a significant remove from his southern cousins.
years as the region addressed the worst of its crimes against its black citizens. But equally important was a growing, backlash-derived sympathy for the South amongst whites in the rest of the country. As African American activism spread from the South to cities in the Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast, and black protestors were joined on the street by those calling for Women’s Liberation, Gay Liberation, and an end to the Vietnam War, the South’s resistance to change attracted adherents outside the region. Alabama’s racist demagogue, Governor George Wallace, became the first presidential candidate to tap this vein of resentment. Richard Nixon stole some of Wallace’s tactics to win the 1968 and 1972 elections, denouncing busing to court nervous whites and promising to restore “law and order” to win over a nation weary of protest. The South’s politics—and politicians—moved from the margins to the mainstream. Almost every president since Lyndon Johnson has been a southerner; the exceptions are two Californians who owed their elections to southern support, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

At the same time that southern politics were coming to dominate American political life, the region’s musical export—country music—was coming to dominate the airwaves. Country has been either the most popular or the second-most popular music in America since the 1960s. By the mid-1990s country musicians were smashing sales

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records. Garth Brooks’s moved records at levels second only to the Beatles. In 1996 there were 2400 country stations, 1600 more than the next-most-common format, news talk. In that same year, the president and the next three officeholders in the line of succession—the vice president, speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and president pro tem of the U.S. Senate—were all southerners, as were the House majority leader, House majority whip, and the chair of the Republican National Committee.

While it is hard to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the rise of a form of popular culture rooted in the South and the region’s politics—did country music become more popular because southern politics became more accepted, or did southern politics become more accepted because country music became more popular?—it is hard to imagine that the cultural and political trends are unrelated. In actuality, causality is probably not a particularly relevant concept for understanding such cultural trends. Politicians and musicians worked in tandem: politicians crafted rhetoric that made southern values nationally appealing, while country music used sounds that gave southern imagery national resonance. But however we connect the influence of the musical and political spheres, both contributed to the reversal of the South’s fortunes in the nation. In order for Americans to stop looking on the South as the nation’s problem and start

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12 The numbers themselves likely overstate the degree to which the commercial success of country music was unprecedented. In all likelihood, statistics from before Soundscan started compiling sales figures directly on consumer purchases understated the performance of country music because of a reliance on distorted sampling methods.

13 Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Times Books, 1996) 241. This is even before the full effects of statutory changes that allowed large-scale centralization (and, many have complained, homogenization) of radio broadcasting.

14 Applebome, 7-8.
looking to the South for solutions to the nation’s problems, the region’s image had to change from a place of social blight to the homeland of social virtue.

It is impossible to understand how country music helped overhaul the South’s reputation without first understanding how country music came to be affiliated with the white southerners to whom the region’s failings and virtues have been attributed. Scholars of the early recording industry have now disproved the common assumption that country music simply came into being when white southerners recorded the music they were already making for themselves. Instead, they document, decisions commercial record companies made about recording, distribution, and marketing created an entirely new musical category for southern whites. The recording industry needed to reduce a musical world that had been characterized by complex interracial exchange and collaboration to a simple binary system in which music for blacks and for whites occupied distinct spaces in their recording catalogue.

This changed the kinds of relationships music created between black and white southerners. Music, which had long been one of the principal vehicles for interracial contact, became something that increasingly drove whites and blacks into separate cultural spheres. No longer was it unsurprising for whites and blacks to make music together, nor would it be expected that whites and blacks would largely hear the same

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15 Tony Russell, Archie Green, and others have been documenting the way recording segregated southern music since the mid-’70s. Much of the scholarship in this vein has been published in journals like Old-Time Music, The Old-Time Herald, and the JEMF Quarterly. See also Russell, Blacks, Whites, and Blues; Karl Hagstrom Miller, “Segregating Sound: Folklore, Phonographs, and the Transformation of Southern Music, 1888-1935,” Doctoral Dissertation, New York University, 2002.
music in their day-to-day lives. As mass-mediated music became more important in Americans’ lives, it increasingly divided Americans’ musical worlds by race.

Let me be clear: this is not to argue that cross-racial musical interactions ended altogether with the introduction of separate black and white categories, nor to assert that mass-mediation only advanced segregation. Whites continued to hear some black music, and vice versa; records and radio often provided a conduit for crossing racial barriers that southerners were forced to observe in their daily lives. But interracial musical contact became more the exception than the rule. It was remarkable, not ordinary; subversive, not accepted; destabilizing to the South’s racial order, not a natural part of it. Chapter 1 argues that as long as music-making practices were rooted in community relationships and power structures, interracial music-making did not threaten white supremacy, because racial hierarchy largely derived from the way whites and blacks treated one another in everyday interactions, not by the formalized boundaries between areas declared “for white” and “for colored.”¹⁶ If musicians or dancers did cross the (often ambiguous) line that separated appropriate and inappropriate interracial behavior, order could be reestablished by direct social punishment—sometimes violent—of the transgressors.¹⁷ Mass mediation changed all that. Records and radio removed music and the social relationships it created from community control, placing it in a market of


¹⁷ The black Creole musician Amadé Ardoin, who played with a white partner for white and black audiences around Louisiana violated the ambiguous racial codes by accepting a handkerchief from a white woman to wipe his brow on a hot day, for which he was beaten and left for dead. Liner notes to Amadé Ardoin, *Amadé Ardoin: The First Black Zydeco Recording Artist*, Old Timey LP 1224.
transactions between strangers. New technology made it possible for people to musically engage in interracial contact without their neighbors knowing. It raised the especially frightening specter of youngsters crossing the color line musically without parental chaperones.

Music was not the first industry in which mass marketing threatened to upset white supremacy. In expanding southward, record companies followed the model developed by railroads and dry goods distributors to broaden their reach while respecting the South’s racial hierarchy. Race records performed the role in a record catalogue that a Jim Crow car did on a train: The Jim Crow car allowed railroads to make money on African Americans’ need for transportation while consigning them to a separate and unequal seating category. Race records allowed record companies to make money on African American’s hunger for music while consigning them to a separate and unequal record category. White supremacy no longer relied on community enforcement to ensure that music did not undermine white and black inequality—it depended on a newly constructed musical separateness. 

Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale’s analysis of Jim Crow’s function on the rails illuminates its function in record catalogues. “Railroads became the focus of late

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18 My point is not that mass mediation completely and instantly reconfigured southern music. Rather, it introduced a new musical paradigm that became increasingly influential over time under which musical segregation was normative; musical miscegenation, subversive. The interpretation of the historical record that I offer in Chapter 1 places the birth of this new paradigm around 1920, when the record industry “discovered” the southern market. I make no effort to pinpoint when this paradigm became dominant. Certainly, however, by the time Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and others caused an uproar by ignoring the boundaries between the descendents of hillbilly and race records (country and R&B), mass mediation’s segregated paradigm had become firmly entrenched. Mass mediated segregation had to have become an accepted part of American life in order for the integrated music’s popularity to cause such social panic and market meltdown.
nineteenth-century racial conflict,” she argues, “because … [t]rains moved beyond the reach of personalized local relations of class and racial authority.” Often all that kept a well-dressed, light-skinned African American from slipping across the color line was the fact that community members knew who his parents were and his place in the local racial hierarchy. But trains crippled the ability of communities to police the color line—while such a person might get on the train as a black man in his hometown, it could carry him to a place outside his community’s racial knowledge where he could disembark as a “white” man. Responding to the pressure from southern whites, the northern-owned railroads created a region-wide system to maintain the racial order that supplanted the weakened localized ones. Hale explains, “Systemized spatial relations replaced the need to know others personally in order to categorize them.” Train cars, station waiting rooms, bathrooms, drinking fountains, and so on were divided into separate black and white zones. Place was used to manage race. Hale quotes W. E. B. Du Bois, “An African American became … someone who ‘must ride Jim Crow in Georgia.’ ”19

Record catalogues extended the concepts Jim Crow deployed in physical space into the ephemeral realm of mass media. While the music industry could not hang signs on records reading “for white” and “for colored,” it could list records in separate categories, contain them within separate numbering series, and release them with different labels. The vocabulary of the early record industry suggests there may have been some awareness of the geographic origins of these classification practices: while we today consider labels like R&B and country to refer to “genres,” they were understood to

19 Hale, “Bounding Consumption.”
This dissertation understands how southern musical fields—hillbilly and country, race records and R&B—shaped racial and regional identity through another spatial word, “site.” While describing a cultural practice as a “site” has become so commonplace in cultural analysis that its spatial origins are all but forgotten, it is useful to listen for the echo of the word’s original meaning. In physical space, a site is bounded by physical features such as rivers, highways, or national borders, encouraging those contained within them to interact with one another and discouraging contact with those outside. The definition of “site” that labor scholars Samuel Bowles and Howard Gintis offer emphasizes that cultural practices and social conventions can contain personal relationships in a similar way: a site is “an arena of social activity with a characteristic set of social relations defining its specificity.”  

Put less abstrusely, a site is characterized by the unique quality of the personal relationships that occur within it.

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20 This observation about vocabulary is based on a survey of periodicals including Billboard, Downbeat, Country Song Round-up, and the Music City News.

This dissertation understands country music as a site that created musical relationships between people grouped together based on their racial, regional, and, later, political identities. Once gathered there, they heard music that shaped their ideas of self, community membership, and politics. This statement of principles reveals my indebtedness to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. I took two lessons from this landmark book: First, communities exist largely because members believe they are connected to others even though they will likely never meet them. Communities owe their existence to the imaginations of their members, and as such they are largely created in the newspapers, books, and music in which community members enact their sense of belonging.\(^{22}\)

The second lesson Anderson taught me is that the nature of the media through which a community is imagined profoundly affects the way its members imagine it. In his reflections on the origins of nationalism in early modern Europe, he writes,

> What … made the new [national] communities imaginable was a[n] … interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity.\(^{23}\)

Profit gave an incentive for the far-flung sale of printed materials; the printing press made it possible to produce books efficiently; and people were incorporated into communities of shared language, cut off from those who spoke a foreign tongue.

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\(^{23}\) Anderson, 42-43.
With slight modifications, I could import Anderson’s formulation into my analysis of how country helped shaped white southernness:

What … made the new [racial] communities imaginable was an … interaction between a system of production and productive relations (the popular music industry), a technology of communications (recording and broadcasting), and the fatality of human musical diversity.

Profit gave an incentive for the popular music industry to develop music that could appeal to a large group of people, white southerners; technology made the distribution of that music possible; and as it caught on, local musical traditions were increasingly absorbed into the regional country music that dominated the airwaves. The country field—evolving away from its black counterpart—helped white southerners imagine themselves as part of a community made up of other white southerners they would likely never meet.

William Howland Kenney offers an attractive metaphor for the way a musical field becomes a site for imagining community. In Recorded Music in American Life, he introduces the term “circle of resonance” to denote “active recorded sound cultures” focused on recorded music “in which listeners shared, debated, analyzed, and fought … over their personal patterns of empathy and appreciation for what they heard.”²⁴ Kenney’s “circle of resonance” has a virtue beyond its poetic evocation of the way mass mediated music brings listeners into communion with one another. It anchors the analysis of communities imagined through recorded sound in the musical experiences of individuals

²⁴ Kenney, xv.
and the sounds they find meaningful. Though my narrative often emphasizes the marketing and technological forces that shaped country music’s direction, they would never have mattered if people had not invested musical sounds with personal meaning. The country circle of resonance is comprised of individuals who have built a common musical world.

Heeding Robert Walser’s call to study the “music of popular music” in my efforts to understand how country music’s circle of resonance has shaped Americans’ identities and politics, I have adapted a range of tools to answer this project’s cultural and historical questions. I am grateful to a wide range of scholars such as David Brackett, Richard Crawford, Robert Fink, Susan McClary, and Ronald Radano for freeing me from the need an earlier generation of musicologists felt to develop elaborate theoretical tools for studying popular music that could withstand charges of triviality and sloppiness.

Techniques I employ include the relatively traditional analysis of melody and harmony to explain how Charley Pride inflects Hank Williams’s abject songs with upbeat optimism; the close reading of rhythmic and timbral markers of musical style to explicate how Jimmie Rodgers separated himself from blackface minstrelsy and Ray Charles musically

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critiqued segregation; and the exploration of vocal timbre and mechanical mediation’s role in creating intimacy between the Carter Family and their audience.

Answering social and historical questions with music-analytical tools designed to explain the subjective listening experience poses a unique challenge. If there is any problem that remains to be adequately theorized by popular music scholars, it is this one: How does hermeneutic analysis of a specific musical artifact simultaneously illuminate the idiosyncratic experience of the individual listener while accounting for the work’s significance to a collective musical community? I have tried to resolve this dilemma by approximating what I believe is the “preferred meaning” of any particular work, one that may not be the actual experience of any one listener, but rather something assembled in the penumbra of a collection of individual listening experiences.

Put another way, I do not offer my interpretations as an account of any one listener, nor do I put them forward as the experience of every listener. Rather, I try to hear the music from somewhere in between these two interpretive levels. In my attempt to tune my ear to this interpretive stratum, I have tried not to rely too heavily on individual accounts by musicians or listeners, primarily drawing on newspaper articles, advertising materials, television broadcasts, and other places where extramusical discourse took place in a collective arena. My ethnomusicological colleagues may be especially unhappy with this choice; nevertheless, public discussion of what music means
shows musicians and listeners in collaboration and confrontation with one another, revealing the inner workings of imagining community. 27

Historians may object to my approach for another reason: By focusing on “preferred meanings” explained in the press, I have privileged the musics and personal experiences of the people with the greatest access to the media. This would be a fair criticism—this study largely accepts a canonic version of country history and therefore inevitably overemphasizes the centrality of the Nashville establishment. Such historiography diminishes the importance of amateur and small-town working musicians, the importance of rival musical centers like Bakersfield and Austin, and obscures the contribution of the women who are only beginning to receive their due. I have been grateful to pursue my study alongside Stephanie VanderWel, whose dissertation places country women at the center of the music’s history, and Olivia Mather, whose work on country rock has frequently reminded me of the limits of the Nashville narrative. The work of VanderWel, Mather, and other revisionist country historians is so important precisely because the canonic country history has so powerfully shaped the way Americans relate to country music. My work, however, is not a corrective to these

27 This is not to say that some of the participant/observation practices of ethnomusicological fieldwork did not inform this project, but they did so only indirectly. My study closes in the year I was born, so I obviously could not have spent time with the audience members or musicians about whom I write. I am a fan of country music myself, with tastes that run from the 1920s all the way to contemporary top 40, and my ability to hear the echoes of the past in the music I listen to today has honed my ability to identify important aspects of musical sound. I also grew up as a musician in a community of people dedicated to preserving the music popular when hillbilly music was first making it onto records, and I learned a great deal from the amateur historians who have done extensive research on early southern music, as well as the stories that have been passed down in the oral traditions of the old-time and blues communities.
failings of this history; instead, it refracts the story’s significance through the lenses of race, region, and politics.

An article by historian Thomas C. Holt and the work of sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant made me realize that this complex refraction is precisely what puts the music historian in a position to make a unique contribution to the study of identity formation. “Marking: Race, Race-making, and the Writing of History,” lays out what Holt terms a “levels problem” that frustrates analysis of race, bringing to mind the claim in Omi and Winant’s Racial Formation in the United States that race should not be thought of as “an essence [that is] … fixed, concrete and objective.” Rather, it is “formed and transformed over time” on multiple levels: “At the macro-level race is a matter of collectivity, of the formulation of social structures: economic, political, and cultural/ideological;” while “at the micro-level, race is a matter of individuality … the structuring of our practical activity—in work and family, as citizens and as thinkers….”

Holt conceptualizes race in similar terms, as the product of everyday interpersonal interactions abstracted into the larger principles that organize social life. His difficulty, however, is “one of linkages”—how does the analyst understand the relationship between the macro- and micro-levels? As he puts it, “the level problem … [is] the problem of establishing continuity between behavioral explanations sited at the individual level of human experience and those at the level of society and social forces.”


29 Holt, 7.
race and racism that chart its intellectual history, material foundations, and cultural elaborations are useful in many ways, he complains, they “leav[e] the linkage between social context and individual actor unresolved.”

Holt argues that W. E. B. Du Bois’s analysis of a 1917 race riot in East St. Louis points towards a way to rethink the connection between individual lived experience and global systems of economic and political relations:

A war-induced boom, [Du Bois] writes, had produced a historic conjunction in that city of northern capitalists, eastern poor white labor, and southern impoverished blacks. The latter two groups might have logically found common cause and community in their basically similar relation to capital, but instead white labor came to see its interests and itself as somehow fundamentally different from those of black labor. “They saw something at which they had been taught to laugh and make sport; they saw that which the heading of every newspaper column, the lie of every cub reporter, and the exaggeration of every press dispatch, and the distortion of every speech and book had taught them was a mass of despicable men, inhuman; at best, laughable; at worst, the meat of mobs and fury.”

Global economic factors had brought white and black workers into conflict, while “media of communication” had prepared white workers to interpret this conflict in racial terms. Yet neither the underlying economic tensions nor the racial lens through which they were viewed caused the riot—psychological factors inside each individual actor resulted in a decision to respond to the situation with violence.

Holt’s reading of Du Bois offers a solution to the levels problem by scrutinizing how representation links global economic and power struggles to individual

30 Holt, 6.

31 Holt, 6-7.
consciousness and identity. Two concepts emerge to guide historical investigations of this dynamic. The first is the “marking” to which Holt’s title alludes: A host of expressive activities—petty name calling, news reporting, political speeches, stories, and songs—marked the boundaries of race. They taught individuals to view the world in racial terms and helped interpret the meaning of racial status.

The other key concept Holt derives from Du Bois’s example is “the everyday,” a realm of common experience in which a racialized interpretive framework is applied, naturalized, and given force. Building on the work of sociologist Henri Lefebvre, Holt understands the everyday as the site of micro activity upon which macro phenomena are constructed. “Major activities are born of germs contained in everyday practice,” he writes, illustrating this assertion with an example of a woman buying a pound of sugar: Though this purchase is a small event undertaken casually, it takes on much larger significance when viewed as a link in a chain of historical and political events. This small event “not only expresses but makes possible [the] global structure of imperialist politics and labor relations” in which sugar is produced. Global forces, such as imperialism, racism, and the like, only come into meaningful existence through such everyday occurrences. If there were no one to buy the sugar, then the political and labor relations that produced it would not exist. “Power can only be realized at the level of everyday practice, and it is dependent … on the reproduction of the relations, idioms, and the world-view that are the means of its action. In short, the everyday is where macro-level phenomena—politics, economics, ideologies—are lived.”

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32 Holt, 10.
The implications of Holt’s analytical perspective for the study of popular music are profound. People experience popular music in the most personal way, inviting it into their bedrooms and living rooms, welcoming its company in the most emotional moments of their lives. Yet as personal and intimate as the everyday experience of popular music can be, it always remains part of the larger public sphere—music requires a large social network for production and distribution, and each individual listener consumes popular music as part of an audience that consists of thousands or millions of others. Whether listeners hear popular music in a group setting or by themselves at home, they are equally part of a circle of resonance anchored on musical sound. The personal nature of the listener’s relationship with popular music does not isolate him from other listeners—rather, the strength of his response makes them more forcefully a part of that imagined community built around musical sound.

The racial foundation of America’s pop-musical genre system, worked out largely in the South, has come to be one of the most prominent sites through which individuals are encouraged to attach their everyday personal experiences to racial identity; boundaries between musical genres are now some of the most high-profile “markers” of racial difference in the American psyche. The evolution of this segregated system was not inevitable: it was the result of a concrete history in which historical actors—musicians, record company executives, politicians, audience members—chose to turn in one direction or another at important junctures. This dissertation looks at two of the most
important of these crossroads.

“The American Honky-Tonk Bar Association”
The Politics of Culture/Culture’s Politics

… [R]ejoice, you have a voice,
If you’re concerned about the destination
of this great nation.
It’s called the American Honky-Tonk Bar Association.

It represents the hardhat, gun rack, achin’-back, over-taxed,
flag-wavin’, fun-lovin’ crowd!
Their heart is in the music, and they love to play it loud!
There’s no forms or applications.
There’s no red tape administrations.
It’s the American Honky-Tonk Bar Association.
—Garth Brooks, “American Honky-Tonk Bar Association,” 199333

The first of these two turning points is the subject of the preceding historiographic note: as part of the modernization of the Jim Crow South, the 1920s gave birth to the racial binary that would chart the course of popular music for the rest of the twentieth century. I could have chosen any number of turning points for my second period of focus, however. The most obvious candidate probably occurs in the mid-1950s, when, under the pressure of the rock-and-roll explosion, the genre system established in the 1920s teetered on the brink of total meltdown. But explaining how popular music shaped racial thought is not the only objective of this study. Equally important is understanding how

the racialized worldview that developed through popular music translates into electoral politics. Country music during the decade-or-so that straddles 1969 provides one of the best case studies through which to view the dynamics I seek to illuminate.

This dissertation’s subtitle does not use the phrase “the Politics of Culture” metaphorically, as it is usually understood outside academia. “The politics of culture” conventionally denotes ideological controversies that erupt within the intelligentsia around cultural incidents and artifacts. In my lifetime, this has included the hostility towards the National Endowments for the Arts and its funding of radical artists that many felt crossed the boundaries of “decency” and the “culture wars” waged by groups that were angered by the violence, sexuality, and profanity on television and in popular music.34

While such disputes often provide a stage upon which important social battles can be (symbolically) fought, restricting study of “the politics of culture” to such occasions obscures culture’s profound impact on electoral politics. Its place in my subtitle, then, is intentionally misleading, an effort to hijack the term to give cultural critics a greater role in the discourse about politics. Rather than being concerned about the few moments when politics concerns itself with culture, I am interested in the politics embedded in culture—“the politics of culture” rewritten as “culture’s politics.”

This does not mean focusing on overtly politicized popular culture, however. Pop culture represents itself primarily as entertainment, and has directly concerned itself with

political action—such as the protest music of the 1960s or the consciousness rap of the 1980s—about as often as politics has directly concerned itself with popular culture. While consensus has developed within the humanities that popular music and popular culture more generally are always political even when they are not politicized, there is little critical scholarship examining the practical implications of popular music for electoral politics. And if political practitioners—politicians, strategists, and activists—concern themselves with popular music at all, their understanding of its power is often simplistic and limited.35

In explaining my project to people in politics who are skeptical about the political importance of seemingly apolitical popular culture—who are usually enthusiastic about discussing politicized music—I have found an analogy useful: Politicized cultural artifacts are to popular culture what storms are to weather. Weather usually goes unnoticed unless it is doing something extreme, and storms remind us that weather is up there. The final chapter examines the local conditions under which such a storm erupted in 1969, but also attempts to trace the larger climatic shifts that shaped country music’s prevailing weather in the following decades. In that year, Merle Haggard began performing his (in)famous “Okie from Muskogee,” a song embraced by millions of country fans as a counterattack on protestors and hippies and their perceived disrespect for hard work, “traditional” values, and patriotism. There were in fact a flurry of other

35 This is true of even of those who should know better, such as record producer-cum-activist Danny Goldberg, whose recommendations for using popular music to agitate for political change seem to boil down to getting pop stars to use their celebrity to draw attention to political causes. Dispatches from the Culture Wars.
country songs in a similar spirit, but overtly political songs were only a small handful in a
crop of thousands. Yet there was continuity between the political sentiments fans heard in
“Okie” and its myriad apolitical contemporaries, a common thread that helped weave the
cultural fabric out of which the modern conservative movement is fashioned. Country
music held up the South as a homeland for the values many Americans felt were under
threat, turning the marketing niche into a politically transformative circle of resonance
that brought together like-minded folks both inside and outside the South. When George
Wallace and Richard Nixon ran presidential campaigns that turned southern antagonism
to the federal government and cultural “elites” into a national force, they were
empowered in part by the remapping work country music performed, as it attributed, for
the first time, important core “American values” to the South. Conservatives rose to
power during the last quarter of the twentieth century in part because they learned how to
use this new map of American virtues to legitimate their politics.

This project is an attempt to use the hermeneutic methods developed in the
humanities to produce a cultural analysis helpful to the men and women actively shaping
electoral politics and public policy. Some may object that if I call for a broader
interpretation of the politics of culture, I ought not limit my focus to the kind of politics
revolving around elections and professional politicians. I do so not because I believe
electoral politics are the only kind of politics that matters, nor because I am blind to the
informal politics people practice in their everyday lives. I share the convictions of
colleagues who believe that empowering individuals to make conscious decisions about
how to interpret the world in which they live is an act of social change in itself. As both a
student and a teaching assistant, I have been privileged to witness professors who put this conviction into practice, giving students intellectual resources to influence the world around them. But I believe cultural critics—regardless of their place on the political spectrum—have something to offer to electoral politics and we should aspire to a place for ourselves in the elaborate (and extravagantly funded) infrastructure of direct political action.

Earning a place in America’s political life requires that we supply usable answers to the moment-to-moment questions confronting political practitioners—politicians trying to win votes and activists trying to shape policy: What do Americans value? What narratives are most effective in communicating with constituents? What language is most advantageous to advancing a political or policy position? Because I hope to address these practical questions, my work does not draw directly upon the thinkers whose analyses of the way power works through culture have become so central to political humanistic scholarship. Both the Marxist traditions passed down through the Frankfurt School and Antonio Gramsci and the poststructuralist tradition derived from Michelle Foucault address the workings of power at a much more abstract epistemological level than is useful to those who try to influence power every day. 36 Though I have been heavily

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36 A growing number of scholars have applied these traditions to popular culture. These range from the thorny theoretical work of scholars like Judith Butler (Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, New York: Routledge, 1990), Paul Gilroy (Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2000), and Frederic Jameson (Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). In musicology, the influences of these thinkers have intersected with two other important strains of thought. Theodor Adorno bequeathed a tradition of Marxist cultural criticism parallel to Antonio Gramsci’s, one that emphasizes the role of expressive culture in structuring subjectivity and its pliability and resistance to power. Long marginalized in American musicology, his work was first explicated by Rose Rosengard Subotnik (“Adorno’s Diagnosis of Beethoven’s Late Style: Early Symptom of a Fatal Condition,” Journal of the American Musicological
influenced by such scholarship, deploying it here would be like cutting butter with a chainsaw. This study does not concern itself with the ontology of power, but rather with the concrete decisions made by historical actors who have shaped its course. As such, my cultural analysis is particularly inspired by the work of historians of race and labor such as Matthew Frye Jacobson, Robin D. G. Kelly, George Lipsitz, and David Roediger.  

For help turning cultural analysis into a resource for political practitioners, I have turned to a somewhat unlikely source—a cognitive linguist. Taking the advice of the politicians and activists I encountered during the final months of working on this project, I have drawn on the ideas set out by George Lakoff in his 1996 book, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, and its “executive summary,” *Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (2004).  

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Lakoff’s attempt to uncover metaphors that make political rhetoric compelling offers a model that is helpful to humanists trying to make cultural criticism useful to political practitioners. Lakoff argues that political behavior is governed by *worldview*, not by rational calculation of self-interest. These worldviews are created through the application of *metaphors* that organize value systems. The cognitive linguist deploys “worldview” as a technical term, a framework of thought and cognitive dispositions that organize political positions in relation to one another under a coherent, consistent, and seemingly self-evident rubric. Worldview explains why political groups “choose different topics to discuss and use different words … to discuss them,” and provides the underlying logic that “makes the collections of political stands … into natural categories.”

As a cognitive linguist, Lakoff is most interested in the mental “structures” with which people think. Using “structure” as a metaphor for the way people think (to give Lakoff a taste of his own medicine) is static rather than dynamic, implying that thought is hardwired rather than changing over time. The tool that politicians have taken from Lakoff, “framing,” is also weakened by its implied stasis. In *Don’t Think of an Elephant* he writes, “[f]raming is about getting language that fits your worldview”—making your opponents in a political debate use language most favorable to your position (4). The “frame” metaphor also connotes stasis. But we “frame” things meant to hang on the wall, like pictures that “capture” moments of events unfolding in time. To be useful, these must be replaced with metaphors that allow for motion and change. One of cultural criticism’s most important contributions is an emphasis on historical contingency. The way people think about things can change remarkably fast, often without anyone noticing.

The concept most analogous to “frames” in the humanities is “narrative.” But where frames suggest that people’s interpretations are frozen, narrative emphasizes that people’s worldviews shift over time. Narrative also offers another advantage. While a frame usually surrounds a single element, narratives imply the presence of multiple characters. As thoroughly as Lakoff explicates the way his family models organize liberal and conservative thought, I believe the insistence that a single, unified metaphor underlies all political thought is overly reductive. It does not reflect the often-fragmentary way people live their lives, nor does it recognize that the competition of multiple constituencies set political agendas, not rational decisions of a single individual. While Lakoff is somewhat sensitive to this problem, he is constrained by the rigid nature of his model. Narrative provides another way to apply his principles with greater flexibility. After all, people interpret the world not only through the models they compare things to, but by the stories they liken things to.

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Lakoff limits himself to explicating the way political rhetoric—speeches, advertisements, and the like—fashions worldviews and their underlying metaphors. But humanists need not do so. Our disciplines have developed powerful tools for examining the way entertainment—music, television, movies—shapes the metaphors through which people interpret the world around them. I would even assert that popular culture’s products tell us more about the ideas that control Americans’ relationship to politics than speeches by office seekers. Not only are they a far more ubiquitous part of Americans’ everyday lives than political rhetoric, but popular culture straddles the personal and the collective, the global and the everyday, circulating widely and activating the most intimate emotions. Popular culture shapes the contours of individual experience while integrating the personal within the public sphere; it is, perhaps, modernity’s most powerful mechanism for developing metaphors into worldviews with political implications.

Lakoff offers a way to understand how the experience people have listening to country music on the radio influences how they act in a voting booth. Understanding the links between these two realms of activity, I believe, is the starting point for creating a cultural criticism that goes beyond explaining culture’s political nature to attempt to effect political change. We must find a way to put our work into a form that political practitioners can use. Though this dissertation is not a manual for using country music to craft political rhetoric, its basic claim is one to which rhetoricians should pay attention: the way Americans think about their country’s geography—especially the changing moral position of the South—gives authority to some values and marginalizes others.
Changing the country’s political landscape means recharting American virtues and failings. As a progressive southerner (I will reflect on the way my regional identity and politics have colored this study in a moment), my hope is that the South’s populist traditions can provide a foundation to build an indigenous progressivism for the twenty-first century. Failing that, alternative map must be offered to reclaim “American values” from the conservatives who used the South to annex them in the late 1960s— with the help of a map acoustically drawn by country music.

My call for a scholarship that intervenes in electoral politics may raise anxiety over the appropriateness of conducting such work from within the academy—we do not want political agendas to corrupt scholarly values, nor do we want to make our work inaccessible to students and colleagues who do not agree with our politics. A case can be made that such work, if it has an explicitly partisan agenda, should be conducted outside the academy. But I believe that politically-engaged criticism does have a place in American universities, and we must be reflexively aware of our biases and how they influence our scholarship. Indeed, I believe academic cultural critics in American universities, especially state universities like UCLA where I have been trained, have an obligation to participate in this kind of work which need not necessarily be partisan.

Academics have a role in improving democracy itself, regardless of its impact on

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41 Attacks on “political” scholars made by such conservative critics such as Robert Kimball (Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Higher Education (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) and Lynne V. Cheney (Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense—And What We Can Do About It, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), however, define “political scholarship” in such a way that asserts that scholarship supporting a conservative agenda is apolitical. See George Lipsitz’s critique of the approach to American history curricula advocated by Lynne Cheney in Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 22-26.
particular parties or ideologies. By understanding Americans’ values through explicating the culture they value, we can help politicians better address their constituents’ concerns through public policy. This is not only appropriate work for American academics—it is part of their mandate, at least those at public universities. America’s public universities were largely founded to safeguard democracy by educating the electorate, and it remains part of the mission statements of many state institutions. We should embrace that mission as part of our scholarship, not just our teaching.

“Song of the South”
Biography, Geography, and Assuming the Burden of Southern History

Shortly after I had moved back to my native Northern Virginia to finish my dissertation, I experienced one of those broadcasting coincidences that make it tempting to believe that God is a DJ. Driving back to my home in Alexandria from a friend’s house on DC’s Capitol Hill late one night, I passed the halls of Congress and the federal agencies that mingle with the monuments and museums along the National Mall. I was tuned to Jim London’s “America’s Music” program on the District’s country music station, WMZQ. London selected a 1989 tune by Alabama from his playlist of hits from the 1970s and 1980s, “Song of the South.” This tale of a farming family’s rescue from

Depression-era poverty by Franklin Roosevelt’s Tennessee Valley Authority provided a perfect soundtrack for my drive past the buildings that housed the federal government FDR did so much to expand. I also became aware of a remarkable symmetry: the son of federal employees, I grew up surrounded by the descendents of the people who implemented the programs that touched the lives of the people like the characters in Alabama’s song.

Listening more closely to “Song of the South” than I ever had before, I was struck by the distance that opened up between Alabama and the tale they were telling. Their close harmony swept over a sparse duple accompaniment, sounding almost like a wind blowing across a barren landscape colliding only with the stark thud of the kick drum and hollow ring of the woodblock. The fiddle tune that introduces the song and punctuates its verses evokes a way of life swept away by poverty and modernization; the chorus describes its quotidian details falling to the passage of time:

Song, song, song of the South.
Sweet potato pie and shut my mouth.
Gone, gone, gone with the wind.
There ain’t nobody looking back again.

Though sung in the first person (from the point of view of the family’s son), this not a personal account of the experience of an actual family. Rather, it is a history-in-miniature in which one family’s story embodies the historical experience of the whole region. Alabama does not sing a “Song of the Jones Family”—they sing a “Song of the South.”

My listening experience reached its apotheosis as I turned onto the Memorial Bridge and crossed the Potomac River. At that moment the song entered its outro, with a chorus taking over the refrain and fusing its gospel spirit with the fiddle’s danceable
energy. A fragment of the South’s unofficial anthem, “Dixie,” briefly answered the line “Gone, gone, gone with the wind” as I was suspended over the river that had once drawn the battle line between North and South. My rearview mirror framed the monument to the Union President Abraham Lincoln; my windshield framed the house of the Confederate general he defeated, Robert E. Lee.

Though I recognized the likelihood of divine intervention in London’s decision to play that song at that moment was remote, it was hard not to listen for a message in the broadcast, especially since I had already chosen to reuse the title of Alabama’s track as the title of this dissertation. This drive home came to mind when I revisited southern historian C. Vann Woodward’s 1960 essay collection, *The Burden of Southern History*. Woodward writes,

> The South has had its full share of illusions, fantasies, and pretensions, and it has continued to cling to some of them with an astonishing tenacity that defies explanation. But the illusion that “history is something unpleasant that happens to other people” is certainly not one of them—not in the face of accumulated evidence and memory to the contrary.43

Woodward goes on to call for a new class of American historians who can “penetrate the [national] legend without destroying the ideal, who can dispel the illusion of pretended virtue without denying [America’s] genuine virtues.” Woodward implies that the “burden” of producing this kind of history falls especially on the shoulders of southern historians. “America might find such historians anywhere within her borders, North as well as South,” he writes, “But surely some of them might reasonably be expected to

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arise from that region where it is a matter of common knowledge that history has happened to their people in their part of the world.”

In the shadow of the Mall and Arlington Cemetery, Alabama’s history-haunted “Song of the South” brought home to me the importance of reflecting on the historical consciousness with which I approached this project. I also offer these thoughts in response to two musicological colleagues. I have taken to heart Guthrie P. Ramsey’s call on the writers who spill so much ink on the relationship between musicians’ identities and their music to spend some time reflecting about the relationship between their own identities and their scholarship. I am also addressing the (understandable) anxiety of a scholar from Mississippi who, upon hearing me describe my project without hearing the South in my accent, feared that I was yet another Yankee oblivious to the nuances of southern racial history out to defame the region as a bigoted backwater. She was much relieved when I told her I was from Virginia. If I had told her I was a native of Arlington, however—a place southern humorist Florence King has described as “part of the polyglot Yankee suburb tactfully known as ‘Northern Virginia’”—she would certainly have wanted further clarification of my intentions.

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44 Woodward, 211.

45 Ramsey is speaking specifically of students of African American music: “Given the intense attention to African American cultural identity and politics in [their] studies, one would expect much more theorizing on how [these authors’] own subjective, complex identities dialogue with their representation of blackness.” I believe however, that his call for a more reflexive scholarship obtains to all writing on identity and politics (I might even go so far as saying to all scholarship). Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. “Who Hears Here? Black Music, Critical Bias, and the Musicological Skin Trade,” Musical Quarterly 85:1 (Spring 2001), 34.

What is my own relation to “the South”—and to country music? My mother grew up in Palm Beach County, Florida, a place whose southernness has been diluted in recent years, (not unlike Northern Virginia) by the influx of large numbers of newcomers. But at the time her father moved her there from New York City at the age of four, she encountered a world that was undisputedly southern. She was a seven-year old student in a segregated elementary school when the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown vs. Board* decision declaring segregated public schools unconstitutional. Throughout my childhood, my mother told me of the bigotry she grew up around, both the racism aimed at her black peers and the anti-Semitism targeting her. Though she was actually a popular member of the community in which she grew up—she often makes a point of reminding me that she was a cheerleader and even dated members of the football team—she distanced herself from the region after leaving to attend college in Boston. By the time I was born following my parents’ move from Massachusetts to Virginia, my mother had come to think of herself as a northeasterner who just happened to live on the southern side of the Potomac.

For my mother—and for my father, who had grown up on Long Island and mostly experienced the South through the media—the South was first and foremost associated with bigotry. Though there were many traces of the rural South which modern Northern Virginia has yet to pave over—we often bought corn and tomatoes from a farm in our neighborhood, and we were closely connected to our African American cleaning lady who often provided care for me in time-honored southern tradition—I was mostly aware of the South as the entity that had been on the losing side of history. My elementary
school classes made annual visits to nearby Civil War battlefields. While I was taught in school that the Confederacy was fighting not for slavery but for state’s rights, my parents always made it clear to me that the Confederacy was created to protect white supremacy and we would have been on the Union side of the conflict. (Never mind that I was born in Robert E. Lee’s hometown in a hospital just off the highway named for the General). It was also an annual event in my house to watch the documentary series about the Civil Rights Movement, *Eyes on the Prize*, which my mother would embellish with stories about her experiences of Jim Crow as a child and of her college summers as a civil rights worker.

My family circle largely consisted of people who, like my parents, found themselves in Virginia by virtue of the historical accident that placed the Old Dominion next to the Nation’s Capitol. The first time I became aware that growing up in Virginia had made me different from my friends who lived across the river came after my own brush with bigotry forced me to leave Virginia public schools. When school-sanctioned gay bashing forced me to transfer to a private school in the District, I found I had to relearn the names of the Civil War battles for my American history class. I had been taught the southern names, and I now had to learn the northern ones.47

It was my involvement with music, however, that really made me aware of the region’s lingering southern past. Washington, which drew large numbers of migrants from around the upper South, had a vibrant musical community with deep southern roots.

47 Southerners generally called battles by the name of the place where they were fought, while northerners knew them by a nearby geographic landmark. The battle fought not far from where I lived that I had learned to call “Manassas,” for example, I relearned as “Bull Run.”
As I learned the guitar, I found my way to local masters of the Piedmont blues style popular among African Americans in Virginia and North Carolina before World War II; when I took up the banjo I became a part of a community with ties to West Virginia and the Carolinas. As soon as I was old enough to drive, I made regular trips to the rural South to play music and learn local traditions. But I seldom encountered the bigotry my parents so powerfully associated with the region. I had experienced more racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia in urban centers than in the “backwoods.”

This is not to say I never saw it. But what I witnessed was a place with the same complicated dynamics that characterized life in the rest of the country, leading me to question what my parents had told me about the South. The music I learned especially forced me to rethink the prejudices my parents had taught me—I had begun learning the blues and old-time believing that they were two traditions that had evolved independently on opposite sides of the color line. But I kept finding that the two traditions flowed into one another, only artificially separated by the way the music had been recorded.

While this music, popular three generations before I was born, enabled me to experience the integrationist strain of southern culture, the popular music of the present taught me a lot about segregation. Washington, which was seventy percent black when I was growing up, was home to one of the liveliest music scenes in the country. The homegrown genre of Go-Go, which combined elements of funk and hip-hop with a distinctive Latin influence, dominated the city’s popular music. But this music was confined almost entirely to the black community, with which I, a white kid in an
overwhelmingly white private school, had very little contact. When I got a little older and began hanging out at a DC country bar, I could see that while there were some people of color who frequented the establishment, the clientele was far whiter than the city as a whole.

I also grew up aware of race and region’s impact on politics. Even before I became a favorite target of bullies in Fairfax County Public Schools, I was already deeply uncomfortable because of the hostility towards the politics with which I was raised. My family was solidly and proudly progressive—one of my earliest memories was pulling the lever for my mother to cast her vote for Walter Mondale for president. At the time, Fairfax County was overwhelmingly conservative and I frequently was in conflict with my classmates and teachers as a result. Just across the river, however, there was a city that was solidly liberal, with a political leadership that had come out of the Civil Rights Movement. And in contrast to my all-white neighborhood, DC’s African American majority had earned it the nickname “Chocolate City.”

My musical proclivities—especially as I became a fan of country music in college—often confused friends who knew my politics. During the session I spent working in the Virginia legislature dominated by the right wing of the state Republican party, I found it ironic that as I got closer to Richmond on my weekly commute from

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48 Kip Lornell has written the only academic study of Go-Go with Charles C. Stephenson, Jr., entitled The Beat: Go-Go’s Fusion of Funk and Hip-Hop (New York: Billboard, 2001). There were, however, many white people who did have more contact with Go-Go than I did. For example, my older brother, who was in high school in the ‘80s when the Go-Go scene was at its peak, had much more contact with the music than I did.
Alexandria, the more I liked the music on the radio and the less I liked what I heard on the news.

My relationship to the history I tell in this dissertation is not an objective one. Nor can it be characterized by simple partisanship. Like the musicians, listeners, producers, and politicians I discuss in these pages, I bring my complex, contradictory experience of music, Southern identity, and race to the world I describe. I have tried always to be conscious of the ways my background and political beliefs shape my thinking, and to write with respect and empathy for the people to whom this music matters, even when I have disagreed with them. The biases I bring to this study are no hindrance—in the present context, they represent what Guthrie Ramsey defines as a “productive bias.”

I have a kind of double-consciousness born of my experience in a border region between North and South, black and white, conservative and liberal. I write as a musician and fan of country music, having a deep fondness for a music that touches me deeply, but also as someone who grew up in a community that feels alienated from—even threatened by—that music. I also write as someone with an awareness of conservatism that comes from having grown up in a state with a loud and powerful conservative movement, but also as a progressive alienated and threatened by it.

I am also aware that representing the South is a political act. As the southern historian George Brown Tindall notes, representations of the South have become “one of

49 Ramsey, 5.

50 Conservatives are fond of dismissing progressive Virginians as not really being Virginians at all—especially those of us from Northern Virginia—an attitude that I flatly reject. Melanie Scarborough’s April 10, 2005 op-ed in the Washington Post entitled, “Virginia’s Directionally Challenged Democrats,” epitomizes this attitude.
the realities of history, significantly influencing the course of human action” by providing “the ground for belief, for either loyalty and defense [of the South] on the one hand or hostility and opposition on the other.”51 Certainly, my parents’ perception of the South fed their hostility towards it. The “burden” that my personal southern history has placed upon this dissertation is to understand the way that southerners and non-southerners collaborated and fought over the region’s standing in the national imagination and how that affected America’s racial and political history. My goal is neither to portray the South as an innocent victim of northern distortions, nor is it to portray it as a villain polluting America with its racism. It is my hope that my experience has prepared me to be in some small way the kind of historian Woodward calls for, one who can “penetrate the legend without destroying the ideal, who can dispel the illusion of pretended virtue without denying the genuine virtues.”52

51 Tindall, 23.

PART I

Making Whiteness Resonate
Hillbilly Music’s Southern Circle of Resonance, 1920-1933
Chapter 1
“The Hillbilly and the Nigger Stuff”
Recording, Marketing, and Segregating Southern Music

What difference did it make? I thought that a little integration of the music is done naturally… —Frank Walker

In November of 1927, the Allen Brothers cut two sides for Columbia Records’ talent scout Frank Walker in a makeshift recording studio in Atlanta. The duo from Chattanooga, Tennessee had already had a modest hit with an earlier Columbia record, “Salty Dog Blues” backed with “Bow Wow Blues.” They recorded two more blues songs at this session in an effort to duplicate their success. Backed by a peppy tenor banjo strum straight out of a jug band and complemented by kazoo breaks evoking New Orleans jazz, Austin Allen mixed conventional blues lyrics that complained about his woman with praise for his hometown in “Chattanooga Blues”; his brother Lee alternated with virtuoso precision between falsetto whining, outright sobbing, and guffawing in the peculiarly compelling “Laughin’ and Cryin’ Blues.”

After the Allens had committed these and a few other songs to disc, Walker packed up the wax masters and sent them to Columbia’s New York office to be pressed for distribution. The company put out the record with unusual speed, a mere six weeks after the Atlanta sessions. Yet the Allen Brothers’ delight at the quick release of their second record became distress when they learned it would be listed in the Columbia

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1 Frank Walker interviewed by Mike Seeger, date unknown. Archie Green Collection of the Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

catalog as No. 14266. This fact made them so angry that they hired a lawyer and threatened to sue Columbia Records for $250,000.\(^3\)

Why was a catalogue number so upsetting? Columbia, like all the major record companies working in the southern music market (Victor, OKeh, Paramount, etc.) had institutionalized white and black music categories through separate numbering series designating them “hillbilly” and “race records,” respectively. The 14000 series, in which the record was placed, was Columbia’s race series—but the Allen Brothers were white.

From our vantage point, three-quarters of a century after the Allen Brothers made these recordings in the Jim Crow South, it seems obvious why these white men were angry about having their record sold as black music—the question of how Columbia came to release this record in the race series in the first place is far more perplexing. But for Frank Walker, it was obvious that this record was a race record, and he was surprised at the Allens’ outrage. As he told Mike Seeger, “I didn’t think there was anything wrong…. I put it on my colored list of records because it was [a blues] and they sang it in a colored style…and I thought that’s where it belonged.”\(^4\)

Because Walker was not a southerner (hailing from Fly Summit, New York, not far from Albany), it is tempting to explain his failure to grasp what may seem obvious to us in retrospect by assuming he was ignorant of southern music and naïve about the region’s racial attitudes. But he had been a pioneer of southern recording since the early

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\(^4\) Walker, interview. In discussing this incident, Walker confuses “Salty Dog Blues” for “Chattanooga Blues,” but he is clearly referring to Columbia 14266.
'20s, and it is arguably his *familiarity* with the musical entanglements between black and white southerners that got Columbia into hot water with the Allen Brothers. He knew that even while southern life was physically segregated in every aspect, music still flowed across the color line. Exchange and interconnection—not distinctiveness and division—characterized the musical relationship between blacks and whites.⁵

The Allen Brothers are a case in point—the music the duo made closely resembled that of their black counterparts, shaped by the long history of blacks and whites coexisting on southern soil. The Allens accompanied their singing on the banjo, an instrument that slaves derived from African models that had worked itself into the heart of white music making. Learning this instrument from African Americans, whites absorbed African instrumental techniques, approaches to rhythm, and other musical devices that became a fundamental part of the southern musical landscape. (Ironically, by the mid-twentieth century the banjo had become such an indispensable part of the hillbilly stereotype that its African ancestry was almost completely overshadowed.)

Like most white musicians of their time and place, the Allens were shaped in their music-making by the direct influence of their African American contemporaries. They learned a great deal from riverboat performer May Bell and Chattanooga street musicians Evans and McClain, who provided models that the Allens used to develop their own

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⁵ Karl Hagstrom Miller’s “Segregating Sound: Folklore, Phonographs, and the Transformation of Southern Music, 1888-1935” (Doctoral Dissertation, Department of History, New York University, 2002) provides one of the best overviews of the complexities of interracial musical relationships in the South before mass-mediation. His examination of many of the same issues discussed in this chapter, which focus on the performers’ experiences and the industry’s representations in its trade journal, *Talking Machine World*, provides a valuable analysis. Tony Russell’s *Blacks, Whites, and the Blues* [1970], reprinted in *Yonder Come the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), also provides a useful discussion, with detailed discussion of the music recorded and how this music culture was transferred onto record.
blues songs. Their music may have even been shaped by the tastes of black audiences—Frank Walker claims they performed in Chattanooga’s “black pubs.” If true, Walker’s report would mark an unusually overt transgression of the boundaries that segregated social space; but the direct contact with black musicians and musical settings it reflects was far from unusual. The white banjo player Doc Boggs, for example, who worked for most of his life alongside African Americans in the mines of southwestern Virginia, would visit black neighborhoods to listen to, learn from, and play with musicians like Go Lightning and Jim White. Even white southerners less intimate with African American musicians had their imagination shaped by the minstrel show, which created a template for the white consumption of black culture since its heyday in the nineteenth century that endures to this day.

Of course, black musicians were shaped just as much by interracial exchange as whites. Undeniably the product of unique black communities, traditions such as jazz and blues resulted from African American adaptation of European instruments and the combination of other European musical resources with African, Latin American, and Native American influences. Stringband music, heavily rooted in Irish and Scots-Irish fiddling traditions and therefore often thought of as the exclusive provenance of white

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8 Wolfe, 235.
7 Walker, interview.
8 Wolfe, 242.
folks, was not only shaped by African music as whites took up the banjo, but it was widely played and enjoyed by African Americans. The North Georgia duo Andrew and Jim Baxter, for example, not only entertained audiences of both races, but teamed up with the white musicians known as the Georgia Yellowhammers, even recording with them in the late ‘20s. Black musician Ashley Thomas, from Ripley, Mississippi, reports that the music played for his community’s square dances during his youth at the turn of the 20th century were fiddle tunes well known to whites, including “Sally Gooden” and “Leather Britches.”

This was the musical landscape Walker saw, one that was far more carefully shaded—and more accurate—than the stark black-and-white image presented by record catalogues. Walker explains,

We had our list of “old familiar tunes” [another name for hillbilly] and we had our “race music.” And that’s the way we differentiated between the two. And we also had different serial numbers for them. But, you see, the same areas that produced one produced the other…. They both came from the same area, in the same locale…. They both have the same general idea; the same general thoughts are back of them. They both go in strongly for rhythm and they both go in for religious songs…. We finished up our work with the country people [hillbilly] at the end of the week and on the next day we started and got the other [race music]…. It worked together and it worked beautifully.

But the story of the Allen Brothers makes it clear that something is wrong with this picture. If it all really worked together so beautifully, why did their catalog number upset the Allens? More importantly, why did the record companies maintain separate

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10 Ashley Thompson quoted in Miller, 44.

11 Walker, interview.
black and white numbering series in the first place? If we could ask Walker these questions, he would have some real explaining to do: Under Walker’s supervision, Columbia became the first record company to create a separate listing for white southern music in 1925 and proceeded to develop the largest hillbilly catalog and widest distribution network in the industry. If Walker grasped the integrated nature of southern music, why did he oversee the creation of a classification system that he knew was confounded by the music it classified? And if this system was counter to the integrated nature of southern music, why was it adopted by all the companies working in the southern market?

Clearly these questions cannot be explained away by saying Columbia and its competitors were passively acquiescing to Jim Crow. Southerners lived their lives with complex and contradictory impulses towards interracial attraction and social segregation, balancing a genuine human sympathy with a perceived need to win a high-stakes battle for power. Perhaps because of its capacity to arouse the deepest human feelings, music brought attraction into conflict with segregation more than almost any other domain. This does not mean music existed outside the white supremacy that permeated daily life. The experience of musicians like the black Creole accordion player Amadé Ardoin reminds us of this: While working as a sharecropper near the Louisiana town of Eunice, Ardoin teamed up with white fiddler (and fellow sharecropper) Dennis McGee, becoming one of the most popular musicians in the region among blacks and whites alike. While playing a

12 Charles Wolfe, “Columbia Records and Old-Time Music,” JEMF Quarterly 5 (Fall 1978), 118. Wolfe documents that the 781 releases in Columbia’s hillbilly series, 15000-D, accounted for approximately 20% of hillbilly releases prior to 1932.
dance one summer afternoon, he accepted a handkerchief to wipe the sweat off his face offered to him by the white daughter of his former employer, a breach of racial taboos for which he was severely beaten and left for dead.\textsuperscript{13}

Yet such stories are rare. Though white supremacy was a constant presence, the deep desire for interracial musical exchange was more commonly managed on a case-by-case basis by the navigation of a baroque set of rituals and customs. The nature of mass mediation and mass marketing, however, was not flexible enough to directly mirror this nuanced world. Any system that was developed to distribute southern music on a large scale would inevitably have flattened its intricate terrain. The record companies chose to do so in a way that made them active participants in deepening racial divisions. As records and subsequent commercial media became an increasingly important part of southern musical life, they imposed a rigid and previously unknown segregation on southern music. Marketing separated black and white listeners from one another, and talent scouts like Frank Walker were forced to tailor the music they recorded to fit newly distinct racial categories.

Thus the advent of hillbilly and race record series marked the beginning of a change in the way music shaped southerners’ relationships to their neighbors. Prior to mass-mediation, proximity had always been a far more important element in shaping a southerner’s musical life than race. Whites in a given locale would have more in common musically with their black neighbors than whites in another southern community miles

\textsuperscript{13} Liner notes to Amadé Ardoin, \textit{Amadé Ardoin: The First Black Zydeco Recording Artist}, Old Timey LP 1224.
away, and the same went for blacks. This was especially true of working-class people, who generally enjoyed closer social relationships across racial lines. Records, however, were not sold along community lines. They were distributed regionally, targeting separate racial audiences. Records united listeners musically across locales while simultaneously divided listeners by race. For the first time, the color line became a more powerful boundary of southerners’ musical worlds than the county line: whites in a given community were increasingly connected to whites in another community and less connected to their black neighbors.

I have been forced to inelegantly describe the introduction of segregated recorded music as “marking the beginning of a change” in music’s role in the southern racial experience because it did not transform the musical-racial paradigm overnight. When recorded music first became common in the South, it formed a small part of the way southerners heard music. Its new racial codes were much less authoritative than the relatively integrated traditions that predated them. Sometime between 1920 and 1955, however, the segregated paradigm that began in recorded music became the authoritative one. I have found it impossible to pinpoint a particular moment when this happened, largely because the process was so gradual. It is also difficult to mark the moment when things changed because southern music’s integrationist tendencies were never entirely wiped out. Still, at some point, integrated musical practices, which had been relatively accepted by most southerners (albeit always limited by complex and shifting cultural parameters), became subcultural and subversive. (As I suggest in my Introduction, nothing makes this shift clearer than the reaction to rock and roll in the mid-’50s, which
revived southern music’s integrated strain and directly challenged the dominance of segregated mass media.)

We can, however, identify the years between 1927 and 1933 as the period in which hillbilly music coalesced as a mass-mediated and mass-marketed music, established a category to contain whiteness, and thus completed the black/white binary. In Chapters 2 and 3, I will examine how hillbilly music’s whiteness coalesced during these years, taking as my starting point the legendary 1927 Victor recording sessions in the Appalachian city of Bristol that launched the career of the artists who did more than any others to transform hillbilly into a coherent and distinct genre. Through their tremendously successful careers, both Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family convinced the music industry that there was money to be made in the hillbilly field, guaranteeing that the nascent genre would grow to adulthood. Their widespread popularity also helped provide a musical vernacular, a “common tongue,” that transformed the marketing category “hillbilly” into an actual musical genre. Chapter 2 explores how the Carter Family helped integrate distinct musical styles from around the South into a coherent and recognizably distinct genre, while Chapter 3 examines how Rodgers’s music recontextualized the blues and hillbilly’s relationship with African American music in this newly segregated environment.

While it is true that southerners experienced only a small portion of their music on records during the period—most music was heard in live performance or, by the mid-thirties, on radio—the record industry had a cultural impact disproportionate to its economic role in the market during these years, as the careers of Jimmie Rodgers and the
Carter Family handily illustrate. These musicians are widely regarded to have set the basic paradigm of what hillbilly music was supposed to sound like in its earliest years; Jimmie Rodgers, in particular, is credited with spawning legions of imitators who would later become stars in their own right—Gene Autry, Bob Wills, Bill Monroe, just to name a few. Yet Rodgers seldom performed on the radio during his heyday in the late ‘20s and early ‘30s, and he toured only occasionally, in part because his tuberculosis denied him the stamina for such strenuous work.  

Though the Carters did a lot more live appearances than Rodgers, and also later achieved a substantial radio presence, their influence was first felt on record. Live performances by the Carters were restricted to the area near their home in Appalachian Virginia. And after Sarah and A.P. Carter’s marriage disintegrated and Maybelle Carter moved out of the region, they stopped doing live performances altogether. Their most influential radio years, broadcasting over the high-powered south of the border station XERA, did not begin until 1938, a decade after their career first began on record.

The record industry necessarily turned the performance of individual songs into packaged commodities requiring a classification system that would bring a particular kind of music to the particular kind of consumer for whom it was intended. The specific relationship between musical products and consumers that the record business institutionalized entered a southern world whose groundwork for marketing along racial lines had been built up over almost forty years of experience in segregated mass

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commerce. I argue in this chapter that although industry leaders like Frank Walker were aware of the integrated nature of southern music-making, both concrete historical events that drew impresarios like him southward in the 1920s and the region’s pre-existing commercial landscape laid the foundation of the system adopted by Victor, Columbia, and their competitors. Like other retailers of “dry goods,” record companies first developed practices to appeal to African Americans that made race the organizing principle of southern music marketing. When they reached out to non-African Americans by inventing the “hillbilly” category, they found they could adapt this approach to use whiteness to cultivate a new (and larger) group of consumers.

This wider perspective mirrors that of Karl Hagstrom Miller, in his path breaking study “Segregating Sound: Folklore, Phonographs, and the Transformation of Southern Music, 1888-1935.” Miller argues that the segregation of southern music institutionalized by the recording industry in the 1920s was the product of Jim Crow segregation as it evolved in the decades after Reconstruction. He focuses on the role not only of industry professionals, but also that of the folklorists who adapted anthropological theories of race to the classification of vernacular music and the performers who exploited while subverting the segregation that was gaining an ever-tightening hold on their musical lives. While I agree with many of Miller’s conclusions, record companies need to be compared not only to folklorists and others engaged in musical exploits, but also manufacturers and others involved in commercial enterprises.

As Grace Elizabeth Hale points out, the southern consumer market had been conquered by northern manufacturers and marketers in the years following the Civil War, and the need to balance southern racial hierarchies with northern marketing priorities greatly contributed to the shape of Jim Crow.\(^{16}\) (I will outline her argument in greater detail below.)

My work also builds on Richard Peterson’s *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, the first sociological study to treat country music as a commercial practice that required record companies, musicians, and consumers to construct it.\(^{17}\) Curiously, Peterson’s commercial focus never leads him to deal with the segregation that cut across all southern commerce; he never asks how the construction of country music contributed to the evolving construction of race. So though I am indebted to Peterson for his investigation of country’s commercial beginnings, I also intend the present work as a corrective to a problematic ellipsis in scholarship.

In the remainder of this chapter I retell the story of country’s creation, documenting how national northern marketing and segregated southern consumption produced the racially divided music world we now know.

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Jim Crow Music
Dividing Southern Music into Black and White

I went to New York and worked for OKeh Records. That’s where I invented the hillbilly and the nigger stuff. —Ralph Peer

In 1920, all the major recording companies were headquartered in and around New York City. Given their location and lack of a widespread distribution network, these companies focused their efforts on the dense urban centers of the Atlantic seaboard where they could more easily reach large numbers of consumers. Additionally, East Coast cities contained more of the affluent customers who were the industry’s main target, customers who could afford the expensive phonographs and talking machines that generated a large portion of the record companies’ profits. Though the industry had established itself in southern cities such as Atlanta, it largely ignored the region because it remained overwhelmingly rural and poor.

Ironically, the South was put on the record industry’s map by the buying power of its poorest citizens, African Americans. Scrambling to capitalize on this market, which came to their attention almost by accident, they planted seeds of segregation in their record catalogues that would only reach maturity when hillbilly records would take off some three years later. In the fall of 1920 vaudeville singer Mamie Smith became the first black woman with a commercially released record, “Crazy Blues” for OKeh Records. Larger companies like Columbia and Victor proclaimed prestigious classical music to be

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18 Ralph Peer interviewed by Lillian Borgeson, 1958. Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
their main business. But OKeh was openly pursuing a down-market, popular music niche when the Alabama-born African American composer, Perry Bradford, approached them about recording Smith. OKeh’s recording director, Fred Hager, agreed to this experiment, and was completely surprised by its results. The disc sold an extraordinary 75,000 copies in the first month of its release. Though OKeh originally tried to market it to whites, they soon realized that the overwhelming majority of copies were purchased by African Americans, the majority of whom lived in the South. As African American record scout J. Mayo Williams put it, “the people in those small places were all hard up for records.”

The black community had developed an infrastructure to meet needs long neglected by producers of mass culture, providing the record industry with a ready made—if unanticipated—distribution network that made possible this recording’s explosive release. According to Hager’s then assistant, Ralph Peer (one of the most important pioneers of southern music recording in his own right, soon to become a central figure in our story), “We [didn’t] know where these records were going…the porters on the Pullman trains would make a fortune just by carrying the records out. They’d pay a dollar a piece for them, sell them for two dollars…[to] the Negroes in the South.”

African American publications such as the Chicago Defender, which were published in the urban North but were exported to black communities around the country, corroborates Peer’s assessment of the importance of porters in delivering records to black customers: “They’d come to Chicago, see, Chicago was a railroad headquarters then…. They’d had orders for ‘em and would pay for ‘em, the wholesale price…. Then they’d sell ‘em sometimes for a dollar a piece, as much as the traffic would bear.” Quoted in Miller, 269.

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19 Miller, 255-266; quote on 269.

20 Peer, interview. J. Mayo Williams, an African American record scout for Chicago-based Paramount corroborates Peer’s assessment of the importance of porters in delivering records to black customers: “They’d come to Chicago, see, Chicago was a railroad headquarters then…. They’d had orders for ‘em and would pay for ‘em, the wholesale price…. Then they’d sell ‘em sometimes for a dollar a piece, as much as the traffic would bear.” Quoted in Miller, 269.
also carried word to potential customers down South who could purchase records by mail order.

“Crazy Blues” demonstrated that southern African Americans not only had money to buy records, they also had a pent up demand for “their own music” made by “their own people.” As Perry Bradford put it in his autobiography, “There’s fourteen million Negroes in our great country and they will buy records if recorded by one of their own.”

But record companies needed the right music to capitalize on this newly discovered market. Though there was little precedent for recording black music and marketing it to black consumers, New York was home to a vital African American entertainment scene with plenty of performers who were eager to record, many of whom had only recently arrived from the South. As Ralph Peer explains,

We finally found out that the best place to get them [black musicians] was in New York…. There was a whole string of Negro vaudeville theaters at that time up in Harlem. And there was a lot of other work to do. They could sing with dance bands, and we were looking for vocalists essentially. So New York came to be the real source of the Negro material. Later we uncovered Chicago, but New York and Chicago for a good many years were the real source of race material.

Though selling black music was new to the record industry, turning the music performed in New York’s African American community into a saleable product was a practice of long standing in the city’s music business. Sheet music publishers, who had sales that dwarfed that of record producers, had built much of their late 19th century boom on commodifying black music. Their composers emulated ragtime, and their marketers

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21 Quoted in Miller, 261.

22 Peer, interview.
emphasized the music’s “blackness” through depictions of African Americans—even actual photographs—to attract consumers. “Coon songs,” which musically portrayed the most vicious of African American stereotypes, did especially brisk sheet music sales around the turn of the century. These were only echoes of practices for commodifying black music that had been established by New York’s first commercial music enterprise of wide-reach, minstrelsy, which had provided a stage from which black culture could be performed for a profit.

These patterns were so ingrained that the record companies did not immediately realize that African Americans were their main customers, and initially promoted race records to white customers in time-honored tradition. Yet even after they figured out that black listeners were buying the majority of race records, the record companies continued to use many of minstrelsy’s basic approaches to commodifying black music. OKeh’s early race catalogues make this explicit, sometimes featuring geometrically-stylized renditions of minstrel figures (black circles with large white ovals for eyes and mouths attached to black bodies finished off by white gloves), who trumpeted their blackness through the music that most conspicuously signaled racial difference, the blues. Though they contained a variety of types of music (including vocal quartets, spirituals, and dance music), race record catalogues were frequently identified as The Blue Book of Blues, and

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24 As OKeh wrote in its 1923 general catalogue, “No one knows, exactly, what makes a ‘blues.’ But, it is conceded that no other people have sung or played these soothing, pleasing, musical concoctions more fascinatingly than the colored race.” OKeh Records, Complete Catalogue of OKeh: The Record of Quality, (New York: General Phonograph Corporation, 1923).
(thanks, perhaps, to Mamie Smith) the genre was much more heavily represented in their pages than it was in the musical lives of most African Americans. An introduction to one of these catalogues from the early ‘20s circumscribes these records with an array of minstrel tropes, even as it boasts of their authenticity and asserts a privileged connection to a black audience:

Who first thought of getting out Race Records for the Race? OKeh, that’s right! Genuine Race Artists make genuine Blues for OKeh….

You will find our titled pages bear the meanest kind of Blues horn ever loosed—the simplest kind of a note rises and swells like the passing shriek of an angry gale. It is the kind of stuff to thrill you through and through. All the greatest songs Blues has ever given await you; songs of love and joys and griefs; good mammas and good papas, mean mammas and mean papas; haunting memories and stirring desires; the delicate passions of humanity—all have been made real and articulate by our exclusive OKeh Artists. They are artists who have been basking in the applause of a listening nation. They are the greatest Race Artists in the country.

There is also a complete alphabetical index, listing every Race Record you might crave. Do go on and turn our pages and see the kind of stuff we’re holding back. Every smilin’, teasin’ brown skin gal in dis book of Greatest Blues has jes got it natchely—the dawggone Blues; dis ain’t no time to git blues, jes go on back downtown and git some of our OKeh Blues, then there’s nothin’ gonna stop you from feelin’ as happy as a kissin’ papa. Boy, do that thing—and tell ‘em about OKeh.

25 While the term “the blues” was not invented by the record companies, it acquired an important function in the early record industry as a device for attracting this newly “discovered” market. Francis Davis goes as far as to assert that “what we now think of ‘the blues’ was initially a trope, a marketing concept.” The History of the Blues (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 62. Certainly, the term played a central role in the development of the early race market. But the racialized hearing of the blues precedes the advent of race records, extending as far back as there is evidence. The first copyrighted song with the word in its title, “Dallas Blues” (1912), was given that title by its white composer because he took its melody from a black porter who worked for his family. The first recorded song with “blues” in its title, recorded by a white performer named Lasses White in 1915, was “Nigger Blues” (written 1912). Black popular song composer W. C. Handy, who claimed to be “the father of the blues,” wrote a song in 1913 called “Jogo Blues”—“jogo” was a slang term for “negro” (Davis, 59).

26 OKeh Records, OKeh Race Records: the "Blue Book of Blues" (New York: General Phonograph Corporation, ca. 1921-25).
As if waxing rhapsodic about a minstrel performance, this note describes the music as possessing the simplicity that arouses uninhibited emotion, bodily pleasure, and deep pathos. When the prose gets more excited, it lapses into classic minstrel dialect like a voice emanating from a burnt-cork mask, promising the reader sexual titillation from “smilin’, teasin’ brownskin gals.”

Clearly, the white gaze that minstrelsy served continued to have a strong influence on representations of black music even when the target audience was black. This can only be partially explained by the music industry’s long-standing habits of turning black music into profit. Miller observes that race records, though intended for black ears, were purchased under the supervision of white eyes. Southern commerce was (unavoidably) integrated, and the owners of the general stores and furniture stores where records were sold depended on white and black customers alike. They could not afford to use advertising aimed at blacks that might alienate white patrons. The continued use of comfortable minstrel imagery allowed advertisers to speak to black audiences without threatening whites.27

Reinforcing the supremacy of the white customer, the record companies were following the southward path blazed by northern retailers who helped produce the Jim Crow system in the 1890s. Grace Elizabeth Hale argues that as mass commerce—largely controlled by northern manufacturers and western distributors of dry goods—integrated southerners into the national market system with the help of the railroads, it undermined

27 Miller, 264-268.
the strict racial hierarchy that had evolved in the turbulent years following the Civil War. This older system relied primarily on interpersonal relationships for its power. People knew their neighbors, they “knew their place,” and the community could take action against transgressors by withholding social support or material goods—and in some cases, by violence. The advent of cheap railroad travel and the concomitant large-scale migration of populations in the late 19th century made it possible for large numbers of individuals to move to communities where they were not known, subverting the authority of personal history to keep people in their racial place. (In *Light in August*, William Faulkner gives shape to this concern with his character Joe Christmas, a man who settles in a community as a white man but is later revealed to be of mixed blood.28) As the 20th century dawned, the impersonal relationships fostered by mass commerce made it possible for African Americans, especially those who were middle class, to escape symbolically the material disadvantages to which blacks were subjected. The rise of mail order removed commerce into an environment where the color of money was more important than the color of skin; the existence of standardized, brand-name products enabled African Americans to request products by name and achieve a degree of control over the quality of the goods they received; and those who were lucky enough to be making purchases with cash (rather than credit that kept customers beholden to individual

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storekeepers), were able to assert some power by avoiding stores where they did not feel welcome.  

“The answer to the problem of consumption in the South,” Hale argues, “was segregation.” The Jim Crow system, crafted with the assistance of northern businessmen, mitigated threats to white supremacy while allowing for the expansion of commerce in three important ways. First, as I pointed out in the Introduction, the division of space into zones designated “for white” and “for colored” made urban geography, rather than individual knowledge, responsible for keeping southerners in their places within the racial hierarchy. You knew someone was black because they sat in the Jim Crow car, drank from the colored water fountain, or used the colored toilet, not because you knew who their momma and daddy were. Second, black inferiority could be marked through the spaces to which African Americans were restricted, which were dirtier, less safe, out of doors, etc., thereby imposing material discomfort even on those who could afford better. The third way Jim Crow accommodated commerce was actually a boon to marketers: white superiority was marked by material privilege, and therefore became both something that could be sold and a means of selling. The white consumer was the ideal consumer, and marketers appealed to their racial identity through advertising that upheld their superiority.

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29 Of course, whites did continue to exert a degree of direct personal control over black spending habits, especially those of sharecroppers and tenant farmers who often had to approve their purchases with their landlords because they were borrowing against their harvest whenever they bought anything.

30 Grace Elizabeth Hale, 121-198; quote on 169.
Retailers of race records coveted the dollars of African Americans; but their business challenged the privileged position of white customers. Minstrel tropes helped record marketers slot this new commodity into the Jim Crow system by masking commercial messages in a guise familiar to southern whites that marginalized blacks even as it got their attention. Creating a separate marketing category, which allowed companies to list their race records in a separate section of their catalogue or even segregate them into a separate catalogue altogether, also served that purpose. Frank Walker, who was developing a race catalogue at Columbia around the same time Peer and Hager were doing so for OKeh, explained his decision to create a distinct race series by saying he need to differentiate between “music for colored people, all types … [from] normal phonograph records.”31 “Normal,” of course, meant the classical and mainstream popular music intended for white audiences.

It is worth noting that “normal” and “white” had a more restricted compass in the American mind at this time than they do today. There was thus ample precedent within the Northern “white” record industry for the creation of separate and unequal marketing categories that contributed to the emphasis of racial difference. Ralph Peer explains that, shortly after the success of “Crazy Blues,”

I saw that this [race music] was really a business like our foreign record business. We put out German records, Swedish records, and what have you. So I decided that, like the German records were all in, let’s say, the 6000 series, I said, “well, we need another number series,” so I started this 8000. That was the theory behind it.32

31 Walker, interview.

32 Peer, interview.
The “foreign records” Peer is referring to, usually in languages other than English, had long been an established industry category. Though record companies marketed them domestically to the large immigrant communities that had settled in northern cities, they originated not in industry efforts to develop the American market, but rather in overseas exploits that had begun around at the turn of the century. As Miller observes, the ignorance and lack of concern for educating non-white customers in foreign lands created an approach to foreign music that emphasized its “foreignness.” Talent scouts recorded the music that seemed the most different from American music because it was what seemed to sell to people so different from what they had previously encountered in their New York headquarters, a perception corroborated by the widespread belief in a link between musical difference and essentialized racial/ethnic difference. This was further accentuated in the teens when dealers appealed to musical and national differences in pursuit of immigrant customers in the U.S.\textsuperscript{33} (Immigrants, who largely consumed such recordings as a way to preserve their distinctive national identity and resist the pressures of assimilation, appear to have vindicated this approach at the cash register.\textsuperscript{34})

A pre-existing emphasis on musical difference developed with foreign records, in conjunction with the segregation of southern mass commerce and the racially-circumscribed informal distribution networks that brought race records to black listeners, led the record industry to adopt a strictly race-based approach to marketing music to

\textsuperscript{33} Miller, 126-222.

African Americans. A system that not only described a record’s content but also its intended consumer’s identity also made it easier for the record companies to get their products into the hands of the customers most likely to buy them. And when, a few years later, the record companies realized there were non-black southerners who would pay good money for “their own music” as well, they drew on their experience with the “race” record and made race the organizing principle of its new twin, the “hillbilly” record.

Peer made the recording that first brought the white southern market to the industry’s attention while on a trip to Atlanta in the summer of 1923. No company had ever made a recording outside their urban studios, and Peer was pioneering the practice with newly-developed portable equipment in the belief that he would turn up more material popular with southern African Americans by recording in their native land. In his account, the discovery of a new southern white market that resulted from this trip was as unintentional as the discovery of the southern black one:

OKeh had never made any recordings outside the studio…. We went down to Atlanta, we looked around, found a small vacant warehouse…. I had gone down ahead and began scouting around for some talent. Now, I was dependent largely upon the [Atlanta] distributor of OKeh Records. Matter of fact, I hadn’t been to Atlanta, Georgia before—this was my first trip. So this fellow ran a furniture store, and he began scouting around, but, to my amazement, he didn’t know of any Negro talent…. So I began to switch off, and I said, “I better record a local dance band, I’ve got to do something about this.” And he went to the local Negro theater and he tried to find acts but nothing amounted to anything, so we did a sort of fill-in job on this first trip. We went down there to get Negro stuff … [but] I don’t think we picked up any Negro stuff of any importance…. Finally there was the deal where he wanted me to record a singer from a local church. This fellow … had quite a good reputation and occasionally worked on the radio…. So we set a date with this fellow, and this boy’s father was ill in some other town—he just couldn’t make the date. So to take up that time, my distributor brought in [white fiddler] Fiddlin’ John Carson…. He said Fiddlin’ John had been on the radio station, and he’s got quite a following. He’s really not a good singer, but let’s see what it is.
So the beginning of the hillbilly was just this effort to take up some time. He would never have recommended Fiddling John except that we had a vacant date and the time would otherwise have been lost. So I can’t claim there was any genius connected with it, not on my part, not on his part….

Peer would never have released the two sides he recorded by Carson that day if it had not been for the insistence of the OKeh distributor who organized the session, furniture dealer Polk Brockman. The recording quality was not even up to OKeh’s accommodating standards, and Peer did not think the disc would sell. Peer agreed to let Brockman have 500 copies, but he released them to him without giving the recording a catalogue number so that it would not embarrass the company. “A couple of days later,” Peer continues, “[Brockman] got me on the phone and he said, ‘Why, this is a riot.’ He said, ‘I’ve got to get two thousand records down here right now.’” Peer had Carson come to New York to re-record the selections that had sold so well, and, Peer says, “we were off.” Hillbilly records were born.

Peer’s memory of these events, it should be pointed out, is not quite borne out by the historical record. In fact, Brockman had been eager to record Carson from the beginning, and this desire appears to have driven him to persuade Peer to come to Atlanta in the first place. Brockman was certainly aware of the popularity Carson had cultivated in his street-corner performances, his frequent appearances on Atlanta’s year-old radio station, WSB, and by his seven-time championship in competition at one of the city’s

35 Peer, interview.

36 Peer, interview.
most important cultural events, the annual Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers Association.37 When the records went on sale, Brockman also knew how to promote them through Carson’s radio spots and by hawking them at the fiddler’s live appearances.

Yet the fact that Peer positioned Carson’s recordings as a last-minute addition to keep the recording session from being a total wash—one detects the persistence of the alibi he probably ginned up to justify the waste of time and materials in case Carson’s records had to be written off as a dead loss—demonstrates that it was something of a revelation to the record companies that there were white southerners with needs that were unmet by mainstream popular recordings. They were not caught as off-guard as they had been by Mamie Smith’s smash hit, however, because race records had given them a template by which to make sense of this new demand. “When hillbilly came along,” Ralph Peer commented, “I quickly saw the analogy [to race records] and I gave that a separate number series almost immediately.”38 Actually, it took almost a year before Peer realized the analogy and created a new series, nor was he the only one to see the parallel with race records—Frank Walker beat him to it.

There was an important difference between the way race records and hillbilly marginalized their audiences. Race records purported to represent the whole of black music. While they were actually primarily aimed at the southern working class that made up the vast majority of the country’s black population, race records were conceived of as

37. “Old-time” was the name given to the style of stringband music that coalesced in southern vernacular music in the late 19th century that remained one of the region’s most popular musical styles until World War II.

38 Peer, interview.
containing “music for colored people, all types,” in Frank Walker’s words. Hillbilly records, however, only claimed to contain music for one kind of white person, one separated from the nation’s musical mainstream not by race, but by region and class. Well-off southern whites, presumably, had been purchasing the same selections of classical and popular records as their northern counterparts for years before the creation of hillbilly records, and the category was not created for them.

Because this was music for the southern white working class, there was an added dimension to the way race shaped the construction of hillbilly records. While poor southern whites enjoyed many of the same racial privileges as rich ones, they also experienced much of the same economic subjugation as their black neighbors. As a result, poor whites lived in a cultural sphere largely separate from that of their social “betters” that reflected their inferior class status. Landlords controlled the spending and planting habits of their white sharecroppers just like their black ones, and factory bosses had say over the lives of their white employees just like their black ones. The poll tax and “literacy” restrictions white elites had enacted into law to disenfranchise African Americans were designed to disenfranchise poor whites as well. And, while poor whites did have access to spaces designated “for whites,” the material deprivation they experienced was not unlike that of their black neighbors, though generally less severe.39

Poor whites had their consumption bounded by more powerful whites, just as African Americans did, and catering to the needs of working-class whites required similar negotiations to avoid offending the South’s most powerful customers. Frank Walker’s account of the apprehension with which Columbia released its first hillbilly record reflects the anxiety the company had about the possibility it might alienating its existing customers:

The music was not understood by my own people, and they said under no circumstances could we put anything of that sort on the market. But after due pleading on my part they agreed to let me do it providing we not make mention of it in any way. We must not put it on any of our [advertising] hangers or anything, and I created a special series number, as I remember at Columbia called the 15000 series, and we would make a record and we would manufacture and release it and offer it quietly by a little letter to our various distributors through the South.40

The name ultimately applied to these records—“hillbilly”—reflected the need to appeal to working class southerners without upsetting class hierarchies. Folklorist Archie Green reports that the term first appeared on an OKeh release from 1925, a recording of a stringband from Watauga County, North Carolina, who showed up at a New York recording studio without having decided what to call themselves. When Ralph Peer, who was supervising the sessions, asked for their names, one of the group’s members responded, “We’re nothing but a bunch of hillbillies from North Carolina and Virginia. Call us anything.” So Peer released the sides under the name “the Hill Billies.”41

40 Walker, interview. It is not clear whether Columbia was concerned about tarnishing its brand identity amongst northern customers, upper-class southerners, or, quite likely, both.

Within a few years, “hillbilly” denoted white southern working class music. It supplanted the various names that the record industry first experimented with—“Old-Time Tunes” (OKeh), “Old Familiar Tunes” (Columbia), “tunes from Dixie” (Brunswick), and “Olde Time Fiddlin’ Tunes from the Sunny South” (Victor)—labels that situated the music at the cultural margins by virtue of its antiquity. The “hillbilly” label also implied the rusticity of the various “old-time” names, but with a derogatory spin that underscored its subaltern marginality. As Hill Billies member Tony Alderman commented, “Hillbilly was not only a funny word; it was a fighting word.”\(^\text{42}\) When used in anger, the epithet implied not only someone who was old-fashioned, but someone who was from the backwoods, unsophisticated, uneducated, and unintelligent. On the other hand, it was also a label starting to be used by rural people themselves to connote a rejection of ongoing urban commercial encroachments on their way of life. The virtue of “hillbilly” as a marketing category was its double voice. Like the minstrel tropes applied to race records, the hillbilly label allowed the record industry to target a working-class southern population by appealing to their distinctive qualities while allowing the dominant class (in this case, northerners and wealthier white southerners) to dismiss them as marginal rural outsiders. To match the blackface of minstrelsy, the record companies invented a music that presented itself in a carefully constructed “hickface.”

In hillbilly’s early years, the record companies did not have a clear idea of what hillbilly music should sound like. Success was somewhat hit-or-miss: they cast a wide net in their search for musicians to record, got what appeared to be each group’s best material

\(^\text{42}\) Quoted in Green, 212.
on disc, and then moved on to begin the search again. But all this changed in 1927, when Ralph Peer first recorded Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family. Session after session, Rodgers and the Carters kept recording new material that appealed to their listeners. Their staying power helped make hillbilly music something more than just a marketing category, helped develop the label into a coherent genre with a recognizable sound. Providing musical integrity to the segregated genre, the musical work of Rodgers and the Carters recordings was crucial in consolidating the split of black and white southern music, a necessity if record companies were to flourish in the Jim Crow south. As we’ll see in the next chapter, this music drew southern whites into what one can imagine as a “hillbilly circle of resonance”—a sound world increasingly separate from the blues-based circle that enfolded their black neighbors. As the Allen Brothers and other southern musicians found out, this new musical world was hostile to the interracial musical practices with which they had grown up. Because the record industry had divided customers by race, music that confounded the racial binary faced challenges getting into the hands of customers likely to buy it. Though integrated music-making persisted, it came into increasing conflict with the segregated mass-market.
“Bristol, August 1927” … has come to signal the Big Bang of country music evolution, the genesis of every shape and species of Pickin’-and-Singin’ down through the years. Feed “Nashville Now” into the projector and run it backwards: Past Porter and Dolly; … past Lefty and Hank; … back beyond The Golden Age and the yodeling cowboys and “There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere”; … past “Orange Blossom Special (and God said, “Let there be Bluegrass!”); past Melody Ranch and Renfro Valley and the Light Crust Doughboys … and hundreds of Playboys; when you pass Al Hopkins and the Hillbillies and hit the hub, the place where it all started, you’ll be at the vacant hat warehouse on State Street in Bristol in August 1927, with Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family.

—Nolan Porterfield

The city of Bristol is bisected by the Tennessee/Virginia border, which runs straight down the middle of the town’s aptly-named main thoroughfare, State Street. The vacant warehouse country historian Nolan Porterfield sends us back to in the above epigraph stood on the Tennessee side. Talent scout Ralph Peer converted the building into a makeshift recording studio for two weeks in the late summer of 1927 to make his first records for his new employer, Victor Records. While he was just beginning his work for Victor, he had made expeditions such as this one all but routine while doing the work for OKeh Records that I discuss in Chapter 1. Indeed, Peer’s selection of this site and the planning he put into the sessions were the product of his pioneering experience in the mechanics of commercial field recording down South. Bristol was part of the largest

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urban area in the southern Appalachian Mountains, and a recording session there promised to attract large numbers of musicians, many of whom had recently arrived from surrounding areas in search of work. Peer knew how to use the town’s radio and newspaper to get out the word of his visit, how to leverage an advance scouting visit in order to make the best use of his recording time, and how to take advantage of local contacts (autoharpist Earnest Stoneman, who Peer had previously recorded, helped put the word out) to drum up talent.²

Eighty-odd years on, these sessions provide a striking contrast with the lucrative music industry they spawned. The early twenty-first century finds country music production remarkably centralized and institutionalized: most of the genre’s songs are written by professional songwriters working for Nashville publishing companies, shopped around to Nashville-based producers and singers, recorded in Nashville studios featuring Nashville session players, released by Nashville record labels and distributed across the country (indeed, across the world) by conglomerate-owned country radio, and sold largely by the world’s largest corporation, Wal-Mart. Today’s country music has evolved so far away from its hillbilly ancestor of the 1920s that it is effectively a different species. The music Peer recorded was radically decentralized—he had to scour the countryside to find the music popular in various communities with different musical styles and tastes, and then find a way to market those musics to communities with different habits of buying mass-marketed goods.

Yet despite the gap between turn of the twenty-first century country and 1920s hillbilly, the recording and marketing system Peer helped develop laid the foundation upon which its modern form was built. Employing a suitably Appalachian metaphor, sociologist Richard Peterson argues that the recording model Peer pioneered in Bristol shifted the hillbilly music industry from a “strip-mining” to a “deep-shaft mining” production model. Rather than simply coming to an area, depleting its “surface” musical resources by recording the best selections currently in the repertoire of local artists, and then repeating this process somewhere else, Peer prized artists that could continue to come up with good material over the long haul. Performers who had a musical style and compelling presence on record that made them marketable outside the communities that had nurtured them were especially valuable in this system, because it meant that they could reach a large audience to develop a reliable customer base for new installments in their catalogue.3

Peer discovered the first musical veins ripe for deep-shaft mining during the Bristol sessions when he recorded the two acts that would do more than any others to create country music as a recognizably coherent musical style with an appeal outside a small, local market. One of these acts was the Carter Family—the focus of this chapter—from the Virginia mountain community of Maces Springs, made up of Sarah Carter, her husband A.P., and her cousin/sister-in-law, Maybelle Carter. The four sides they cut in Bristol were the first installment of one of country music’s most enduring careers,

producing scores of songs synthesizing a wide array of southern musical influences. In the fifteen years that followed, the Carters became a ubiquitous presence in the southern sound world. They cut hundreds of sides for a slew of record companies, and, beginning in the mid-1930s, blanketed the country with broadcast on high-powered radio stations. Their songs, along with their distinctive vocal harmony and guitar picking style, were adopted by hundreds of followers, and remained a part of country music for generations.

The other performer the Bristol Sessions launched into the hillbilly stratosphere—whom I will discuss in Chapter 3—was Jimmie Rodgers, a small-time aspiring pop singer who was then working in the resorts of Asheville, North Carolina. Rodgers’s career was much shorter than the Carters, cut short by his death from tuberculosis just six years after he first recorded. In that brief time, however, Rodgers established himself as far and away the preeminent hillbilly star of his day. His first few records sold around one million copies each, and, until the full weight of the depression squashed sales across the industry, he averaged around 350,000 per record thereafter—astronomical numbers at a time when 50,000 was an impressive sales figure for an artist in any genre. Rodgers became popular largely on the strength of his “Blue Yodels,” in which he imported a style of falsetto singing from the minstrel stage into the blues. As I will argue in the following chapter, though built on black musical resources, these songs (perhaps paradoxically) facilitated the segregation of southern music by providing a recorded home for black music separated from black people. The first hillbilly singer of truly

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national stature, Rodgers influenced vocalists for decades to come including such diverse musicians as Bill Monroe, Bob Wills, and Merle Haggard.

While hillbilly music had been recorded for four years before the Bristol sessions, many musicians, scholars, and fans subscribe to the picture of “Bristol, August 1927” painted by Nolan Porterfield: “the genesis of every shape and species of Pickin’-and-Singin’ down through the years…. [occurred in] the vacant hat warehouse on State Street… with Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family. Indeed, while there is disagreement about the precise moment hillbilly music began (was it with Eck Robertson’s 1922 New York recordings? Or Fiddlin’ John Carson’s 1923 Atlanta sides? Or was it vaudeville singer Vernon Dalhart’s 1924 “The Wreck of the Old 97,” which became the first disc to sell one million copies?), the genealogy that anoints Jimmie Rodgers the “Father” of country music and the Carters its “First Family” is all but uncontested. When a historian like Nolan Porterfield describes the Bristol Sessions as the “Big Bang of Country Music,” or a country great like Johnny Cash claims that “everything important in country music seems to have proceeded from that point,” they are highlighting these artists’ role in creating a model of a southern music marketable to whites across the region, using elements familiar to folks in many different communities but stylistically heterogeneous enough not to limit its resonances to a particular neighborhood, sound, or state. Focusing on the music of the Carter Family, this chapter seeks to capture how a regional style was built out of a plethora of regional ones. Though the Carters were rooted in the

Appalachian traditions of their “Clinch Mountain home,” the way they weaved influences from the musical traditions of other southern communities meant their records were not received by hillbilly audiences as “Clinch Mountain music,” nor “Appalachian music,” nor “Virginia music,” but rather as something new: “hillbilly music” for southern whites.

_Visiting Neighbors_  
Recording Technology and the Collapse of Southern Space

“Hear them sing together on one record. A great event…and a great record.”  
—Advertising copy for “Jimmie Rodgers Visits the Carter Family,” Victor Record 23574 (1931)²

Before Jimmie Rodgers exits this chapter to prepare for his starring role in the one that follows, he helps make explicit hillbilly records’ radical transformation of geography by appearing on record with the Carter Family. Whether it was an accident or, some might say, an act of fate that brought Rodgers to Bristol at the same time as the Carter Family in August of 1927, Ralph Peer’s business savvy brought them together on record during sessions in Louisville, Kentucky in July of 1931. Actually, Peer’s scheme, which was designed to capitalize on these artists’ popularity, brought them together in three quite distinct ways on that occasion: First, they physically gathered in a studio on Louisville’s Main Street; then they recorded a phantasmagorical “meeting” at the Carter’s house in the Appalachian town of Maces Springs, Virginia; then followed up by sonically

² Archie Green Collection, Southern Folklife Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
enacting a third virtual get-together at Jimmie Rodgers’s lonely homestead in the Texas hill country. The result was a record that sold ten times more copies than the average record released that fall.7

“Jimmie Rodgers Visits the Carter Family” finds Sara and Maybelle sitting on their front porch singing a song familiar to their audience, “Sunny Mountainside.” A.P. cuts off their nostalgia for a beloved mountain home because he “sees” a car coming up the road. When it stops, who gets out of it? None other than Jimmie Rodgers, who has driven all the way from Texas! In a loose conversational style, they “make him feel at home while he’s at Mace’s Springs,” giving him “a little squirt” of moonshine, singing him a tune (“Little Darling Pal of Mine”), and chatting with him about the mountains and possum hunting. While we listen in, the four of them pick up “a little bit of that sure enough ridiculously [sic] harmonizing round here like [they] used to do,” singing “Hot Times in the Old Town Tonight” so casually that no one seems concerned that they are singing three different versions of the lyrics.8

The flip side of “Jimmie Rodgers Visits the Carter Family,” “The Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers in Texas,” works the same casual, semi-improvisatory conceit of country life: Jimmie sits in his “nice little shack” in the lonesome Texas hill country, singing a tune about life on the trail, until the Carter Family “unexpectedly” knocks on


8 All Carter Family recordings discussed in this chapter are found on The Carter Family, In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain, Bear Family CD 15865.
the door. As they visit, they chat about Texas, share a song (Jimmie Rodgers’s trademark “Blue Yodel,”), and sit down for a fresh-cooked batch of fried chicken.

While it might be expected that the collaboration of four of the day’s most celebrated musicians would produce spectacular records, the sound of these sides is completely, spectacularly mundane. By that I do not just mean that they fail to make use of the potential musical brilliance of this hillbilly combination. (We hear them talk a lot more than sing, and they do not even do that with much enthusiasm.) Instead of depicting these superstars in extraordinary situations, these “visiting” records capture them engaged in something about as ordinary as can be imagined: calling on their friends at home. Most of their listeners would have done this very thing every Sunday after church as a matter of course.

But even as these records let us listen in on everyday events, they go to great lengths to point out how radical and new this kind of “visiting” actually is. These performers share the same things their listeners might when dropping in for an impromptu bit of hospitality—a home-cooked meal, communal music making—but they share them under fairly extraordinary circumstances. In a makeshift studio near the banks of the Ohio River, where the South meets the Mid-West, recording technology transforms Virginia “mountaineers” from the South’s northeastern edge and a Texas “cowboy” from the region’s southwestern outpost into visiting “neighbors.”

The dialogue draws attention to physical space and recording technology’s ability to collapse it again and again: Rodgers and the Carters go on at length about the landscape, as if the writers feared the titles might not be enough to make it clear that the
records were “set” in Virginia or in Texas. Rodgers the tourist observes, “Man look at
those old hills over there. Say, what’s that old mountain layin’ over there? Ain’t that a
pretty old mountain? What is that pretty old mountain?” while A.P. poetically captures
the tedium of a long drive through the desert: “Well, since driving through Texas I’ve
seen more windmills and less water, more cows and less milk, seen farther and seen less
than any dadburn country I’s ever in.” In case the listener misses the point, both
recordings have Rodgers loudly proclaim his location—“So this is Virginia!” and “So
you finally got out here to Texas, did you?”—and he repeatedly observes how far apart
Virginia and Texas are as if making sure the listener appreciates the cleverness of this
 technological conjuring trick.

An off-hand comment Jimmie Rodgers makes at the close of his visit to Maces
Springs makes it emphatic that the purpose of these discs is to make a spectacle of the
mundane acts these sides depict. “Hey, hey, boy, tell ‘em about us!” he exclaims. Who is
he talking to? Clearly not anyone with him in Maces Springs—he is speaking through the
phonograph horn directly to the listener, demanding, “hey, pay attention while me and the
Carter Family do these everyday things under these extraordinary circumstances.” What
does he want the listener to “tell” about them? Presumably, they are to comment on the
phonographic collapse of southern geography these records go to such lengths to stage,
and also on the way recording technology erases the walls between the listener’s living
room and the Carter’s front porch. At the same time that recording technology allows
Rodgers and the Carters to visit each another as if traversing a thousand miles were a
walk next door, it makes it possible for listeners to be next door to the Carters and
Rodgers—wherever in the South they might happen to live. Rodgers and the Carters (along with their instruments, food, household furniture, and the surrounding landscape) can travel through the phonograph horn into the listener’s living room.

Certainly phonograph marketers had been commenting in their advertising on the idea that the machines could transport the performers—not just their music—into a listener’s home. Figure 2.1, a Victrola ad circa 1910, pictures the phonograph as literally bringing a performer into listeners’ living rooms. Such advertisements had always emphasized the phonograph’s ability to grant access to events beyond everyday experience. Victor describes its phonograph as the “only instrument that brings you the world’s greatest artists,” suggesting that the music world’s who’s-who will visit the listeners home. A 1917 ad for Columbia’s Grafanola went a step further, describing its machine as opening “portals of enchantment.”9 The “visiting” records, in contrast, offered listeners the opportunity to experience not the radically new, but rather the tremendously familiar. They allowed them to listen, magically, across huge expanses of virtual geography, to people just like themselves doing the things they did in their everyday lives.

Figure 2.1. Victrola advertisement, ca. 1910.¹⁰

¹⁰ Collection of Robert Fink.
These visiting records model the kind of listening experience hillbilly record manufacturers were increasingly trying to create: listening to a hillbilly record, people heard to familiar music played the way a neighbors would play it for them while visiting their homes. But because the new mass of consumers ranged from Texas to Virginia (and beyond), hillbilly recordings had to be able to draw a wide range of people into their circle of resonance at the same time that they attempted to colonize their listeners’ everyday music-making practices. These discs needed to allow as many listeners from as wide a geographic area as possible to identify with what they heard, and at the same time exude the kind of familiarity and intimacy that enabled the listener to feel the same kind of personal connection to the musicians as with a friend playing a tune for them (or with them) on the front porch. What made the Carter Family such a powerful force in laying the groundwork for modern country music was their seemingly effortless ability to do both at once. Even though their music drew on a staggeringly broad range of sources, biographer Mark Zwonitzer writes, “Listeners came to regard the Carters as friends they knew, as people like themselves. There was A.P. wandering in and out of songs, Maybelle trying out new descending licks on her guitar, and Sara’s voice deepening through time.”11 Even when their distribution was arguably at its broadest in the late ‘30s, with their “Good Neighbor Hour” blasting twice a day across the US-Mexico border from

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a station with a signal far stronger than any allowed under American law, they managed
to sound like exactly that—good neighbors.

Technology enabled the Carter Family to visit with Jimmie Rodgers in Texas, and
it let them visit regularly with folks in Mississippi, Kentucky, South Carolina, Louisiana,
and other states across the South—and the country. A fan letter sent to Sara Carter
testifies to the powerful sense of personal connection her music created for their listeners:

   Aunt Sara, this is from my heart…. Oh Dear God, hear my plea and answer the
one prayer I feel in my heart…. I am a poor and don’t understand big words but
you know my heart and thoughts, please keep Aunt Sara Carter singing your
praises and songs like she has in the pass [sic]. Don’t let nothing happen to her
health and voice, and Good Lord if we don’t get to see each other in this world,
help us to meet each other in heaven, and there I can hear her sing and play in
person forever, in Jesus’ name, amen.¹²

“Carter Family Songs”
Sincerity, Authenticity, and the Synthesis of Southern Repertoire

What was it about the Carter Family’s music that made thousands of listeners
spread throughout the region feel like the Carters were “people like themselves” who
were singing directly to them? The answer may lie in the cultural significance of two
closely related terms that pervade contemporaneous descriptions of the Carters (and
remain central to evocations of country music to this day): they sounded “authentic” and
“sincere.” This might, at least, be where the answer begins—in and of itself, saying they

¹² Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 8.
sounded authentic and sincere raises more questions than it answers. What features of this music signaled “authenticity”? What notes did the Carters play to sound “sincere”? And before we can even approach the question of what musical features created the sensations of authenticity and sincerity, we need to understand why these terms crop up in discussing the Carters, and what they might say about their music.

Though country listeners and musicians use the words authenticity and sincerity without a second thought, contemplating their meaning has been giving scholars headaches for decades. Though the two words are often used interchangeably, to understand how people respond to “sincere, authentic” music (and how these concepts contribute to the listener’s sense that the performers are “people like me”) I find it useful to understand the two words as having distinct, albeit related, ranges of meaning. In this context, authenticity has to do with the way performers represent where they come from: If a member of the Carters’ audience hears their music and comes to believe the Carters come from the same background he does, have the same historical memories he does, and share his frame of reference, he is responding to their authenticity. Sincerity also has to do with how performers represent themselves and how their performance convinces a listener they are “people like me,” but in a very different sense: Performers seem sincere when their music convinces a listener that they are making audible what they “really feel.” If a listener hears the Carters music and is convinced that they have the same emotional reactions he does, experience events in the same way he does, and interpret the events with the same values he does, he is responding to their sincerity. In short, authenticity concerns how listeners understand the correspondence between performers’
representation of themselves and the performers’ backgrounds; sincerity concerns the correspondence between performers’ representations of themselves and how they feel inside.

In a performance that is successfully authentic there is no difference between the way the performers are presenting themselves and the way their audience believes them to be. For a Carter song like “Little Darling Pal of Mine,” for example, to sound authentic and familiar to their audience, the tune needs to sound like it has been around forever, and the Carters are performing it like they always have, like anybody might. They are “just singing,” not putting on any kind of show. But if the audience only hears this song on record and does not personally know the performers and the history of the music, then how do they recognize its authenticity? Indeed, “Little Darling Pal of Mine,” an early Carter success, had not actually been around forever—A.P. had just written it. And when they performed it in the studio in Camden, New Jersey, they were not “just singing” the way anyone might. They had rehearsed it repeatedly, fine-tuning their harmony, working out the instrumental parts, and making sure it was under the three minutes a phonograph could contain on a single side.13

Authenticity was something that had to be made, not found. Richard Peterson draws attention this paradox in the subtitle to his book, Creating Country Music—the only work devoted to its history in country music—Fabricating Authenticity. Peterson turns to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) for help in breaking down the concept of

13 Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 107-108.
authenticity.\textsuperscript{14} His music-inflected discussion of the many definitions the \textit{OED} offers focuses on how music performed in the present corresponds to music as it was performed in the past. It is in this sense that I use the word when I argue that ‘Little Darling Pal of Mine’ sounds authentic because it sounds like \textit{it has been around forever}. When the Carters recorded it in 1928, a listener could easily imagine they had been singing it since 1918, or 1908, pretty much the way they always had. Another important definition Peterson distills from the \textit{OED} is that an authentic performance is “not pretense.” It is in this sense that I use the word when I say the Carter Family sounds authentic because they sound like they are just singing, \textit{not putting on any kind of show}.

If, in actuality, “Little Darling Pal of Mine” was newly-composed and carefully rehearsed, it does not fulfill either criteria of authenticity. Does that make their performance a counterfeit? Peterson offers a third definition of authenticity that suggests that this is the wrong question to ask. He writes, “A distinct sense of ‘authentic’… centers on being \textit{believable} or \textit{credible} to the contemporary observer. The authentic in this sense may, but usually does not, accurately represent some…performance in the past.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, if the Carters’ recording of “Little Darling Pal of Mine” \textit{sounds like} the song has been around forever, and the Carters \textit{sound like} they are just singing, then a

\textsuperscript{14} Peterson, 205-209. Though widely shown deference in academic circles, the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} is a questionable starting place for the discussion of authenticity in country music. Because it relies primarily on printed sources for surveying the range of a word’s meaning, the \textit{OED} largely omits particular meanings of words in oral tradition. Moreover, because of the \textit{OED}’s breadth, it cannot adequately contend with authenticity’s particular meaning within the discourse of country music. Yet Peterson manages to make many important observations despite the \textit{OED}’s weaknesses. For that reason, as well as because his is the only work devoted to examining authenticity in this particular context (and also because the \textit{OED} helpfully takes apart the many meanings of the word)—I take Peterson’s starting point as my own.

\textsuperscript{15} Peterson, 208. Emphasis in the original.
listener can hear them as authentic even if the song is really newly-composed and carefully rehearsed. Authenticity is in the ear of the beholder.

The Carters were masterful at seeming authentic even as they assembled their sound out of southern musical traditions. It takes close scrutiny to hear their eclecticism. They largely fabricated their authenticity through two key musical elements: their repertoire, largely assembled by A.P, and the distinctive instrumental style, substantially defined by Maybelle’s legendary work on the guitar. The constant need for new material led A.P. to mine the memories of his neighbors, people he encountered in his travels, and folks he hunted up on collecting expeditions. In the process, he tapped veins of material that ran deep through the memories of listeners all across the South: ballads, camp meeting gospel songs, blues, parlor songs, tunes from singing-school hymnals, Tin Pan Alley numbers. In front of the microphone, Maybelle’s picking hand fused several differentiated musical traditions: the sounds of the barn dance and the parlor, the techniques of the fiddle and the banjo, and the patterns of lead playing and vocal accompaniment.

**Song Catching and “Carterization”**

The Carters’ began assembling their repertoire by harvesting the dozens of songs that had found their way into their brains from the folks they had grown up around. If folksong collections assembled around the turn of the 20th century are any guide, this
starting point gave them much in common with many southerners. Sara and Maybelle had
known songs like “John Hardy Was a Desperate Little Man” and “Bring Back My Blue
Eyed Boy,” which appear in several such collections, since childhood. “Little Moses,”
which Sara learned from her aunt Myrtle Bayes, had been documented as far away as
Missouri over a quarter-century before the Carters put it on record. Many of their songs
are the legacy of British and Scotts-Irish immigrants who had settled across the South in
large numbers. For example, “The Storms are on the Ocean” (which they recorded at
Bristol), uses commonplaces derived from British Isle balladry, and “Fond Affection”
was documented in a book of Scottish folksong as early as 1909.16

      Mythology of isolated communities like the Carters’ Maces Springs not
withstanding, the South had long been infused with commercial music. Along with songs
whose origins were shrouded in the mists of oral tradition, the Carters picked up tunes
composed on Tin Pan Alley. These had percolated into their region through commercially
printed sheet music intended for amateurs to play in their homes on “respectable”
instruments such as the piano or guitar. Known as “parlor songs,” they were absorbed
into oral tradition and passed on across generations. Two of the most enduring songs
recorded in Bristol, “Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow Tree” and “Wildwood
Flower,” though passed down like a Carter family heirloom, had their roots in published
music—Maybelle recalled of Wildwood Flower, which Charles Wolfe traces back to a

16 Charles Wolfe, liner notes to The Carter Family, In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain, Bear Family CD
       15865; Margaret Anne Bulger, "The Carter Family: Traditional Sources for Song" (master’s thesis,
       Western Kentucky University, 1976).
song published in 1859, “The first time I heard that song, I was just a kid…. My mother sang it and her mother sang it. It has been handed down for years and years.”

Sheet music picked up by amateur performers that “got loose” in oral tradition (as Charles Wolfe puts it) served as an important conduit into the home for another form of commercial music, that of professional touring musicians. Songs like “When the Roses Bloom In Dixieland,” which the Carters recorded in 1929, was written by one of the great minstrel performers of the day, George “Honeyboy” Evans. Minstrelsy had been America’s most enduring forms of mass entertainment since the 1840s, paving a road followed by many other kinds of touring shows. Nomadic performers would often sell printed versions of their songs, either as sheet music or word-sheets known as “ballets,” that allowed amateur musicians to recreate the songs at home and pass them along to others. Sara recalled that 1934’s “Over the Garden Wall” was one such song. Coming to them on “an old ballet given to us by an old lady in Tennessee,” it had been written by the minstrel team Harry Hunter and George D. Fox in 1879 and popularized by vaudevillian Tony Pastor in the 1890s.

The commercially-published songs that arguably left the deepest impact on southerner’s music making habits and the Carters’ repertoire were the tunes that came from the shapenote hymnals that spread printed sacred music across the region. Singing teachers fanned out to build customers for hymnal publishers by teaching amateurs how


18 Wolfe, liner notes to In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain.
to read this accessible music notation. Though the system had originally been devised in New England “singing schools” of the early 19th century, by the early 20th century it remained in use almost exclusively in the South where such schools were still common. A.P.’s uncle Flanders Bayes ran singing schools across southwestern Virginia, and A.P. had spent a lot of time in them as a child. The Carters sang from shapenote hymnals at their Mt. Vernon United Methodist church, especially those published by Lawrenceburg, Tennessee’s James D. Vaughan. The Carters recorded many shapenote songs, the most famous of which became their theme, “Keep on the Sunny Side,” composed by Ada Blenkhorn and Howard Entwistle in 1899 and brought to their attention by Flanders.¹⁹ Other shapenote tunes they recorded include “The Grave on the Green Hillside” (a gift from another relative, the preacher Big Tom Carter), “Anchored in Love,” “Diamonds in the Rough,” “Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone,” and “School House on the Hill.”²⁰

In addition to shapenote hymnals and other religious songbooks, sacred music circulated throughout the South on its own touring circuit, revival meetings. Dating as far back as the Great Awakenings of the 17th century, these annual festivals featured a visiting preacher (or several visiting preachers), who would hold long religious meetings at which worshipers could publicly reaffirm their Christian commitment and the unconverted could get saved. A new revival phenomenon was sweeping the South—indeed, much of the country—in the early 20th century, and with it a new repertoire of religious songs:

¹⁹ Wolfe, liner notes to In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain.

²⁰ Wolfe, liner notes to In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain. The tradition of shapenote singing the Carters themselves practiced was a seven-note system, which originated in northwestern Virginia and had its strongest exponent in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee’s James D. Vaughn Music Publishing Company, rather than the older, four-note system.
Pentecostalism. This movement, which had begun in 1906 at Los Angeles’s Azusa Street Apostolic Faith Mission, emphasized worshipers’ direct experience of the Holy Ghost that manifested itself in shaking, speaking in tongues, and other uncontrolled expressions of religious ecstasy. The movement, often known by the name “Holiness” (short for Fire Baptized Holiness Church, a new Pentecostal denomination), swept the South with its revival meetings, and the Carters experienced its music firsthand.²¹ Songs such as 1930’s “On My Way to Canaan’s Land,” 1931’s “Let the Church Roll On,” and 1934’s “I’m Working on a Building” were ones Sara recalled that the “Holiness church people sang.”²²

The Carters did not learn all these Pentecostal songs at revivals. They learned quite a few from an African American musician from eastern Tennessee, Lesley Riddle, who was an integral part of the Carters’ musical life. A.P. first met Riddle while hunting songs in Kingsport, near Bristol, a company town that had drawn workers from Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina, to work in its cement factory. A.P. singled out Riddle from a community of several impressive musicians—amongst them the young Brownie McGee—and brought him back to Maces Springs for a week. Like many musical relationships created across racial lines before mass-mediation drew the color line more starkly, Riddle remained A.P.’s friend, traveling companion, and musical repository for many years. He often accompanied A.P. on song hunting expeditions, memorizing the tunes they heard while A.P. wrote down the lyrics. Along with

²¹ Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 133-136.
²² Quoted in Wolfe, Clinch Mountain liner notes.
Pentecostal numbers like “When the World’s on Fire” (1930), Riddle taught them other sacred songs such as “Motherless Children” (1929), and secular songs like “The Cannonball” (1930).23

Recorded music became an important part of the Carters’ world at the same time it was becoming a part of their audience’s world, and this new medium also contributed to their repertoire. Sara remembers learning the western-themed “Cowboy Jack” (1934), which had been recorded by Arkie the Arkansas Woodchopper (among others), from a Victrola record. Sara also recalls learning “Are You Tired of Me, My Darling” from a record; and it appears that either Mac and Bob’s 1927 version or Bill Cox’s 1931 cut may have been the Carters’ source. Bud Landress’s “Picture on the Wall” had been a smash hit for his Georgia Yellowhammers in 1927. Charles Wolfe suggests that this was almost certainly the Carters’ source for their 1931 recording.24

While dissecting the Carters’ repertoire in this way gives us a sense of the musical cross-section their songs captured, it is somewhat misleading. The Carters lived in a world where sacred and secular music, published and orally-transmitted songs, old ones and new ones, coexisted side by side. Much of the time it is unlikely that people even experienced them as separate categories—the sounds that got into peoples’ heads in one setting often came out of their mouths in another. “Little Darling Pal of Mine” was written by A.P., for example, but the lyrics draw heavily on commonplaces of parlor songs, including lost love, deceptive dreams, and the like. The tune is largely derived

23 Wolfe, liner notes to In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain.

24 Wolfe, liner notes to In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain.
from a Pentecostal hymn that the Carters also recorded, “When the World’s on Fire.”

The Carters version of the shapenote hymn “Diamonds in the Rough,” Norm Cohen documents, includes a verse not contained in any printed version that is likely taken from 1924 Uncle Dave Macon recording. “Hello, Central! Give Me Heaven,” which Sara described as a “sort of a Holiness song,” was written by the king of commercial parlor songs, Charles K. Harris, and had become widely popular several years before the Pentecostal movement even began. And, as I have already discussed, songs from printed music and records could get loose in oral tradition and become more associated with a family member than with their composers.

The way the Carters gathered their music and assembled it for recording promoted this conglomeration of influences, much in the same way that southerners’ daily musical lives did. They primarily learned their music from face to face meetings, picking the brains of whomever they came across. A.P., whose restlessness and love of visiting made him a natural at song expeditions, generally took on this task. His daughter, Janette, describes he would seek out singers, paying them almost exactly the same kind of visit that he enacts with Jimmie Rodgers on the visiting records.

He loved meeting people, loved visiting, and he never forgot the people he met…. [P]eople would tell him if they heard somebody had a song, and he’d go to see them. Or sometimes he’d just be driving by and stop and go up to a little house in the hills to see if they had a song. It’s a wonder he didn’t get dog-bit. He’d just

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26 Cited in Wolfe, liner notes to In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain.
tell ‘em who he was and that he was looking for songs. Sometimes he’d stall all night at their house.  

One such source was their neighbor Mandy Groves, who is described by her nephew like a picture out of the Carter myth-book:

> When I was a little boy, she’d set out on the porch of their little log house and she’d sing to me…. She had the prettiest, clear voice, and she’d set there and rock and sing all these old songs…She’d sing that [ballad], “Barbara Allen,” “Sourwood Mountain.” She had all of these.

Yet in addition to singing on her front porch, she also sang at her piano, according to her neighbor, Bud Derting. The piano’s popularity was largely driven by its usefulness in bringing sheet music to life, and the constant supply of printed music made the instrument increasingly attractive. The fact that Groves owned a piano strongly suggests that she played parlor songs written on New York’s Tin Pan Alley along with her “old songs.” She may have even given the Carters some sheet music.

Once songs were gathered, working them up was a collaborative process, not a solitary one, providing an additional opportunity for the mingling of influences. A.P. generally returned from his collecting trips not with whole tunes, but with fragments. Sometimes his sources could not remember all the words to a song, so the Carters would have to fill in the gaps when he got back to Maces Springs. If Lesley Riddle was not with him to remember the melodies, he often returned without them because he did not (ironically) have such a good memory for tunes. When he worked up one of these songs

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27 Quoted in Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 121.

28 Quoted in Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 119.

29 Quoted in Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 119.
with Sara and Maybelle, they might be called upon to construct a melody for it out of the pieces A.P. could recall and new melodic phrases from their imaginations. Maybelle recalled, “A.P. was the song-hunter…. He’d get out and scrape up everything he could find, and then we’d probably have to put ‘em together, get a tune. So we usually just made up a lot of them.”

Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg show how the Carter Family’s repertoire was put together through this combination of remembering, reconstructing, and inventing by discussing a tune they recorded in February of ’29, “Sweet Fern.” Charles Wolfe has traced the song’s origin back to a parlor song published in 1876 by Thomas Westendorf and George Perseley, entitled “Sweet Birds.” But Gladys Carter—one of Sara and A.P.’s daughters—vividly remembers her father writing it:

I can tell you where Daddy wrote a song one time…. Right over behind the house here. The blackberries was ripe. And Mommy said, “Doc, go a-back out in the holler and pick me some blackberries, and I’ll make a pie.” And there’s a little old bird up in the tree a-singin’ and Daddy was a-throwin’ berries, and hitting the bucket, and he come back—“Sweet Fern.” He got the tune to it from that bird a-singin’ to him and [the berries] a-hittin’ the bucket. And it went ding, ding, ding. And he come back and said “Sary, I thought up a song,” and he wrote it and they made a record…. I can remember it as if it’d been yesterday.

Maybelle offers yet another account of the song’s provenance, recalling that A.P. learned it from someone while on a hunting expedition in east Tennessee. Given the

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30 Quoted in Wolfe, liner notes to In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain.


32 Quoted in Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 120.
compositional tradition in which the Carters worked, Zwonitzer and Hirshberg suggest that all three accounts can be true. “Like as not,” they write,

A.P. did get some lyrics or sheet music from somebody up in the Tennessee hills…. And like as not, he did get the idea for the call-and-response arrangement of “Sweet Fern” from his blackberry expedition. And like as not, Sara and Maybelle took A.P.’s notion and remade the melody and instrumentals into something barely suggested by the old sheet music.33

Songs put together from old fragments could tickle many different people’s imaginations simultaneously, without any of them actually recognizing the song in its entirety. One piece of a song might resonate with a listener’s memory—say the melody recalled a song she sang in church—and another piece might set another listener’s memory to work—reminding him of the songs his mother sang on their front porch. Through this process of cobbling together new songs out of old parts, which Charles Wolfe half-jokingly suggests is a new industrial practice on a par with Xeroxing by dubbing it “Carterization,” newly assembled songs sounded like they had been around forever.34 And the combination of different parts meant they sounded like they came from the many different pasts to be found among the Carters’ diverse audience, opening up their repertoire to viewing through a variety of frames of reference.

The “Carter Scratch”

33 Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 120.

34 Wolfe, liner notes to In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain.
While these Carterized songs folded together an impressive cross-section of the South’s musical traditions, not all their musical influences were audible in the Carters’ voices. Instrumental dance music, which was an important body of southern music in its own right, found its way into the Carter sound through Maybelle’s guitar playing. She seems to have been most heavily influenced by the stringband, which was anchored by the fiddle and its consort, the banjo. Indeed, the function of Maybelle’s guitar playing is in many ways analogous to the function of the banjo part in a stringband: it outlines the skeleton of the main tune (played on the fiddle or sung by the Carters) while simultaneously providing rhythmic drive. Maybelle accomplished this by adapting banjo technique to the guitar, allowing her to import elements of instrumental dance music into the Carters’ sound while providing a compelling accompaniment to voices.

For most of America’s musical life, the fiddle was the dominant instrument in popular music. Beginning in the early-to-mid 19th century, fiddle traditions brought by Scottish and Scotts-Irish immigrants to the New World mixed with the music brought by slaves from Africa. The major conduit between these two traditions was the banjo, developed by Africans in the New World based on African models. As it became popular among whites through the minstrel show, the fiddle music of immigrants from Ireland and the British Isles met up with African banjo techniques. The combination was widely popularized by Dan Emmett’s Virginia Minstrels (who, despite their name, were New York-based), a band built around the core pairing of fiddle and banjo accompanied by bones and tambourine that would become the model for minstrel troupes well into the
20th century. The music that emerged out of the pairing of fiddle and banjo traditions was carried back down South by Civil War soldiers.35

By the turn of the 20th century, the sounds of the minstrel stage had seeped deeply into the practices of amateur music making, reinforced by direct contact between black and white musicians. They coalesced into what came to be known as “old-time” stringband music, featuring the fiddle, which played melodies that usually were in binary form (|AABB:|), repeated indefinitely. Its primary function was to accompany dancing, either a solo style known as “flatfooting,” “buckdancing,” or “clogging,” or group dances such as squares or contras. The fiddle tunes, derived from Scottish and Scotts-Irish tunes shaped by African rhythmic accents and approaches to repetition, had a rhythmic drive that complimented the highly percussive dance styles. While a competent fiddler could play with the variety and energy to carry a dance alone, he was usually accompanied by a banjo. The banjo’s main job was to percussively enhance the tune’s rhythm, using a variety of plucking and strumming techniques to pick out a paired-down version of the fiddle’s melody. (Providing a harmonic accompaniment was not really required. Harmony, as a series of chords that constantly undergirds melody and changes regularly, was not really a component of stringband music.) When another musician joins this duo he generally finds a way to play a version of the fiddle tune on his instrument; or, if he

35 This account is based largely on the research of minstrel and banjo historian Hubie King, who generously shared his unpublished findings in our conversations over the past ten years. Other sources include Hans Nathan, Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962); Dale Cockrell, Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Karen Linn, That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
plays something not suited to carrying a tune, like a ukulele or bass, he assists the banjo in laying out the rhythm.36

The guitar was something of a latecomer to this ensemble. While researcher Hubie King has documented that the guitar was used to play this sort of music as far back as the Civil War, it seems that the instrument was not common among stringbands until much later.37 The guitar was known in the South not for providing dance music, but rather as a respectable parlor instrument played by the middle-class (and those aspiring to the middle-class), much like the piano. Like the piano, it was often used to accompany singing with chordal harmony. But, over time, the guitar became an increasingly common part of the stringband. A crucial turning point was 1906, when Sears, Roebuck dropped the price of the guitar below the price of a banjo in its mail-order catalogue. By the time old-time music made it onto records in the 1920s, guitars were a standard part of the stringband ensemble. A picking technique developed that was considerably different from the approach used in the parlor. In playing parlor guitar, a musician would pick individual strings with the flesh of the fingertip, pulling into the palm. This fingerstyle technique was abandoned in favor of alternating single bass notes with strummed chords, often picked with a plectrum instead of his fingers. Though this bass-strum technique could be used to play melodies (as jazz, bluegrass, and rock guitarists would later do with great virtuosity), and had a range that fell roughly in the same area as the banjo’s, the

36 This account of old-time music is based largely on my experience playing this music and in conversation with musicians in the modern-day revival community dedicated to keeping this music alive. I also draw on articles published in the journals The Old-Time Herald and Old-Time Music.

37 Hubie King, unpublished research.
instrument did not double the melody like most other instruments that could. This is perhaps because the guitar is much quieter than the fiddle and banjo, and single-note playing would have been drowned out. Instead, musicians developed a style that accompanied the ensemble’s melodic workhorses, supplementing the banjo’s percussive rhythm, while exploiting the two strings that fell below the banjo’s range to provide an anchoring bass.

While this style was very effective as part of a stringband ensemble, it was not terribly satisfying on its own. Guitar players may well have gotten bored, having far less to do than banjo players, and there were many models for a more complicated style. Parlor fingerpicking could play both a melody and an accompaniment, while the banjo could provide rhythmic support and play melody at the same time. Maybelle Carter’s innovation was a technique, known as “Carter picking” or the “Carter scratch,” that made it possible to fulfill the guitar’s rhythmic and bass responsibilities while playing the melody at the same time. Building on the banjo’s clawhammer technique, Maybelle picked out the melody on the lower strings with her thumb, while rhythmically strumming the top strings with her fingers.\(^{38}\)

\(^{38}\) Maybelle’s picking style was largely derived from the dominant banjo technique of the day known as “clawhammer” or “frailing,” which had evolved from the method minstrels had learned from African Americans. The banjo, as it had become standardized in the late 1800s, had five strings. Four of these ran the length of the neck, and were tuned low to high. The fifth string began at the fifth fret, about one-quarter to one-third of the way up the neck. While it was tuned to a higher pitch than the rest of the strings, it sat just next to the lowest string—when a musician held it perpendicular to his body in playing position, the fifth string was the topmost. Rather than picking up with the flesh of the finger as parlor guitar players did (and as became widespread among bluegrass players after World War II), frailers struck down on the four full-length strings with the nail of the index (or sometimes middle) finger. This was how melodies were played (and, for that reason, the full-length strings are sometimes called melody strings), and also how banjo players would enhance their sound by striking multiple strings at once or brushing their fingers across the strings. The fifth string served to provide a high-pitched, rhythmic drone, never changing in
Maybelle’s distinctive picking largely defined the Carter sound. On almost three-quarters of the 82-odd sides they recorded for Victor between 1927 and 1932, it is the first thing the listener hears, picking out the tune or a short introduction, announcing the track’s melodic and rhythmic tone. Though in the early years the function of the guitar would vary some—Maybelle occasionally played the guitar lying across her knees and fretting it with a slide Hawaiian style, and once or twice fingerpicked it in an African American ragtime style that she likely learned from Lesley Riddle—by 1932 every song began with her picking out the melody on the bass notes, making the opening instrumental hook a consistent feature of the Carters’ sound. Her guitar playing’s driving energy drew the listener in, and made the actual vocal melody seem familiar before he heard it sung for the first time. Later in the song, part of a verse was always given over to a guitar break, reminding the listener of the tune’s melodic core and the song’s rhythmic foundation.

But as important as Maybelle’s adaptation of the sounds of dance music to the guitar was, she was not playing dance music—she was accompanying the songs assembled out of the wide array of vocal traditions I have described. And it is the mixture of the sounds of the barn dance with those of the church, the vaudeville act, and the parlor that made the Carter family’s music so innovative. Their synthesis is especially

pitch. Unlike the other strings, it was sounded by the flesh of the thumb (instead of the nail of a finger), allowing the string to resonate in a syncopated pattern.

39 Wolfe, liner notes to In the Shadow of Clinch Mountain.
impressive because they hid the seams between the various elements out of which the
forged their sound.

“Aunt Sara”
Immediacy, Voice, and the Phonograph

As important as A.P. and Maybelle’s contributions to the Carter Family sound
were, Sara, who almost always sang lead in the early years, is at the center of the Carters’
success. While she was an extraordinary singer in her own right, the particularly
explosive power that her voice had on record was in part due to the acoustic features of
phonograph technology. The immediacy and warmth of her voice coming out of the horn
of a phonograph did much to break down the barrier between the studio where their
records were recorded and the living rooms where they were listened to. Her voice, which
sounded so unaffected and so close, went a long way to making the Carters’ singing
sound sincere.

If Ralph Peer’s account is to be believed, he recognized the power of Sara’s
singing right away:

As soon as I heard Sarah’s voice,… that was it. You see I’d … done this so many
times, I was trained to watch for the one, one voice…. But on the very first effort,
the very first test record, I recall distinctly noting her voice. I knew that was going
to be wonderful.  

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40 Ralph Peer interviewed by Lillian Borgeson, 1958. Southern Folklife Collection, University of North
Carolina, Chapel Hill.
What made her voice so special? Notice that Peer was impressed not on first hearing Sara sing, but after hearing “the very first test record.” It was not just her vocal style or her timbre that stood out. It was the way her presence translated onto record.

The conventional wisdom on recording vocals, developed largely by engineers recording classical music, held that low female voices reproduced poorly. Altos wound up sounding hollow and dark, lacking the brightness to cut through record hiss and the focus to compete with more piercing instruments. Male tenors, whose tessitura falls roughly a fourth higher than an alto’s—between the A above middle C and the A one octave higher—were considered to have the range that best reproduced on record. Where altos sounded strongest on low notes that reproduced poorly, tenors are at their best on the higher notes that best suited the acoustic properties of the phonograph horn. Sara’s tessitura lay roughly in the tenor zone—G above middle C and the G an octave higher—and since her range was the same as the phonograph’s own, her voice sounded relatively unchanged by the recording and playback process.

Sara’s unpretentious voice showed no sign of alteration by the recording process; her unforced method of vocal production helped as well. Tenors had to expend a great deal of effort to reach their high notes, providing lots of breath support and mixing their head and chest voices. But they sat comfortably within Sara’s chest voice, and she did not

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41 Though internal horns had replaced external ones on up-to-date machines in use by this time, older models with external horns—upon which these records sound best—were still in wide use among customers for hillbilly music.
have to work to hit the pitches.\textsuperscript{42} She placed the song where it felt comfortable, not taxing herself for effect. Remember the formulation of sincerity I invoked when I introduced the concept many pages ago: thanks to her technique and the way it interacted with extant technology, Sara Carter sounded on records as if she was “just singing, not putting on any kind of show.”

Emphasizing the seeming immediacy and unaffectedness of the quality of her recorded voice, I am recalling the meaning of “sincerity” offered by the \textit{OED}, “Freedom from dissimulation or duplicity; honesty, straightforwardness.”\textsuperscript{43} Of course, Sara’s singing was as “performed” as that of an opera singer or a blues shouter—she used the techniques with which she was most comfortable to sing in a particular style. But these techniques minimized the specific vocal sounds and mannerisms that would have signified putting on an act for her audience. Whether or not she actually was, she \textit{sounded} casual, unrehearsed, and unobstructed by recording technology. She sang the way her listeners might have, simply for their own enjoyment, sung the songs themselves.

The illusion that Carter Family recordings gave listeners direct access to Sara’s voice created the perception that her songs were a sincere expression of inner feeling. If she did not sound like she was going to any great lengths to control how she sounded, but instead was “just singing,” it followed that the songs she sang were not the product of calculated

\textsuperscript{42} Compare the sound of Sara’s voice with that of her blues contemporaries, such as Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith, who sang in roughly the same range. When they sing, they make audible the work it takes to get the sounds out (though this energy is largely put into projecting the voice, not taxing its range). Though sincerity was ascribed to this effect as well—the work of singing was mapped onto the power of deep emotion—it was of a very different kind than Sara’s.

marketing or persona management, but rather expressions of the way she actually felt. Because the songs sounded like they came unaffectedly from her mouth, they sounded as if she sang them sincerely from her heart. In the words of Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, she made it possible for listeners to “hear those songs, and think, _That’s just how it was…. They understand._”

Recording technology itself, shaping the social parameters of listening experience, facilitated the Carters’ aura of sincerity. Until the jukebox was invented in 1934, giving recorded music its first strong presence in public life, records were made to be listened to at home. The early country music listening experience, therefore, corresponded most closely to the musical experience modeled by the visiting records: small groups of people sitting around a parlor or on front porch making casual, unpretentious music for their own enjoyment. While many kinds of records traded on the ability to bring exotic, “foreign” non-domestic music into the home—the sounds of military bands or grand opera, for example—hillbilly recordings did precisely the opposite. Their appeal lay in using new recording technology to re-create a totally familiar musical experience, a virtual experience of down-home music-making.

Sara’s performance style and that of her partners conveyed a sense of sincerity in part because their tone conformed to the performance expectations of their audience. The expectations their audience brought to their listening experience were similar to the ones they would have had if the Carters were in fact singing them a song in their living room. Because in a sense that is exactly what the phonograph made it possible for the Carters to

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44 Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, 36.
do—sing a song to their listeners in their living rooms. This lent the Carters’ synthesis of the various musical styles I outlined above a patina of genuineness that disguised the heterogeneity of their musical influences. Though their music was fed by the dozens of musical streams that flowed through southerners’ musical consciousness, it became a single river that coursed out of the Carters’ recordings and into their listeners’ homes via the horn of a phonograph.
Chapter 3
“Talk About Your Trouble”
Masculinity, Agricultural Collapse, and the Blue Yodels of Jimmie Rodgers

If you’ve ever had the blues, you know just how I feel.
—Jimmie Rodgers, “Blue Yodel No. 2,” 1928

Having surveyed in Chapter 2 the various southern traditions that the Carters fused into a single musical style with a circle of resonance that encompassed much of the white South, we can now turn our attention to the place of black music within this white musical space.

This chapter picks up with Jimmie Rodgers where Chapter 2 left him, simulating a visit with the Carter Family on the recording, “Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family in Texas.” Rodgers sings a tune from one of his hit records, which he calls “T for Texas,” to entertain these “visitors” to his Texas homestead. This song was probably the first of Rodgers’s recordings to be reviewed in print, following its initial release under the name “Blue Yodel” in early 1928. The review appeared in Abbe Niles’s column, “Ballads, Songs and Snatches,” published in the literary monthly, The Bookman: A Review of Literature and Life. A Wall Street lawyer, Niles was an unlikely critic to notice Rodgers. But his Bookman column shows that he was ahead of most contemporary music connoisseurs in taking blues and hillbilly records seriously enough to write about them.

1 All the Jimmie Rodgers recordings discussed in this chapter can be found on The Singing Brakeman, Bear Family BCD 15540.
alongside the jazz, Broadway, and Tin Pan Alley tunes that dominated popular music criticism. His comment on “T for Texas,” part of the survey of new releases that was a regular feature of his column, was brief:

Meet also, Jimmy [sic] Rodgers singing “Down on the Mountain” [he means “Away out on the Mountain”] and his engaging, melodious, and bloodthirsty “Blue Yodel”…. wherein he says in part:

If you don’t want me, mama, you sho’ don’t have to stall,
‘Cause I can git mo’ women than a passenger train can haul.
I’m gonna buy me a pistol just as long as I’m tall, Lawd, Lawd,
I’m gonna shoot po’ Thelma, just to see her jump and fall.²

Niles’s comments on Rodgers’s subsequent records were even more brief, editorializing on the records primarily through the headings under which he reviewed them. Niles liked to group records into idiosyncratic categories with such colorful names as “Hot or eccentric jazz,” “For esthetic dancers,” or “Pornograph Records…this is no misprint,” simultaneously acknowledging and parodying the importance of classification in the record industry.³ After discussing what he called “New Records in General

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² Abbe Niles, “Ballads, Songs and Snatches,” The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life 67:5 (July 1928), 566. In his biography of Jimmie Rodgers, Nolan Porterfield takes this review as evidence that Niles was confused about Rodgers’s race. He writes, “one reviewer, none too sure of the singer’s pigmentation, referred to his ‘engaging, melodious, and bloodthirsty ‘Blue Yodel’ ’—for of course everyone knows how violent those blacks are, what with their oarhead pistols and switchblades and pearl-handled razoos [sic].” Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America’s Blue Yodeler (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 124-5. Read in context, however, Niles’s words don’t suggest that Niles was confused—when shifting from discussing a black musician to a white one (or vice versa), he seems always to be careful to indicate the shift, and often follows African American musicians’ names with the parenthetical “(colored).” Porterfield’s invocation of the common stereotype of Niles’s day about “how violent those blacks are” and their carrying razors or pistols picks up on the fact that Niles may have been making some connection between the violence in Rodgers’s song and the “coon” stereotype propagated on the decade’s minstrel stage and in other forms of popular culture (a matter I will discuss later in this chapter). But Porterfield’s rhetoric greatly over-asserts this point. The way Porterfield makes the association between Niles’s words and the “coon” imagery—invoking less-formal language and minstrel dialect—his writing implies that he is paraphrasing Niles’s own words, and obscures Porterfield’s editorializing on Niles’s comments.

“Tangoes,” his September 1928 column turns to categories that more closely resembled those used by the record industry itself. “White Singers” are followed by “The singing Negro.” Rodgers’s fourth release, “Blue Yodel No. 2” earns its very own category: “White man singing black songs.” Two months later, Niles shortens this appellation for Rodgers’s sixth release, “Blue Yodel No. 3,” to simply “White man gone black.”

As these reviews appeared over the course of 1928, Jimmie Rodgers went from being a virtually unknown hillbilly performer to one of the recording industry’s largest-selling superstars in any musical genre. “Blue Yodel” (“T for Texas”) sold hundreds of thousands of copies after its release in February of that year, its sales eventually topping one million. The records that followed had comparable success, matching and even surpassing those of pop stars like Al Jolson, Bing Crosby, and Gene Austin. Ralph Peer’s claim that “[n]o legitimate [mainstream] artist had [Rodgers’s] sales record at the time” does not seem to be an exaggeration. Rodgers’s records, which continued to perform well even into the Depression, were largely responsible for the record industry’s continued investment in hillbilly music. Rodgers is credited with influencing every male hillbilly singer who followed him (which means almost all hillbilly singers, since men dominated the music), providing a model for Gene Autry, Jimmie Davis, Hank Snow,

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5 Porterfield, 123 and 382.

6 Porterfield, 384 and 385.

7 Ralph Peer interviewed by Lillian Borgeson, 1958. Southern Folklife Center, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
Earnest Tubb, Bob Wills, and Bill Monroe, to name just a few. His influence, both
economic and musical, was so profound that he came to be known as the “Father of
Country Music.”

If hillbilly music was explicitly created as part of the segregated marketing
strategy described in Chapter I to sell “white music” to white southerners, it is curious
that the genre’s “father” became famous for songs that made him sound like a “White
man gone black” to a listener as familiar with the music of the day as Abbe Niles.

Rodgers recorded 25 songs along the lines of “Blue Yodel,” accounting for roughly one-
quarter of his total output and forming such a cornerstone of his career that he earned the
nickname “America’s Blue Yodeler.” The Blue Yodeler’s career suggests a real paradox:
Did the Father of Country Music give birth to this white genre with the help of black
music? If so, how stable is the genre’s “whiteness”?

Musical segregation in the American South, like social segregation, had never
meant severing contact—it was not apartheid. The separation between white and black

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8 This question raises issues about white appropriation of black music. Rodgers has been compared to Elvis
Presley, around whom swirls a weighty historical and ethical debate about cross-racial appropriation.
Though important questions, I have been forced to skirt this debate in my discussion of Rodgers, which
focuses on the racialized meanings assigned to his music rather than on the relationship between his
sources and his commercial use of them.

9 This is not to minimize Jim Crow’s brutality, but rather to point out that the social patterns by which it
functioned were quite different from the strict separation of the races that characterized South African
apartheid, which more closely resemble the segregation practiced in northern and western cities like Detroit
and Los Angeles. Compare the South described by Edward L. Ayers in The Promise of the New South: Life
After Reconstruction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making
Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940 (New York: Vintage Books, 1999) with the
Detroit of Thomas J. Segrue’s The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Post-War Detroit
(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). A more evocative comparison may be the South
portrayed by William Faulkner in such books as Light in August (New York: H. Smith and R. Haas, 1932)
or Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Random House, 1936) and the Chicago depicted by Richard Wright in
Native Son (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940).
music, white and black listeners, was never complete. Segregation meant regulating interaction, using the many points of contact between blacks and whites to reinforce racial hierarchy at each meeting. As the record industry segregated music in Jim Crow’s image, cross-racial musical contact was not simply cut off. Rather, its significance changed, allowing it to accommodate whites’ long-standing affinity for black music without undermining musical segregation. Rodgers’s blue yodeling helped make this possible by restructuring the perceived relationship between the white performer of black music and the sentiments to which his music gave voice. Before Rodgers, the dominant paradigm for whites performance of black music encouraged by the commercial music industry came out of the nineteenth-century minstrel tradition. Reams of sheet music, mountains of makeup and trunks full of costumes were marketed to white performers who used black music as part of a masking practice that clearly distanced them from the characters they portrayed. Record buyers’ embrace of Rodgers’ music turned this paradigm on its head. His recorded appropriations of black music did not serve to distance Rodgers from the sentiments he voiced. It signified sincerity, not artifice. To the majority of those within the hillbilly circle of resonance, Rodgers soon stopped sounding like “white man gone black,” as he first did to Abbe Niles. He did not even sound like “a white man sing[ing] black songs”—he sounded like a man singing simply, naturally, about what was on his mind. In his repertoire, African American-associated material did not carry listeners into a distant black musical realm, but rather into his white hillbilly soul.10

10 This is not to claim that blacks were treated as having no inner life—the marketing of race records
The first half of the argument to follow analyzes how the actual musical realization of Rodgers’s blue yodels made him sound sincere rather than grotesque. Rodgers appropriated musical elements that had previously served to make a spectacle of artifice and instead employed them to intensify emotions perceived as sincere. The yodel’s lyrics, to which I turn my attention in the chapter’s second half, further consolidated Rodgers’s authenticity, anchoring the songs in his own biography and the collective life experiences of his listeners.

“I Ain’t Gonna Tell You No Lies”
The Blues, Yodeling, and Sincerity

What, exactly, “sounded black” about Rodgers’s music, and how did the racial associations of these elements become detached from black people? Like the Allen Brothers, whose story opened Part I of this dissertation, Rodgers was steeped in the South’s integrated musical practices. Raised in Meridian, a railroad town in eastern Mississippi, Rodgers had contact with African American musical culture throughout his life. Charles Wolfe suggests he knew singers Ishman Bracey and Tommy Johnson, and that his arsenal of blues verses grew out of the same tradition drawn upon by early black

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sometimes evoked nineteenth-century tropes that emphasized the pathos of black music. Rather, my point is that the sincerity mapped onto Rodgers music meant that the perception that its origins lay within his white subjectivity trumped its musical echoes of music that lay on the other side of the musical colorline.
recording artists like Peetie Wheatstraw, Ma Rainey, and Bo Carter. Guitar player and researcher Steve James has observed that Rodgers borrowed many of his guitar licks from the recordings of Blind Lemon Jefferson, the Texas guitar player whose success led to the recording of several other solo bluesmen. Rodgers appears to have absorbed much of the musical language of the African Americans he knew. This is most evident in his blues repertoire, but also in his approach to song construction—stringing together fragmented verses—and in his vocal trademark, the yodel (about which more below).

But the fact that Rodgers drew on black sources does not alone account for listeners’ ability to hear blackness in the music. The Carter Family, unlike Rodgers, never confused anyone about their racial status despite the fact that they relied heavily on black music and had a long-running collaboration with Leslie Riddle. In fact, the Carter’s black influences could even escape the conscious detection of the man largely responsible for their careers, Ralph Peer. Comparing Rodgers and the Carter Family for interviewer Lillian Borgeson, Peer asserted that Rodgers “used hillbilly, but he also used Negro… He wasn’t confined to this one act,… but [the Carters] were.” He also concurred when Borgeson described what she believed was “a very striking difference between” Rodgers and the Carters. “Rodgers very markedly did use Negro sources,” she muses, but “[t]he Carters seem to be pretty limited in their sources… to their own area, their own people.”

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12 Steve James, personal communication with the author, 2004.

13 Peer, interview.
Clearly, the audibility of “blackness” in Rodgers’s music cannot be explained solely by the musician’s influences. To examine the blue yodels’ racial connotations, it is helpful to first break down ways music’s racialized nature is usually discussed. Such conversations tend to revolve around three distinct, albeit interrelated concepts: origins, ownership, and associations.

1. **Origins.** If we discuss the black origins of the blues, or the white roots of fiddle music, for example, we are concerned with the racial make-up of the musicians who first played the music and the communities in which they lived.

2. **Ownership.** If we discuss the issue of who *owns* the blues or fiddle music, we are concerned with the race of the people who control how these musics are used and, in commercial contexts, make money from them.

3. **Associations.** If we discuss the racial *associations* of these styles, we are concerned with the racialized images the sounds conjure up (when Abbe Niles first heard Rodgers’s blues, for example, he associated the sounds with caricatures of African Americans).

Sometimes, it is true, music originates in a community predominantly of one race (though entirely isolated single-raced communities are rare in the United States), is owned by members of that race, and associated with them, as, for example, the musical repertoire of the banjo might have been before it was taken up by minstrels in the 1830s. But American history is characterized more by the *disconnection* of these three spheres of racialization. Banjo music in the late twentieth century, for example, came to be
associated with and owned by whites, despite its African American origins in the eighteenth and ownership in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

So while both the Carters and Rodgers played music with black origins, the racial associations of their music, clearly, were quite different. The Carters drew on black influences, but they evidently did so in ways that minimized sounds overtly associated with African Americans. Rodgers, on the other hand, used sounds that (to borrow Borgeson’s term) were “markedly” black, whose association with African Americans, at least initially, readily came to listeners’ minds.

Rodgers’s music was “markedly black” in part because he adapted some of the performance traditions of minstrelsy. He used two minstrel musical resources—the blues and yodeling—with inevitable African American associations at the time. Though Rodgers’s music would ultimately move away from the practices of minstrelsy, the raw materials out of which he built his blue yodels had wide currency on the blackface stage. Both the practice of singing the blues and yodeling were quite common in minstrelsy of the late 1910s and early 1920s. Minstrel performers had always incorporated the music popular among African Americans, from the banjo that facilitated minstrelsy’s birth to more recent additions like cakewalks and ragtime. As the blues became increasingly popular among African Americans in the first two decades of the twentieth century, minstrels began to absorb the style into their acts. The earliest copyrighted song with “blues” in its title was “Nigger Blues” (1912), which also became the first blues on

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14 It is true that the Carters did occasionally play blues songs and yodel, but never in as conspicuously as Rodgers. Moreover, they did neither until Rodgers had established himself as a superstar, at which point the racial associations had been overshadowed by their associations with Jimmie Rodgers.
record, cut by blackface singer Lassus White in 1915. Blues became an even more prominent component of minstrel performance after W. C. Handy began publishing songs that made the form accessible to those without direct contact with African Americans. Indeed, Rodgers himself seems to have sung the blues in a minstrel context before he began recording. His first steady job was as a blackface performer in a medicine show, and contemporary accounts suggest that he was combining the blues and yodeling as early as 1923.  

(The account of a promoter who gave Rodgers an early break suggests that Rodgers did not fully work out the blue yodel form until 1928.)

But isn’t a yodel—labeled blue or otherwise—a musical sign of Europe and whiteness? Though popular depictions of yodeling have come to link it with the mountaineers of the Swiss Alps or the cowboys of America’s prairie, the style Rodgers practiced seems to have been firmly anchored in the practices of the minstrel stage and, at the turn of the century, had a fixed association with African Americans. Charles Wolfe notes that by the 1910s, a tradition of blackface singing had coalesced known as “trick singing,” which he describes as “part black-face parody, part exaggeration, part vocal contortion, and part sincere imitation” of African American falsetto singing and hollering practices.

Despite the black associations of his music and his own medicine show roots, Rodgers was not a minstrel; and, very early in his recording career, the minstrel

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15 Porterfield, 49.

16 Porterfield, 109-110.

interpretation (theatrical and artificial) of his sound was almost entirely obscured by hearings that cast his music as sincere and heart-felt. Minstrelsy was largely founded on masking practices, and, as such, had insincerity sewn into its most basic fabric. Using burnt cork to darken their skin, minstrels wore faces that were not their own and walked around in foreign skins. Black music was part and parcel of these cloaking practices, and musical “blackness” was yet another way to distance the performers from their characters. Although they used blackface to deal with issues that were of deep importance, including anxieties about sexuality, race, and class, hiding behind black masks is precisely what made the engagement possible. Speaking through characters obviously not themselves, blackface performers had the freedom to express sentiments not (nominally, at least) their own.18

Rodgers left behind this game of masks. In a gesture that has since become a signature of American popular music, he used sounds associated with African Americans to signify sincerity rather than artifice, truth-telling rather than dissembling. Rodgers’s wife claims Jimmie instructed his early band mates, the Teneva Ramblers, “This kind of stuff oughtn’t to be circus-ed…. It’s got to have pathos. Make folks feel it—like we do, but we gotta have the feelin’ ourselves first.”19 In his blues songs—songs about romantic troubles, rambling, ill-treatment, and, on a couple occasions, about his struggle with


19 Quoted in Porterfield, 75-6. Carrie Rodgers is a notoriously unreliable source whose recollections are often colored by the mythology that surrounds her husband. Even if Jimmie Rodgers did not actually say this to his band mates, however, the quote remains significant because it harmonizes with the way Rodgers has come to be heard, whether or not his wife actually heard him verbalize it as a goal.
tuberculosis—Rodgers was not understood to be hiding behind the mask of black sounds to distance himself from the subject of his performance. The music’s power came from the perception that he was straightforwardly singing about his own troubles. This, at least, is what listeners like Earnest Tubb thought: Rodgers had a “sincerity in his voice that made you believe what he was singing.” Tubb explains,

When … I first heard Jimmie Rodgers’s song “T for Texas,” I felt so bad for the jilted singer who sang “I’m going to shoot poor Thelma” that I immediately started to dislike Thelma, whoever she was, for hurting him like that. He made it true.  

The quickest way to demonstrate how Rodgers’s music scraped off the minstrel mask is by comparing his blue yodels with those of his closest contemporaneous counterparts from the world of blackface minstrelsy. These are the recordings of Emmett Miller, who made his first records in 1928, at almost exactly same time as Rodgers. In fact, their careers overlap in several ways. Before Rodgers came to be known as “America’s Blue Yodeler,” Emmett Miller was billed as “Famous Yodeling Blues Singer.” Both were working in the resorts of the Appalachian city of Asheville, North Carolina, though it seems unlikely that they ever met directly. But certainly Rodgers would have been aware of Miller’s act—the minstrel was one of the most successful of the day—and could quite possibly have tailored his own to capitalize on Miller’s popularity. Nick Tosches has argued laboriously that Rodgers learned his blue yodeling

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20 Quoted in Peterson, 48.

21 Tosches, 70.
style directly from Miller, but the claim seems far-fetched.\textsuperscript{22} In fact, when the two are examined side by side, the \textit{differences} are what stand out. It is precisely those differences that distinguish Miller’s flamboyant pretense and Rodgers’s sincerity.

A pair of publicity photographs visualizes the contrast between these musical personae. Figure 3.1 is a photograph of Emmett Miller taken from a 1931 OKeh record catalogue, while Figure 3.2 is a Victor publicity shot of Jimmie Rodgers from the same period. Miller appears in the typical minstrel blackface. His skin is darkened, either with burnt cork or grease paint; his face is made comically grotesque by the exaggeration of the size of his lips. The makeup is clearly intended to be read as false, a mask separate from the performer who wears it. It accentuates the performer’s ability and willingness to subordinate his own personality to the stereotype he is impersonating.

\textsuperscript{22} Tosches, 75-77, which restates the argument Nick Tosches makes in “Strange Days: Emmett Miller & Jimmie Rodgers in Asheville,” \textit{The Journal of Country Music}, 19:2 (1997): 26-31. Not only does it seem that there was only a three day window when the two were in Asheville at the same time when the \textit{might have} met, this occurred several years after Billy Terrell reports having heard Rodgers combine the blues and yodeling.
Rodgers’s image, however, does precisely the opposite. He appears in the garb of a railroad worker, a costume anchoring his performance persona in his actual biography. (Though he worked on the railroad only briefly, his father had worked the rails and Rodgers collaborated with his record company to play up this aspect of his personal history.) While Miller’s picture suggests that whatever sounds come out of his mouth should be attributed to the mask he wears, Rodgers’s picture implies that his music is the product of his life experience.
The way Miller uses his voice demonstrates his capacity to make his personality disappear into his character. Most of his recordings begin with a brief comedic dialogue framing a song. Both voices come out of Miller’s mouth—he plays both sides of a well-established minstrel routine. Posing questions in the “straight,” natural-sounding voice of a white interlocutor, he responds in the grotesquely-nasal voice of the blackface character, “Sam.” This spoken display of vocal transformation, however, is merely a prelude to the plasticity Miller virtuosically displays when he sings. When he arrives at

24 Reproduced in Peterson, G1.6.
the chorus of “I Ain’t Got Nobody,” for example, he holds the opening syllable, “I,” for five beats, thrice leaping and up and down from the fifth degree of the scale to the tonic, switching between his full voice and his falsetto, in an accelerating, syncopated rhythm, while staying both in tune and on the beat. After releasing this syllable, he walks down from the fifth to the third scale degree in full voice, where he promptly leaps back up to a falsetto tonic, descending again through an arpeggiated scale. And he accomplishes all this in the space of the phrase’s first twelve beats (Example 3.1) displaying both vocal dexterity and a theatrical skill for manipulating timbre.

Example 3.1. Opening phrase of the first chorus of Emmett Miller’s “I Ain’t Got Nobody” (transcribed by the author).

In “Blue Yodel,” by contrast, Jimmie Rodgers’s vocal technique gives listeners the sense that they are hearing the expression of gut emotion, not flashy performance.

Rodgers defers his vocal pyrotechnics until after he rises to the fifth scale degree to whine that “T is for Thelma” and descend back to the tonic. He drags the last vowel of the mournful phrase into his falsetto, propelling it up an octave to begin a descent from

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25 On Emmett Miller, *The Minstrel Man from Georgia*, Sony 66999. The composition of this song seems to be in some dispute. Guthrie T. Meade, Dick Spottswood, and Douglas S. Meade attribute it to two different teams without explaining the confusion: David Young and Charles Warfield (1914) and Rodger Graham, Spencer Williams, and David Peyton (1915). *Country Music Sources: A Bibliography-Discography of Commercially Recorded Traditional Music* (Chapel Hill: Southern Folklife Collection and John Edwards Memorial Forum, 2002), 496.
the third to the tonic, punctuated by leaps down into his full voice in a pattern of parallel sixthths. Placed there, right after the lament reference to the “gal that made a wreck out of me,” the yodel intensifies Rodgers’s expression of heartbreak more than it demonstrate his vocal skill.

Miller’s “I Ain’t Got Nobody,” like Rodgers’s “T for Texas,” is about romantic rejection. “I ain’t got nobody, and nobody has [feelings] for me. That’s why I’m sad and lonely,” Miller explains. But while he purports to sing about his heartbreak, the opening of the record does everything possible to distance Miller the performer from “real” sadness and loneliness. For example, “Sam” tells his straight-voiced interlocutor that he’s “A man what’s in bad shape. To tell you the truth, I just lost my wife.” When the interlocutor sympathetically responds, “It must be hard to lose a wife,” he turns tragedy into comedy with the punch line, “It’s almost impossible.” In contrast, while Rodgers expresses a range of responses to his heartbreak—dejection, rage, cockiness, and indignation—he never makes light of it, never steps “out of character.” Yes, he brags that he can get “more women than a passenger train can haul,” and threatens to “shoot poor Thelma just to see her jump and fall,” but he never actually seems glad to have been cut loose. His performance is not a send-up of heartbreak; ”T for Texas” is presented as a sincere expression of it. To Niles, writing from the Northern urban milieu in which minstrelsy was invented, Rodgers was just another Emmett Miller, a “white man singing black” for fun and profit. But to his Southern listeners, Rodgers was more like a friend in trouble—he was one of them. His yodel was no longer a sound of artifice and difference; it was a cry of pain—one that could resonate with anyone.
“Gonna be a Rounder”
Jimmie Rodgers, Masculinity, and Agricultural Collapse

Talk about your troubles, that’s all I’ve ever known.
Now if I hadn’t of been a man, I would have stayed at home.
—Jimmie Rodgers, “Blue Yodel Number 5,” 1929

Rodgers’s lyrics reveal how his songs address the actual struggles of the white southerners in his music’s circle of resonance. “Thelma” is just one of the many women Jimmie Rodgers blames for his problems in the lyrics of his blue yodels. There is “Lucille,” to whom he complains, “I love you, woman, but I don’t like your low-down ways. You got me in trouble, and now I’m serving days.”26 There is the avaricious “sweet baby,” to whom he protests, “You sure don’t treat me fair… the presents you want would break a multi-millionaire.”27 He even has a “good gal” whom he claims is “trying to make a fool out of me, trying to make me believe I ain’t got that old TB.”28 The rocky relationships that figure so prominently in these songs, however, are not the only ones the blue yodels describe. Rodgers brags that “All of my women love me ‘cause I’m always there on time,” and boasts that he “can get more women than a passenger train can

26 Jimmie Rodgers, “Blue Yodel No. 2.”
27 Jimmie Rodgers, “Blue Yodel No. 11.”
28 Jimmie Rodgers, “TB Blues.”
haul.” His trouble with women has not cooled his ardor for them: “I love the women, and I love ‘em all the same.”

Hearing the 25 blue yodels Rodgers recorded in chronological order, a listener might hear the refrain of “Jimmie Rodgers’s Last Blue Yodel” as an encapsulation of the entire repertoire: “Women make a fool out of me.” Alternately meaning “women take advantage of me” and “I like women too much to control myself around them,” this line seems to distill the blue yodels lyric down to its essence.

On the other hand, it might also sound like an oddly simplistic note on which to end this collection of songs. While affairs of the heart (and the loins) are the touchstone to which they consistently return, the blue yodels also feature many themes only tangentially related. Recorded at the nadir of the two-decade long collapse of the agricultural economy upon which most southerners depended, Rodgers’s songs reflect the varied hardships his listeners experienced everyday — impoverishment, joblessness, dislocation, illness. Troubles with “Thelmas” and “Lucilles” were brought on by a deteriorating economic situation. Working-class men found it increasingly difficult to meet the social expectations placed upon them, straining domestic relationships to the breaking point. Jimmie Rodgers’s blue yodels articulated the anxiety, depression, and frustration of men trying to negotiate this shifting economic and domestic landscape.

While there is no “typical” blue yodel—they range from the despondent “Train Whistle Blues,” to the raunchy “Let Me Be Your Side Track,” to the anomalously

29 Jimmie Rodgers, “Long Tall Mama Blues;” “Blue Yodel [T for Texas].”

30 Jimmie Rodgers, “Jimmie Rodgers’s Last Blue Yodel.”
optimistic “No Hard Times”—the one that perhaps best encompasses the genre’s central motifs is “Blue Yodel No. 6” (1929):

She left me this morning, midnight was turning day.
She left me this morning, the midnight turning day.
I didn’t have no blues until my good gal went away.

I got the blues like midnight, the moon shining bright as a day.
I got the blues like midnight, the moon shines bright as a day.
I wish a tornada would blow my blues away.

Some of these mornings I’m a-gonna leave this town. (It’s killing me, honey.)
One of these mornings I’m sure gonna leave this town.
Because you traveling women really keep a good man down.

When a man’s down and out, you women don’t want him round.
When a man is down, you women don’t want him round.
But when he’s got money he’s the sweetest thing in town.

A woman will follow you right to the jailhouse door.
A woman will follow you right to the jailhouse door.
Then she will tell you, you can’t fuss and fight no more.

Looka here, sweet mama, see what you have done done.
Looka here, sweet mama, see what you have done done.
You made me love you, your regular daddy’s come.

These disjointed verses paint a picture of a fickle woman with unreasonable financial demands who ultimately abandons Rodgers for another man (whom, apparently, she was also taking advantage of). The singer takes no responsibility for his troubles—he blames this woman (“I didn’t have no blues until my good gal want away”), and the only solution he contemplates is wishing for a “tornada [to] blow [his] blues away.” The third verse, which characterizes travel as a way to escape domestic difficulty and as its source, is perhaps the most revealing of the conundrum confronting working-class southern men. Song after song contains verses that offer travel as an easy way out of—even an exciting
alternative to—failing relationships. Rodgers repeatedly tells whichever trouble-making woman is currently plaguing him some version of “You may see me talking, walking down the railroad track… [G]ood gal, you done me wrong—I ain’t never coming back” (“Anniversary Blue Yodel”). Even when times are good, moving on has its allure: “I went to the depot and looked up on the board… It says it’s good times here, but it’s better down the road” (“The Brakeman’s Blues”). Yet no matter how many times Rodgers’s blue yodels sing the virtues of traveling, sentiments like the ones expressed by “Train Whistle Blues” suggest that this these songs put a positive spin on what is, in truth, a hardship.

When a woman gets the blues, she hangs her little head and cries.  
When a woman gets the blues, she hangs her little head and cries.  
But when a man gets the blues, he hangs a train and rides.  

Every time I see that lonesome railroad train,  
Every time I see that lonesome railroad train,  
It makes me wish I was going home again.  

Look a yonder coming, coming down the railroad tracks,  
Look a yonder coming, coming down that railroad track,  
With that black smoke rolling, rolling from the old smoke stack  

I got the blues so bad till the whole round world looks blue.  
I got the blues so bad till the whole round world looks blue.  
I ain’t got a dime, I don’t know what to do.  

I’m weary now, I want to leave this town.  
I’m weary now and I want to leave this town.  
I can’t find a job, I’m tired of hanging round.

This song, perhaps more than any other, helps us imagine Rodgers’s significance to his listeners. Though the 1920s are often remembered as a period of unprecedented prosperity, for the rural people who made up almost 70 percent of the South’s population,
the abrupt collapse of inflated post–WWI agricultural prices at the beginning of the decade decimated their way of life. Though they made up more than two-fifths of the southern workforce, by the end of the decade farmers were receiving only one-fifth of southern income. Many of those who had been lucky enough to acquire land lost it; tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and farm laborers lost their livelihoods, pouring into the cities in search of work. (Rural communities were sometimes completely drained of their population. There were nine Virginia counties, for example, that shrunk to a size smaller than when they were first established over 240 years earlier!) Fortunately for many, the

31 George Brown Tindall reports that the southern population remained 67.9 percent rural, and 42.8 percent of the workforce was employed in agriculture in 1930. (This number, it should be noted, is of the total workforce, including women and children along with adult men.) The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1940 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 111.

32 In 1929, for example, 21.1 percent of per capita income was earned in agriculture, while 43.6 percent was earned from mining, manufacture, and construction. This calculation is based on Edgar Z. Palmer’s figures presented in “Sources and Distribution of Income in the South,” Southern Economic Journal 2:3 (January 1936), 52.

33 Wilson Gee, “Reversing the Tide Towards Tenancy,” Southern Economic Journal 2:1 (May 1935), 7-9. Tindall observes that tenants operated 36.2 percent of all southern farms in 1880, 49.6 percent in 1920, and 55.5 percent in 1930 (125). These numbers, however, only capture a glimmer of how the collapse of southern agriculture was experienced in daily life during the 1920s. First, while it is true that there was an increase in tenancy throughout the decades following Reconstruction, it had slowed dramatically in the first decades of the 20th century. (The tenancy rate was 47 percent in 1900, and held steady at a steady 49.6 percent in both 1910 and 1920 (125).) Second, these statistics are the percentage of farms being worked by tenants, not the total number of farms. Some places, such as Louisiana and Arkansas, were losing farms at the same time the percentage of those farms worked by tenants increased, meaning that even more owners were sliding backwards into dependency than Tindall’s numbers suggest. Third, these figures count the number of farms worked by tenants, not the number of farmers working as tenants. In places where the number of farms decreased and the number of tenants increased, tenants were likely becoming a higher proportion of the farm workforce at a faster rate than the proportion of farms worked by tenants. In the Deep South, where the number of farms and the number of tenants all decreased, suggesting that economic changes were forcing workers
South’s industrial sector was booming, and they could often find work in mines, mills, and factories. The textile industry alone built 221 new mills in the South in 1921, 480 in 1922, and 469 in the first nine months of 1923. By 1931 the South had more looms at work than any other part of the country, including the textile industry’s historic base in the Northeast. But taking a factory job came at a price—it required workers to surrender their independence and submit to a supervisor’s control; it also required turning over responsibility for their family to company management.

Southern men were confronted not only by real economic hardship, but a fundamental challenge to their masculinity. The independent farmer had long been venerated as the bedrock of the southern economy. The yeoman was a white masculine ideal, embodying the virtues of independence, self-sufficiency, and stewardship that distinguished white men from the women and African Americans who were cast as subservient and dependent. The collapse of the farm economy forced working-class men to choose between allowing their families to slide into poverty on the farm or leaving home for emasculating factory work. As economic realities placed the yeoman ideal increasingly out of reach, Jimmie Rodgers’s blue yodels acknowledged the disappointment and frustration that came from failing to live up to it. But they also offered white men an alternative (even antithetical) masculinity built on rambling, carousing, and competition.

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34 Tindall 84-93.
The political language used to describe the condition of white workers of the day makes clear that their masculinity was widely felt to be in jeopardy as their conditions deteriorated. Voicing his exasperation with white tenant farmers who continued to support Democratic politicians as their lot declined, Socialist Henry M. Tichnor wondered how they could “work like galley slaves year in and year out[?]… How under the sun can a … real man … look his wife and children in the face and vote for this thing to continue?”

The agricultural life, lamented Farmers’ Union President Charles S. Barett, no longer guaranteed the independence it had long symbolized. Instead, farmers were “telling their children that he [sic] is a slave to the distributor of his products.”

35 Henry M. Tichenor, quoted in Foley, 100.

In his discussion of the rhetoric of early republicanism, labor historian David Roediger notes that “in a society in which blackness and servility were so thoroughly intertwined… assertions of white freedom could not be raceless.” The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, revised edition (London: Verso, 1999), 49. Neil Foley’s study of the white farmers in Texas during this period reveals how they became increasingly poor and dependent on land-owners, they began to be subjected to many of the same manipulation and attitudes that had long been suffered by their black counterparts. They were trapped by debt controlled by dishonest land owners, store keepers, and managers who were supported by a biased court system. This increasingly came to be explained with the same racial logic that justified the permanent tenancy in which most African American labored as appropriate to their natural abilities. Whites who could not climb out of tenancy, many asserted, were of unfit stock to own a farm. A Texas landowner, for example, told the Commission on Industrial Relations that “Every fool that follows a plow is not a farmer. He is just an agricultural clerk” (74). Another observer spelled out his bias more fully: white tenants were “ignorant and lazy and seem to do as little work as possible to get along…. None of them ever accumulates anything. They move frequently and are generally very unreliable, rebellious, resentful. suspicious, and unthrifty” (70). The characteristics of “white trash”—who, though nominally white, possessed characteristics that revealed them to be of inferior racial stock—were to blame for their inferior economic status, not an economic system that was stacked against them. Poor whites in the South, Foley writes, were “losing whiteness and the status and privileges that whiteness bestowed. Poor whites in the cotton South came not only to be seen as a social problem but also to be located in the racial hierarchy as the “trash” of whiteness. Successful whites…began to racialize poor whites as the “scrubs and runts of white civilization” (6).

36 Quoted in Tindall, 125-126.
Historian Joel Williamson traces how factory life reduced white laborers who sought work in the booming industrial sector to the servitude and dependency that had been considered to be reserved for African Americans:

The great house of the [factory] owner-superintendent was like the manor house of the planter, and the company store was like the plantation commissary where labor drew its allowances…. Near the mill … were the look-alike company streets filled with look-alike company houses reminiscent of the ‘nigger street’ and its cabins on the old plantation…. [T]here were invariably the company ministers … for the company churches (Preaching what: faithful labor, familial morality, glory in the later life?), company teachers in company schools (Teaching what: faithful labor, personal morality, room at the top?), company police keeping company order…. Mayors, businessmen, teachers, preachers, doctors, lawyers all made their obeisances to the lords of the loom, just as they had in the past paid their respects to the masters of the slaves.\(^\text{37}\)

An industrial worker not only did not own his means of making a living, he did not own his house (usually living in company housing) nor did he run his community (which was under the company’s close scrutiny and paternalistic stewardship). He also was no longer his family’s sole provider—his wife and children worked alongside him. The entire family was dependent on its employer for their welfare. Southern women were entering the workforce at rapid pace, closing the gap with the rest of the country.\(^\text{38}\) This was especially true in cotton mills, the region’s chief industrial employer. “The cotton industry is a family industry,” wrote one observer, depending on women and children for labor. One out of four women in South Carolina (the state with the nation’s highest rate

\(^{37}\) Quoted in Williamson, 435-436.

of female employment in 1930) worked in a textile mill—half of these were helping to support families.\textsuperscript{39}

Hardship for farmers was, of course, far from unknown in the South before the 1920s. It had long been a debt-plagued way of life that demanded hard work for uncertain returns. But the “agricultural ladder,” which imagined a path by which a worker could ascend from the industry’s lowest rung to its highest, cast the yeoman ideal as something to which any white man could reasonably aspire. Economist George S. Wehrwein described this concept in an 1927 article in \textit{The Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics}:

\begin{quote}
In agriculture we distinguish the hired man [who works for a fixed wage], the cropper [who works for a share of the crop] and the tenant [who rents the land he works], the encumbered owner [who carries a mortgage], the “free” owner, and finally the retired farmer who is often a landlord. As a general rule, these classes are not fixed, for men move freely from one to another. In fact, there is a general upward movement from one stage to another with land ownership as a goal. This is called the “agricultural ladder,” and is the basis of the American system of land tenure.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

If federal studies and academic reports at all reflect the actual condition of farm life, this was a plausible model for white men before the 1920s. The U.S. Census Bureau’s Benjamin Horace Hibbard wrote in 1914:

\begin{quote}
Tenancy has… frequently been called a stepping stone to ownership on the ground that a young man starting as a farmer rents land for a few years, and later buys. That this is true to a great degree cannot be doubted since it has been shown by the census statistics that farmers in the lower age groups are more largely tenants than owners, while in the higher age groups tenants become few, and
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\textsuperscript{40} George S. Wehrwein, “The Institute’s Study of Land Tenure,” \textit{The Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics} 3:3 (August 1927), 289.
owners many…. With the possible exception of the negroes of the South there is no tenant class of farmers. That is to say, there are no considerable numbers of farmers who look upon themselves, or who may properly looked upon, as probably life-long tenants.

Indeed, the cotton boom that immediately followed World War I (cotton was trading at 40 cents a bale through July of 1920) may have made the agricultural ladder easier to climb than ever. When cotton lost two-thirds of its value in the last six months of 1920 (closing the year at 13.5 cents a bale) the agricultural ladder collapsed with it.\(^{41}\) The President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy saw a much less rosy picture by the mid-’30s than the Census Bureau saw two decades earlier:

Hundreds of thousands of farm families have attained only a semblance of ownership. Especially in times of depression they have witnessed their hard-won equities steadily decline and finally disappear. After years of effort to retain their foothold as farm owners, they find themselves poorer for the struggle. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of tenant farmers, in spite of years of scrimping, have not been able to accumulate enough to make a first payment on a farm of their own. And a further large segment of the farm population has never reached a stage of economic advancement where its members could even aspire to farm ownership.\(^{42}\)

\(^{41}\) Tindall, 111-112. If market prices were not bad enough, cotton farmers were simultaneously afflicted by a plague of biblical proportions, the boll weevil. The bug, which had migrated north from Mexico sometime in the late nineteenth century, had extended its reach across the cotton belt, feeding on the bolls in which cotton grows. Tindall illustrates destruction wrought by the weevil with the example of Georgia’s Green County, which ginned 20,030 bales of cotton in 1919, 13,414 in 1920, 1,487 in 1921, and a meager 333 in 1922, a 98 percent decline in only 4 years! The pest did its worst damage in 1921, when it destroyed one-third of the cotton crop (120).

\(^{42}\) Quoted in Black and Allen, 393-394.
“To the vast majority,” Arthur Raper wrote in 1936, “the urge for home ownership is gone.” Rather than believing they could climb the agricultural ladder, those on its bottom rungs had become “fatalists of the first order.”

Expressed in terms of male/female relations, songs like “Blue Yodel No. 12” articulated the frustration of men who were unable to head a household effectively in the prevailing economic environment:

Sorrow struck me one morning at the break of day.  
Sorrow struck me one morning at the break of day.  
Cause a mean old man come and took my gal away.

When I woke up there was nothing to do but rave.  
When I woke up there was nothing I could do but rave.  
I know she didn’t want me, all she wanted was a slave….

I wish her good luck everywhere she roams.  
I wish her good luck everywhere that she may roam.  
I don’t know why she left but I know she’s never coming home.

Honey, before I met you I had a new pair of shoes  
Before I met you, woman, I had a brand new pair of shoes.  
Take a look at me now, I’ve got those barefooted blues.

The singer is first emasculated by demands from his woman that he considers unreasonable, which is compounded when she is stolen by another man. The final verse, however, frames these failures of his manhood in economic terms. It suggests that this relationship was an unaffordable financial burden, and elides the sacrifice of independence to an employer with becoming a “slave” to a woman’s financial requirements.

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43 Quoted in Tindall, 126.
Though sometimes addressed to a woman who has done him wrong, the lyrics of Rodgers yodels sound as if he is singing almost exclusively for the benefit of his male listeners. They have the quality of a man describing his troubled romantic life to a bunch of male friends, attempting to remasculinize himself even as he wallows in defeat. In the first “Blue Yodel,” for example, Rodgers sings:

T for Texas, T for Tennessee.
T for Texas, T for Tennessee.
T for Thelma, that gal that made a wreck out of me.

If you don’t want me mama, you sure don’t have to stall. (Lord, lord.)
If you don’t want me mama, you sure don’t have to stall.
Cause I can get more women then a passenger train can haul.

I’m gonna buy me a pistol just as long as I’m tall. (Lord, lord.)
I’m gonna buy me a pistol just as long as I’m tall.
I’m gonna shoot poor Thelma just to see her jump and fall.

I’m going where the water drinks like cherry wine. (Sing ‘em, boy, sing ‘em.)
Lord, I’m going where the water drinks like cherry wine.
Cause the Georgia water tastes like turpentine.

Gonna buy me a shotgun with a great long shiny bell.
Gonna buy me a shotgun with a great long shiny bell.
I’m gonna shoot that rounder that stole away my gal.

Rather drink muddy water, sleep in a hollow log.
Rather drink muddy water and sleep in a hollow log
Than to be in Atlanta, treated like a dirty dog.

Though he has been cuckolded, his account seems design to restore his masculine standing in the eyes of other men. Rodgers boasts of his sexual prowess (“I can get more women than a passenger train can haul”); he pledges violent revenge to both “Thelma” and the “rounder who stole away [his] gal”; and he swears that he’d rather quit his home than be mistreated in it.
Such sentiments turn the yeoman ideal on its head; in the blue yodels, domestic failures testify to the singer’s masculinity, not his lack of it. In subsequent songs, he brags about his lack of commitment to a stable home life. “If your house catch a-fire, th’ain’t no water round,” he sings, “Just put my trunk out the winda, let the house burn on down” (“The Brakeman’s Blues”). “Blue Yodel No. 5” implies this rootlessness is the actual source of his masculinity. “[I]f I hadn’t of been a man,” Rodgers sings, “I would have stayed at home.”

This reinterpretation of domestic instability succeeds in large part because it draws upon a “rounder’s” masculinity built on competition with other men rather than the successful stable home, with the dependent woman and children essential for the yeoman’s self-respect. In his invaluable study of southern recreation, Ted Ownby describes an alternate discourse of masculinity—“ever in conflict” with traditions that emphasized a stable home life—upon which the blue yodels drew. Ownby writes of “southern honor,” a “complex of masculine beliefs and attitudes [that] demanded self-assertiveness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness” in interactions between men. Activities such as drinking, fighting, gambling, and hunting provided opportunities for men to compete with one another. Though accruing honor through victory was important, entering into competition is what actually made someone manly. “Honor came from winning; momentary shame came from losing; identity with the male community came from participating in the competition.”

44 Ted Ownby, Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 12-13. Ownby is interested in the conflict between evangelical domestic ideals and “southern honor.” I invoke his ideas in this conversation because honor-
The frustration of failed relationships and the occasional expression of heartbreak are situated within an underlying current of masculine competition. Rodgers’s songs sometimes put him in direct conflict with other men, as the first “Blue Yodel” does, threatening the “rounder who stole away [his] gal.” More often than not, however, this competition is implied rather than stated outright. The blue yodels brag about his skill as a railroader, popularity with the ladies, a fondness for drink, and rowdiness as a carouser. When the blue yodels lament his failings—bested by another man in competition for a woman, for example—they still demonstrate his presence in an economy of masculinity built on competition.

Rodgers’s 1932 recording, “Rock all Our Babies to Sleep,” provides a foil for the blue yodels that illuminates their masculinizing impact. Like several of the blue yodels, Rodgers sings this song as a man whose woman is unfaithful. “My wife … often causes me a lot of grief,” he explains. “She’s off from her home, she leaves me alone, to rock all our babies to sleep.” She is even cheating on him.

    Just the other night, while out for a walk,
    I happened to stroll down the street.
    And to my surprise, I saw with my eyes,
    My wife with a man of six feet.

When he confronts her,

    She says “it’s no harm, don’t raise no alarm,
    Don’t raise any fuss on the street.”
    She tickled my chin, told me to go in,
    And rock all our babies to sleep.

based masculinity, which emphasized behavior considered incompatible with domestic stability, also conflicts with yeomanry’s masculine models.
This exchange closes the song, suggesting that the singer meekly complies with her demands. The singer is ultimately unmanned by his refusal to challenge his rival. The singer confronts his wife, not her boyfriend. His fatherly devotion to his children is not a mark of masculine virtue. His willingness to “rock all [his] babies to sleep” consigns him to the feminine sphere. He is a pathetic figure who has absented himself from masculine competition by retreating to the nursery.

Competitive masculinity is now audible as musical style. Unlike the deflating “Rock all Our Babies to Sleep”—a sluggish waltz with a square parlor accompaniment and flat vocal delivery—the blue yodels are characterized by a lusty rambunctiousness. Rodgers sings high in his register, playfully infusing the verses with falsetto ornaments; his voice energetically dives into the yodels between verses; and his peppy accompaniments feature syncopated guitar ornamentation.

I want to wrap up this chapter by returning to the “blackness” of these blue yodels, because their sincere incorporation into the hillbilly circle of resonance allowed white men, their own yeoman identity under attack, access to a fantasized competitive black masculinity to bolster it. From the earliest days of blackface minstrelsy, argues minstrel historian Eric Lott, public performance had provided a way for white men to “inherit the cool, virility, humility, abandon, or gaité de Coeur that were the prime components of black manhood.” Citing several examples from various historical periods when white men have romanticized black men as a masculine ideal, Lott suggests that “racialized images of masculinity” have become “so much a part of most American white men’s equipment for living that they remain entirely unaware” of their reliance upon
them. Conveniently, the elements of blackness white men found attractive were those that gave men the advantage in the rowdy competitions that affiliated men with the masculine community. Black men were thought to be more violent, sexually rapacious, bigger drinkers, hearty eaters, and so on. Attraction to black men as bearers of an idealized manhood was always a source of great ambivalence, however. White male envy of the superior masculinity of social inferiors’ contradicted the cultural hierarchy of white power. The white male claim to superiority relied upon the assertion that he was both more powerful and more responsible—in short, more masculine—than a black man.

Undoubtedly, Rodgers blue yodels made complex use of this enduring cultural constellation—a full investigation of its psychological and social implications in this context would require yet another chapter. I want to close by suggesting how such an investigation might conclude. The black associations that continued to cling to the blue yodels made it possible for white men to affiliate themselves with the elements of black masculinity most important to bolster white men’s manhood in their competitions with one another. At the same time, Rodgers’ success in performing music construed as arising within his subjectivity removed much of the ambivalence that complicated white men’s idealization of black masculinity. Rodgers’s blue yodels presented a white man who did not require a black mask to be a virile rambler—the Blue Yodeler had internalized the masculinizing features of blackness and could offer them as his own.

Ultimately, the blue yodeler was a transitional image of hillbilly masculinity. The year after Rodgers’s death, his most famous acolyte, Gene Autry, cast aside the raunchy

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blue yodels he had recorded in his early years to become a wholesome cowboy. Cowboy masculinity went one step further towards distancing a white masculinity from black men—cowboys were defined against Native Americans who lived outside white civilization, not the African Americans who were subservient within it. But by distancing the black musical signifiers of masculinity from the black men with whom they had been previously inextricably linked, Rodgers helped make it possible for hillbilly music to consolidate itself as a distinct site for white southern masculinity.
PART II

Country Music’s Enduring Whiteness and the Southernization of America at the 1959-1974
Grand Ole Opry comedienne Minnie Pearl, along with singer Loretta Lynn, presented the Country Music Association’s Male Vocalist of the Year Award in 1971. The award went to Charley Pride, the first African American to make it as a country superstar. Pride would also win the CMA’s top honor, the Entertainer of the Year Award, later that evening. The audience enthusiastically applauded Pride’s unprecedented accomplishment—the video of the ceremony shows Minnie Pearl barely able to contain herself. (The following year’s Country Music Awards was similarly historic. Loretta Lynn, one of country’s most assertive female voices, became the first woman to be named Entertainer of the Year.) The face of country music was changing.

Or was it? The decade’s first Entertainer of the Year was Merle Haggard, who swept the 1970 Country Music Awards on the strength of his “Okie from Muskogee.” Though the song made no mention of race, it was quickly adopted as a conservative anthem creating the impression that Haggard was a “racist cracker spewing out Johnny Reb songs for the segs.”¹ But Americans with only a passing familiarity with country music could perhaps be forgiven for this misimpression of Haggard. Country had become politicized in the late 1960s and early 1970s in a way that was decidedly hostile to the Civil Rights Movement, Women’s Liberation, and others of the decades’ progressive

¹ John Grissim, “I’m Still Not Sure It Wasn’t Planned,” *Rolling Stone*, May 28, 1970. Grissim’s piece refutes the perception that Haggard was a segregationist—the fact that he felt the need to do so reveals the presence of a racial interpretation of “Okie from Muskogee.” Grissim’s full quote reads, “Okie not withstanding, Haggard is not a racist cracker spewing out Johnny Reb songs for the segs.”
social movements. The segregationist icon Alabama Governor George Wallace became the first presidential candidate to campaign using country music as he traveled the U.S. fueling the conservative “backlash.” Minnie Pearl, so overjoyed at Charley Pride’s crossing the country color line, was the first of the many Nashville stars who would make appearances at Wallace rallies (she helped kick off his 1958 run for governor). The politician who conservative voters ultimately put in the White House, Richard Nixon, sought to endear himself to the country listeners who had embraced “Okie.” Nixon invited Haggard to perform at the White House, declared October of 1970 as “Country Music Month,” and visited the Grand Ole Opry as part of a blossoming courtship between the President and Music City.

Chapters 4 and 5 take 1970’s and 1971’s Entertainers of the Year as their starting points to examine country music at the dawn of the modern conservative movement. Chapter 4, “ ‘Because You’re Mine, I Walk the [Color] Line,’ ” looks at the musical reasons why Charlie Pride’s integration into country music left the genre’s whiteness intact. Though he overcame the racial essentialism that cast him as an outsider to the music, his insistence that he (and his music) was in no way different than his white peers kept the door to country music largely shut to other African Americans. (As one contemporary journalist wrote, “Pride’s blackness is a pigment of the imagination—his style is pure country.”) Chapter 4 also looks at how Ray Charles—whose highly-

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acclaimed 1962’s and 1963’s *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* volumes 1 and 2 were also heralded as the beginning of country’s integration—took on country music by insisting that genres could not contain him. This stance allowed him to appropriate country music but prevented him from changing the genre’s complexion.

Chapter 5, “The Whole United States is Southern,” focuses on “Okie from Muskogee” and country music’s politicization in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As southern attitudes—opposition to federal power, resistance to social change, and defiant pride in old-fashionedness—became central to national politics, the South’s most important cultural export, country music, offered a home to consumers who craved popular culture that represented them. The music helped draw a “geography of values” that allowed conservatism to lay claim to moral authority rooted in a region constructed as a preserve of “traditional,” “American” values.
Chapter 4
“Because You’re Mine, I Walk the [Color] Line”
Charley Pride, Ray Charles, and the Enduring Whiteness of Country Music

A Negro Hillbilly??? Forget it, Mac, it’ll never happen!
— Country Song Roundup, Winter, 1967

No one ever … said “Hey” and the n-word, or nothing like “Get off the stage” or “What do you think you’re doing [singing country music]?” I’ve never had catcalls and name calling, not one time…. If you ask why, well, maybe when I open my mouth … I AM a country singer.
—Charley Pride¹

I’m not a country singer—I’m a singer who can sing country music. —Ray Charles²

Two figures pop up again and again in reflections on the relationship between African Americans and country music after World War II: Charley Pride and Ray Charles. Charley Pride became an unlikely Nashville recording star in the late 1960s, a fixture on the country charts for fifteen years and the first African American to win the Country Music Association’s highest honor, the Entertainer of the Year Award. Yet while many regarded Pride as an integrationist pioneer whose tremendous success blazed a path for others to follow, the singer remains, almost a quarter-century after his career began to wane in the early 1980s, the only black superstar country music ever produced. Ray Charles earned a place in this discussion largely by recording two LPs in the early 1960s,

¹ Quoted in the Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel (Florida), June 5, 1998. Many of the newspaper articles concerning Charley Pride cited in this chapter were found in the Charley Pride Microfiche of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

² Ray Charles interviewed by Nick Spitzer, American Routes radiobroadcast, June 29, 2005.
Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music and its sequel, Modern Sounds … Volume Two. This genre-smashing pair completed Charles’s ascension to the stratosphere of the pop music universe from his start in the separate but unequal musical world of rhythm and blues. Released by one of the nation’s highest-profile black musicians at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, these albums were first greeted as works that had the potential to bring down the “whites only” sign over the country field. But this optimism (and Charles’s subsequent country recordings) notwithstanding, country and R&B continued to live separate lives. Like relatives from estranged branches of a family tree, members of the R&B clan sometimes raised eyebrows by spending time with their country cousins, but the rift that divides them remains to this day.

This chapter is an effort to shed some light on why neither Charlie Pride nor Ray Charles brought down country’s color barrier. No one factor, of course, accounted for the failure of the music industry to make fundamental changes in response to these two extraordinary musicians. Much of the explanation undoubtedly lies in marketing and distribution factors that had little to do with the sounds of the music. But the musical strategies Pride and Charles pursued also had their limitations. My project is to understand what those limitations were. Pride always insisted that he sang country music because it was something he sincerely loved, and used his upbeat musical persona to avoid linking his achievements to its integrationist implications. He also spent so much of his career refuting the suspicion that he was “not really a country singer” by musically placing himself within the traditional (white) boundaries of the genre. The same strategy that made it possible for him to succeed made it impossible for him to undermine generic
segregation in any real way. It opened a door for Charley Pride, not one that others could use after him.³

While Pride’s need to be accepted within country music blunted his impact, Charles’s rejection of genre was so radical that it did little to change the lives of those who continued to accept generic boundaries. Charles’s experiments with country music in 1962 and 1963 are a profound critique of musical segregation—but critiques leveled from so far outside the genre that they are not acts of generic integration in and of themselves. Arranged for the big bands and string sections associated with pop musicians like Frank Sinatra, not reigning country stars like Buck Owens, the Nashville-composed selections on Modern Sounds are, in fact, neither country nor R&B. These experimentalist albums open a window on country music, not a door: Charles says a great deal about country music and its racial restrictions, but makes no real effort to create a lasting black presence inside a genre whose boundaries he consistently refuses to recognize.

My examination hinges on these musicians’ quite different understanding of the relationship among racial essentialism, sincerity of expression, and conventional boundaries of genre. Responding to the perception that he was putting on an act, Pride constantly felt the need to assert that his music reflected his sincere love of country music and his genuine emotions.⁴ Pride helped audiences overcome the dissonance they

³ This is not to say that there were not other black country singers that followed the path Pride blazed—most notably, O. B. McClinton, Stoney Edwards, and Ruby Falls. But none of these musicians ever achieved a level of success approaching Pride’s, and they remain outside the accepted canon of country greats.

⁴ For example, after his producer, Jack Johnson, heard Pride sing country songs for the first time, he thought he sang well but wanted to hear him sing one in his “natural voice.” Charley Pride with Jim Henderson, The Charley Pride Story (New York: W. Morrow, 1994), 135.
experienced between his black skin and “white” voice by convincing them that his songs had their origins in his heart. Rejecting racial essentialism, he ascribed to a different kind of essentialism. Though his skin color may not create an inevitable affinity with a particular genre, his subjectivity does: he belongs singing country music because that is where his soul finds its natural expression. Though Ray Charles also rejects that his race dictates what kind of music he plays, he also rejects the possibility of a one-to-one “fit” between subjectivity, sincere expression, and genre. Charles’s music asserted that personal and musical experiences were more complicated than genre boundaries allow. By limiting the palette to which musicians had access, genre impeded their self-expression. Charles believed that his pursuit of musical expression required that he violate the conventions of genre. Pride, on the one hand, chose to cross the generic color line as an individual by subscribing to country’s fixed conventions as a musician. Charles, on the other, refused to respect boundaries between genres as a musician, thereby transcending restrictions imposed upon him as a black individual.

Neither approach provided a strategy easily adopted by others to disrupt country’s whiteness. Country music was not white simply because bookers, talent scouts, and promoters refused to hire black musicians—there were hardly large numbers of black country singers banging on the gates of Nashville, though there were definitely black country listeners. Successful integration meant not just black faces in country places, but actually opening up country music to representations of the experiences of African Americans. Pride was unwilling (or unable) to even acknowledge that the sounds of
country music might need to change to broaden its circle of resonance to include African Americans. Instead, he held himself up as living proof that “Country music … can fit anybody in any part of the land … because anybody can relate to it.” Charles’s strategy, on the other hand, left country music’s whiteness intact by placing his explorations outside any fixed notion of genre. He provided an example of how black musicians could import country music into their repertoires—even a model for black musicians to appear unexpectedly in contexts that looked and sounded a lot like “country”—but his model left black musicians outside the social and cultural boundaries of country music looking in.

“There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me”
Joy, Belonging, and the Music of Charley Pride

I love to travel. I love to sing. I love to make people happy. That’s why I do what I’m doing…. [Country music]’s what my ears chose to like. I didn’t deny myself enjoyment because it was unique…. Country music is … American music to be enjoyed by everyone.

—Charley Pride, 1973

I realize this is a little unique, me coming out here on a country music show wearing this permanent tan.

—Charley Pride, 1966

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7 Pride and Henderson, 12.
Still at the height of his popularity when he released his tribute album to Hank Williams in 1980, Charley Pride was long past having to prove his country credibility. The very nature of There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me, however, makes it a statement on Pride’s place in the country field. The chorus of the album’s title song, the only newly-composed tune on the LP, seems to recognize that by framing the album as proof for the argument Pride had used to justify himself throughout his career. “Music has no boundary when it comes from the heart,” Pride sings, adding, “Where my music comes from, Hank, you play the leading part.”

This monument to the figure one reviewer calls “the Holy Ghost of Country Music” is a useful starting place to examine how Pride navigated the challenges he faced as the first black superstar of country music. As he lays claim to Hank Williams’s legacy by reinterpreting his music, Pride’s own musical persona is thrown into relief. Where Williams exudes vulnerability, Pride projects confidence; where Williams voices despair, Pride smiles through the tears; where Williams wallows alone in sorrow, Pride’s misery loves company.

The cornerstone of Pride’s strategy is to sound … happy. The sounds of joy, optimism, and contentment became the hallmark of Pride’s musical style early in his career. Answering audiences’ suspicion that he was driven by a (presumably hostile) integrationist agenda, Pride’s genial take on country music convinced listeners that he was just singing the music he uncomplicatedly loved. Juxtaposed against Williams’s

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Charley Pride, “There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me,” There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me, RCA 3548.

nasal singing, a fragile and despairing sound, Pride’s robust chest voice sounds particularly confident and satisfied.

Since he began his career at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, one of Pride’s greatest challenges was combating the perception that he was a civil rights activist pursuing a country career in order to strike a blow for integration. Pride began down the path to country stardom at a time when the images flowing out of the South—especially his native Mississippi—were growing increasingly ugly. He first began performing in Montana bars in 1963; he got his introduction to Nashville in 1964; and he made his first record in 1965. In this climate, white skepticism about his intentions almost quashed his entrée into the field. When introduced to the young singer, Red Foley—the first scion of the Nashville establishment to give Pride a hearing—warily asked, “Is this something pertaining to civil rights?” Pride only got to sing for him after inviting himself backstage during a concert Foley was performing with Red Sovine and breaking into song.¹⁰ Pride had to overcome similar trepidations from bookers, such as Chicago’s Sammy See, who only booked Pride after being reassured that the performer “had no interest in being party to a racial incident.”¹¹

The anecdote with which Pride opens his autobiography highlights the pressure America’s racial tensions placed on his career. The customary publicity photos had not accompanied Pride’s first several releases so that his skin color would not prevent them from getting radio play. When Pride’s manager, Jack Johnson, decided the time had come

¹⁰ Pride and Henderson, 118-119.

¹¹ Pride and Henderson, 152.
for the singer to stop concealing his race. Johnson arranged Pride’s first major public appearance outside of the Montana region where he had cut his teeth, a country revue before a Detroit audience made up largely of southern migrants. This performance took place in late 1966, just months before the city went up in the flames of one of the country’s worst race riots. As Pride explains in his autobiography, he was starting out when the country was “rife with civil rights sit-ins, demonstrations, and protest marches, and in little mood for tolerance.”12

An account published in the fan magazine Country Song Roundup (CSR) of an appearance Pride made shortly after he “came out of the closet” in Detroit reveals that Pride hit on the strategy of displaying contentment and enthusiasm to assuage audience anxiety early in his career.13 On January 7, 1967, Charley Pride became the first African

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12 Pride and Henderson, 12.

13 “Charlie [sic] Pride says, “I just gotta talk to ‘em,” Country Song Roundup, December, 1967. This extraordinary text merits being reproduced in its entirety, but in order not to interrupt the flow of my argument, I offer it here:

The night of Jan. 7, 1967, was just another Saturday night to most of the people who walked from Nashville’s Opry Alley into the two fortress-like doors leading to the backstage area of the world’s most famous Country Music Show [sic]. Some of the these people like Sam and Kirk McGee, Claude Lampley, and Roy Acuff had been through those doors so often that it was something of a routine.

However, on this particular night, history in the world of Country Music was to be made in front of one of the Show’s biggest and most enthusiastic winter season crowds. In the dressing room that had witnessed thousands of Bill Monroe-led jam sessions, a young singer was rehearsing with the lead musicians for his first time appearance on the Opry; the singer’s name was Charley Pride.

The Mississippi-born singer had aroused nationwide attention as the first Negro to be signed to a major recording contract in the Country Music field, and the action of his RCA Victor release had added to this attention. His latest single, “I Know One,” is a “top 10” tune and…”Just Between You and Me” earned a Grammy Award nomination last year.

“Snakes Crawl at Night” had been satisfactorily rehearsed. Several of his friends, including his two co-managers, Jack Johnson and Jack Clement, sensed his nervousness. He was to be introduced by Earnest Tubb, one of his life-long idols, and he was wondering how to best handle his part of the show.
American singer to appear on the Grand Ole Opry.\textsuperscript{14} After describing the historical significance of Pride’s appearance on country music’s flagship broadcast, CSR focuses in on the nervous singer. In this account, Pride’s anxiety primarily stems from his concerns about how to manage the racial politics of his appearance:

\begin{quote}
[Pride] was to be introduced by Earnest Tubb, one of his life-long idols, and he was wondering how to best handle his part of the show.

Junior Huskey remembered the performance Charley gave last fall during the WSM Birthday Celebration at the RCA Victor Breakfast Show, and the short statement he made before singing, about being interested only in “standing for Country Music.” The advice Junior gave brought a look of relief to his face: “Charley, if Earnest introduces your song, just go on out and stop the musicians till you have a chance to say something if you want to….”
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Charley quickly indicated that that had been why he had been nervous as replied with a grin, “Great, ’cause I don’t think I can just walk out there and start singing—I gotta talk to ’em.”

As the various acts that posted outside the dressing room door went through the paces, it became time for the first Negro singer ever to appear on the Grand Ole Opry. The sincerity of Earnest Tubb was shining as usual when he introduced Charley as “a young fella I sure do enjoy listening to and he has a song that I think is a great song—here’s Country Charley Pride signing “Snakes Crawl at Night.”

After a quick burst of applause, the huge house was quiet as everyone sensed he was going to talk and talk he did. “I’ve got a lot of reasons to be happy tonight, real happy. But I guess my biggest reason is that I’m an American.”

The thundering reaction drowned out the sound of the music and the first few words of his singing, and no doubt was left about the greatness of Charley’s talent and personality. The occasion could have been used to place all sorts of tributes upon himself or his managers or one group or another. However, Charley Pride chose to tell the world that he was proud of simply being an American.

A lot of people all over the country have raved enthusiastically about Charley’s appearances, ranging from night clubs and auditoriums to the Grand Ole Opry and the Lawrence Welk TV show. All have been impressed by his singing ability and the meaningful treatment he gives each song; however, they also talk a lot about how warm and friendly he is as a person and that’s the main force behind Charley Pride, a real American.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} He was not, of course, the first African American musician to perform on the program—that honor goes to harmonica-player DeFord Bailey, who opened the show for several of its early years.
Charley quickly indicated that that had been why he had been nervous as he replied with a grin, “Great, ’cause I don’t think I can just walk out there and start singing—I gotta talk to ‘em.”

In order to have this performance go the way he wanted it to, CSR implies, Pride needed to make clear that his presence was not about integration. He wanted to find a way to signal his “interest only in ‘standing for Country Music,’ ” not in standing for his race.

But if CSR’s account is complete, Pride’s remarks were much more oblique at the Opry than they had been the RCA Victor Breakfast Show Junior Huskey recalls. Instead of repudiating politics outright, he emphasized the joy this event brought him. “I’ve got a lot of reasons to be happy tonight, real happy. But I guess my biggest reason is that I’m an American.” CSR applauds Pride for resisting the temptation to declare a victory for civil rights.

The thundering reaction [of the audience] drowned out the sound of the music and the first few words of his singing…. The occasion could have been used to place all sorts of tributes upon himself or his managers or one group or another. However, Charley Pride chose to tell the world that he was proud of simply being an American.

Pride’s demeanor, CSR suggests, did more to distance the singer from politics than his words.

A lot of people all over the country have raved enthusiastically about Charley’s appearances…. All have been impressed by his singing ability and the meaningful treatment he gives each song; however, they also talk a lot about how warm and friendly he is as a person and that’s the main force behind Charley Pride, a real American.

CSR contraposes warmth and friendliness against anger and advocacy: if Pride is so personable, he must not bring the hostility associated with political activism.
A corollary to this logic is that politics could not be Pride’s motivation if he truly
loves the music he sings. *Baton Rouge State Times* reporter Bob Dardenne makes this
explicit in his write-up of his 1973 conversation with Pride revolving around Pride’s
race.15 “We had decided not to dwell on the black country singer subject. But as it turns
out, we did,” he confesses, “Let’s face it, it’s an interesting question.” Pride first tries to
explain his unlikely career path to the perplexed Dardenne by describing how much he
enjoys his profession. “I love to travel. I love to sing. I love to make people happy. That’s
why I do what I’m doing.”

“But why country music?” the unsatisfied reporter asked.

Asserting that something essential within over which he has no control dictates
his affection for the music, Pride responds, “That’s what my ears chose to like. I didn’t
deny myself enjoyment because it was unique” for a black person to like country music.
Pride directly declares his lack of political motivations with a line worthy of a White
House press secretary—“I don’t condemn, condone, reject or accept any organization”;
but it is his apparently unaffected passion for the music that convinces Dardenne that
Pride has no ulterior motive. “I was beginning to catch on about Charlie [sic],” Dardenne
writes, “He was in country music just like anyone else was in country music. He grew up
loving it.”

Pride’s 1974 remarks to the *Christian Science Monitor* indicate that he was aware
that his affinity for the upbeat affected his sound and his appeal to his fans. “I think for so

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long country music has been delving too much into songs about infidelity and death…,[and] this thing of honkytonking [sic],” he complained. “I like [happier] songs like ‘Funny Face,’ ‘Happiest Girl in the USA,’ ‘Kiss an Angel Good Morning,’ and ‘Such a Pretty World Today.’” Not only are the positive sentiments more in keeping with his personal disposition—“I try to sing with feeling. When I sing [an upbeat song like] ‘Kiss an Angel Good Morning,’ … I mean it”—but Pride also believes they are more marketable to his audience. “I realize that this is fine to have a song that is sad … [but] I try to pick what I think my fans will like and what I think will sell….”

Pride’s preference for songs about romantic bliss like “Kiss an Angel Good Morning” over songs about infidelity, death, and honky-tonking makes him an odd candidate to record a tribute album to the honky-tonk king, Hank Williams. For many listeners, Hank’s tunes present the ultimate in alienation—cultural critic George Lipsitz and musicologist Richard Leppert even go so far as to characterize Williams’s music as exuding a “fatalism and existential despair.” Nevertheless, Williams’s songs had always held an important place in Pride’s repertoire. Hank had been one of the most popular country singers during Pride’s formative years. In the opening verse of *There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me*’s title song, Pride describes Williams’ presence in his youth.

Well Hank I never met you but I sure heard you sing.  
At a little bitty port down in Mississippi, you filled my heart with dreams.  
I got an old guitar and I learned how to sing as you did the “Lovesick Blues.”

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17 Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz, “‘Everybody’s Lonesome for Somebody’: age, the body, and experience in the music of Hank Williams,” *Popular Music* 9:3 (1990), 266.
The affection Pride shared with other country fans for Hank Williams made his songs invaluable in winning over his earliest audiences. Pride’s account of his first performance for a country audience in Montana—at the aptly-named White Mill Bar—illustrates how he deployed Hank’s tunes to align himself with his listeners.

As was usually the case with Montana’s saloons, the White Mill was noisy, boisterous, blue collar, all white, and country to the core…. I could feel the stares and hear the noise level shift when I walked across the room, set up my equipment in a corner, and began tuning the guitar…. “I’m a Hank Williams fan,” I said, when the guitar was tuned and ready, “and I’d like to do one of his songs for you. Hope you enjoy it.”

That brought polite applause, but when I finished, the crowd really warmed up. They weren’t just polite, they were downright enthusiastic…. Several came over with requests, and when I sang them, they actually paid attention.18

Hank’s tunes show up at all the important turning points of Pride’s early career. He sang “Lovesick Blues” to break the ice with Red Foley; he promised his Detroit audience that he’d “try to do … some Hank Williams”; and he sang Williams’s “I Can’t Help It if I’m Still in Love with You” when he first appeared on the Grand Ole Opry. And if Houston Post music reviewer Bob Claypool is to be believed, Pride’s recordings of Williams’s songs are what ultimately earned the singer a place in the country pantheon.

[1969’s Live at Panther Hall] was Pride’s sixth album, and he was already a star, but the Panther Hall album both solidified and added to his reputation—it introduced him to new fans and it made “old” ones realize once and for all that he wasn’t kidding about singing country music. And [the] two songs that accomplished that were made famous by Hank Williams—Lovesick Blues and Kaw-Liga [sic]. Pride’s version of the latter song was particularly impressive, good enough, in fact, to be compared to Hank’s. After that, no one doubted Charley Pride’s talent or intentions, and soon the black singer from Sledge, Miss.,

18 Pride and Henderson, 111.
who’d had his share of hard knocks along the way, would find himself compared to the ... country music Master himself, Hank Williams.19

“In those early days,” Pride quips in his autobiography, “I sang Hank’s songs so often that a rumor began circulating that I was his illegitimate son.”20

Questions of biological paternity aside, Pride’s ability to give the impression that he was at least musically descended from Williams did much to earn him a welcome into the country family. He was not the only one using Hank’s songs to lay claim to country music in the late 1960s and 1970s. The legacy of the “country music Master” became the terrain upon which traditionalists and pop-country singers fought yet another round of their perennial struggle over country musical style.21 A spate of Williams tribute albums appeared, recorded by such diverse artists as traditionalist Stonewall Jackson (1969), country rocker Hank Williams, Jr. (1975), and pop-country poster boy Glenn Campbell (1973). But Pride was the only one using this strategy to address a color barrier.

19 Claypool.

20 Pride and Henderson, 283. The allusion this comment evokes to the longstanding practice of white men fathering illegitimate children with black mothers makes this comment worthy of much deeper analysis than I am able to devote to it here.

21 Pride walked the line between these two camps, his style shifting over the course of his career. Arrangements, which were considered the chief markers of style, initially placed him closer to the traditionalists. Though his first producer, Chet Atkins, had become famous as the engineer of the “Countrypolitain” pop style of the late 1950s, Pride made it clear that he did not want to stray too far in that direction. Atkins recalls Pride asking him to “Promise me one thing,... Don’t let them put any strings on my records” (Quoted in Hal Bruno and Jacquin Sanders, “Country Music Takes Pride in Putting Color Bars Down,” Publication unknown, ca. 1970. Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum Library, Charley Pride microfiche.) Pride only adopted the lush string sections favored by musicians like Glen Campbell in the late 1970s, with songs like “Someone Loves You, Honey” and “Burgers and Fries.”
The *Houston Post*’s Bob Claypool writes glowingly of Pride’s own addition to the library of Hank Williams tribute albums.22 “With each note, Pride pays [his] respect.” Yet while Claypool touts Pride’s fidelity to Williams, he acknowledges that not everyone will hear *There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me* that way. “The typical Nashville-slick production … and the occasional string arrangements … will undoubtedly offend country purists.” He excuses these transformations by asserting, “Pride’s feeling for the material is there on every track.” Claypool clearly intends this observation to mean that Pride sings in the spirit of Hank Williams, despite deviations from Hank’s sound. But after listening to the album, this sentence could accurately be read to mean the opposite of what Claypool intended. *Pride*’s feeling for the material is on every track, not Hank’s. Though these songs have merit in their own right, they are not recreations of Hank’s originals. In keeping with upbeat persona Pride had constructed over the previous 15 years, his covers are happier, brighter, and jauntier than Hank’s frequently abject recordings.

The differences between Pride’s and Williams’s sounds on the first few tracks of *There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me* might escape the notice of a casual listener. Even the newly-composed homage that opens the album sounds like something the Williams’s band could have recorded if it had been using 1980’s technology: Though the lead guitar is brighter, the bass has a lot more body, and Pride’s voice is buried deeper in the mix, Pride’s band uses many of the same gestures and riffs as Hank’s would have. And the beat, anchored on a limited drum kit and alternating bass, firmly grounds Pride’s sound in

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22 Claypool.
honky-tonk style. Pride does add two pop elements drawn from 1950s countrypolitan—male vocal harmony supplied by the Jordanaires and a string section—to the song’s chorus, but they are unobtrusive and could easily go unnoticed.

Pride makes no dramatic departure in the album’s second track, either, but the subtle changes he does introduce undermine the despondency of Hank’s original. After the first verse of “My Son Calls Another Man Daddy,” in which an imprisoned singer wallows in sorrow because another man is raising his son, the Jordanaires enter to support the chorus’s declaration of grief. Where Hank’s solitary voice emphasizes the singer’s isolation from his family, the Jordanaires’ presence suggest that Pride has an alternative community of men to support him in his sorrow.

A close listening to Pride’s covers of songs like “Moaning the Blues” or “I Can’t Help It if I’m Still in Love With You,” however, most dramatically reveals what Pride would likely never have been able or willing to spell out—the musical work needed to carry his upbeat persona into songs with downbeat sentiments. He takes advantage of the full force of his well-supported chest voice by moving the song down a whole step from its original key, a choice particularly noticeable at the climax of the chorus, where the melody leaps up to the fifth degree. For Williams, whose thin voice becomes more brittle in the upper reaches of the song’s compass, this passage heightens the song’s despair. Pride’s bigger baritone, even more powerful as he pulls his chest voice up to this higher pitch, undermines the lyrics’ description of a man frozen by sorrow. He sounds paradoxically strengthened and invigorated by his heartbreak, not diminished by it.
The Jordanaires carry this revision a step further, reinforcing Pride’s lead on the line “I just keep moanin’, moanin’ the blues.” At the moment when the words emphasize the singer’s helplessness, his voice suddenly gains the strength of a gaggle of backup singers. Their sudden entrance gives the song the jocular quality of a group of buddies casually singing together. Details of their harmony in the bridge also subvert the soloist’s pleading for his “baby” to come home. While Williams’s lone voice clings to the dominant as the harmony moves to the subdominant, the Jordanaires stabilize this suspension in Pride’s version, making the dominant sound like part of a more complex chord (IV sus 2) rather than a non-harmonic tone wanting resolution.

On songs like “I Can’t Help It if I’m Still in Love with You,” a string section undoes the stark, depressive quality so characteristic of Williams’s sad songs. Where Hank refuses to attempt escape from pain or to soften hurt’s edges by filtering them through sentimentality, Pride sings like a man giving voice to pain only to expunge it from his system. He is never unmanned by sorrow; the lush setting monumentalizes his subjectivity by amplifying his capacity for pathos.

The melody, constructed as a modified thirty-two bar form (AA’BB’), simultaneously depicts contradictory sensations of longing and stasis. The harmonic relationship between the two A sections does much to achieve this (Example 4.1). Though A and A’ are in an antecedent-consequent relationship, they are not separated by a half cadence. As the harmony returns to the tonic, the melody comes to rest on the third,

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23 Even subtle changes in intonation substantially alter the song. Where Hank rocks back and forth between the tonic and an aggressively flattened third to describe the paralysis that gripped him after his “baby moved out and the blues moved in,” Pride raises the blue-note toward the major third, sounding much less inconsolable.
creating a desire for a more satisfying conclusion. A\textsuperscript{1} has the same harmonic structure as A, and an almost identical melody, differing in its final fall to 1 rather than repeating the concluding step to 3. We get harmonic closure twice; both A and A\textsuperscript{1} have clear motion from the dominant to the tonic. Yet neither phrase provides true melodic closure. Even though A\textsuperscript{1} ends on 1 rather than 3, the absence of harmonic contrast between A and A\textsuperscript{1} minimizes whatever sense of completeness we might get from the consequent completing the antecedent.
Example 4.1. Melody and Harmony of the first two phrases of Hank Williams’s version of “I Can’t Help It if I’m Still in Love with You” (transcribed by the author).

A flat, repetitive structure generates an uncomfortably paradoxical musical experience. The pair of phrases is technically complete, but their completeness is not truly satisfying. The listener is left yearning for closure even though the passage has concluded. This renders the lyric’s complaints that the singer “can’t help it if [he’s] still
in love with” the woman to whom the song is addressed. He cannot have his desire satisfied (because she has left him for someone else), but he cannot do anything to put that desire to rest.

Williams’s arrangement of AA\(^1\) amplifies this effect. When the melody returns to the tonic at the end of A, the band simply sits on the chord, intensifying the static feeling engendered by the return to the tonic. The band emphasizes forward motion, however, when the melody achieves its relative repose at the end of A\(^1\). The pedal steel undermines the cadence by adding a minor seventh to the tonic triad propelling the harmony into the bridge’s subdominant.

The strings on Pride’s version, however, completely vitiate any tension between the harmony and the melody. As Pride approaches the cadence at the end of the A phrase, the strings hijack the return to the tonic. The paralyzed tonic is replaced by the string’s rapid cycle through a harmonic progression (Example 4.2). The harmony no longer conflicts with the melody’s incompleteness—this motion substitutes motion for stasis, and it turns the full cadence into a half cadence. It all happens in reverse at the conclusion of A\(^1\), the harmony resting on the tonic a half measure longer than William’s band before angling towards the subdominant.
Example 4.2. Melody and Harmony of the first two phrases of Charley Pride’s version of “I Can’t Help It if I’m Still in Love with You” (transcribed by the author).

Pride’s arrangement builds up his subjectivity at the bridge, as the Jordanaires and the strings unfurl a sweep of lush sentimentality. The lyrics detail the physical elements of the singer’s encounter with his former lover—the proximity of her body when they pass on the street, his imaginings of her kissing and embracing someone else—and the strings weave around Pride’s voice as the Jordanaires sing countermelodies. Orchestral
chimes add a final, glittering spray of decoration. This expansive soundscape, a plush updating of the laconic and sparse Hank Williams original, is ironically erected around a contracted melody, perhaps overcompensating for it.

It is difficult to take the title phrase, evoked again at the end of the bridge, at anything but face value when hearing Williams perform it. Its stagnant melody is placed in a thin, whiny part of his register, and the straightforward accompaniment seems to be there simply to keep him on track. Even the reduced pedal steel fills at times seem to crowd his vocals. As he laments “I can’t help it if I’m still in love with you,” it is not hard to believe that he has been conquered by his heartache. But the phrase takes on a new, somewhat ironic meaning in Pride’s version: though “I can’t help it that I’m still in love with you” right now, he seems to be saying, his arrangement signals the listener that Pride is basically “happy,” that he will demonstrate the emotional fortitude to overcome even this heartbreak in the end.

Pride seems to have adopted the strategy of using his music to display enthusiasm and optimism almost reflectively, but a song released almost a decade before There’s a Little Bit of Hank in Me,” 1971’s “I’m Just Me,” shows Pride to have been highly aware of the role his affect played in making the case that he belongs singing country music. “It answers a lot of questions for me,” he told The National Observer.24 The songs two verses that make up “I’m Just Me” juxtapose descriptions of discontented people with that of the singer satisfied with his lot. Pride proclaims his joy in life during the first

verse, declaring, “Some people live just to love, but I just love to live,” and repudiates dissatisfaction in the second:

When people say their life is rough, I wonder, “Compared to what?”
Some are wanting more and more’s getting less, I just want what I’ve got.
Some want to live on a hill, others down by the sea.
Some want to live inside high walls—I just want to live free.

This contentment, the chorus implies, is born of Pride’s simply doing what comes naturally.25

I was just born to be       I just try to be
exactly what you see.       exactly what you see.
Nothing more or less,        Today and every day
I’m not the worst or the best.    I’m just me.

For a listener watching Pride in live performance, this song’s lyrics raise a peculiar question. Is Pride trying to assert that there is nothing uncomplicated about his being a black country singer? Clearly listeners of both colors did not find his position a simple one. As he told the Christian Science Monitor in 1974, “I meet a white and he says: ‘… you sound like us—but you look like them.’ Then, I meet a black, and he’ll say ‘… you look like us—but you sound like them!’ ”26 One concertgoer from Louisville remarked, “It’s the most amazing thing … You just close your eyes and listen and you’d never know who he is or … well … what he is.”27 Pride used his good-natured persona to substitute the racial essentialism that confused such listeners with an alternative essentialism that asserted he was, in fact, “born to be / exactly what you see.” He

25 Charley Pride, “I’m Just Me,” I’m Just Me, RCA LP 4560.
trivialized the incongruity between his music and his appearance with such comments as
“...I realize this is a little unique, me [sic] coming out here on a country music show
wearing this permanent tan.” He described himself with raceless labels, like “American”
or “genetic man,” even insisting “black, brown, or whatever, I am no color, other than for
the technicality of pigmentation.”28 His countryness was an essential part of him—his
race was not. “You have to love this kind of music and it has to be part of you … and in
this case, it doesn’t matter what color you are.”29

The Geography of “The Genius”
Race, Space, and Ray Charles’s Country Recordings of the Civil Rights Era

[I]t surely is strange to find Ray Charles making a disc
that could have come out of the Country and Western
stable. —*Melody Maker*, June 9, 1962.30

I just wanted to try my hand at hillbilly music…. I was only
interested in two things: being true to myself and being true
to the music. I wasn’t trying to be the first black country
singer. I only wanted to take country songs and sing them
my way, not the country way. —Ray Charles31


222-223
When Ray Charles sings, you know there’s nothing in this world he’d rather do. He lives a song, and does far more for it than it does for him…. Categorizing Ray’s style is much less important than simply enjoying the wealth of talent he brings to your own musical environment. To paraphrase, genius by any other name remains the same.
—Liner Notes, Ray Charles’s *Genius Hits the Road*, 1960

The cover of Ray Charles’s 1965 album, *Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues*, features a trick photo in which the musician shakes hands with himself (Figure 4.). The Ray who faces us, standing on the right, looks the way his audience had been used to seeing him for the bulk of his career. He wears his trademark dark glasses and a purple velvet jacket that would go down well in the Rhythm and Blues clubs where he first made his name. His country cousin shakes his hand, wearing a white western suit and a cowboy hat.

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32 Liner notes to Ray Charles, *Genius Hits the Road*, reprinted on Rhino R2 72813, 1997
Figure 4.1. Cover of Ray Charles’s 1965 album, *Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues*.

This was Charles’s third country-themed LP, a follow up to the surprise smash-hit of 1962, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, and its sequel, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music Vol. 2*. After the critical acclaim and audience enthusiasm for the *Modern Sounds* LPs, *C&W Meets R&B* might well seem like an embarrassment. Released at a moment when his career was faltering (thanks to an arrest for drug possession), the album reduces Charles’s pioneering engagements with country music to a novelty as gimmicky as its cover photo. Rather than the tightly-crafted hi-fidelity stereo *Modern Sounds*, *C&W Meets R&B* is a monophonic concatenation of five country singles.
bulked up with a smattering of other projects.\textsuperscript{33} It appears driven by a simplistic marketing distillation of Charles’s popularity: Ray got famous doing R&B, then won a lot of attention with some country albums—let’s just combine them and we’ll have a smash hit! The liner notes suggest as much:

Ray’s highly creative talents and ambitions have taken him into every area of the musical world. One of his most acclaimed accomplishments was the million-selling album, \textit{Modern Sounds in Country & Western Music}…. His rhythm and blues performances are classics. Remember \textit{Hallelujah, I Love Her So} and \textit{I Got a Woman}?\textsuperscript{34}

This brazen attempt to capitalize on Charles’s earlier successes reveals something about how Charles’s relationship with country music was coming to be viewed. Despite having recorded two platinum albums of country songs, he was not a country singer. He was no longer an R&B singer, either. Instead, he was known as a “Genius” whose musical creativity could take many forms. Country Ray was just one avatar of this category-defying musician, so distinct from his R&B persona that the two could be pictured as separate people shaking hands.

While Charley Pride had made it in the country field by asserting that the genre was where he found his most natural expression, Ray Charles largely adopted the opposite posture. By his own admission, Charles was not driven by a desire to become a country singer. Instead, the evidence suggests he turned to country music as one in a series of opportunities to annex musical territories marked as white, a goal that seems to

\textsuperscript{33} This is not meant to imply that the performances on the album are not strong, but rather that the project as a whole lacked his earlier holistic approach to assembling LPs.

\textsuperscript{34} Liner notes to Ray Charles, \textit{Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues} ABC-520.
have been a driving force behind his career from 1959-1963. Though he occasionally mentioned that the “Grand Ole Opry had been performing inside my head since I was a kid” and his stint in a Florida hillbilly band, only a few of the songs on these albums were ones with which he could have grown up. Instead, Charles asked his A&R man, Sid Feller, to survey the recent products of Nashville publishing houses for material.\[35\]

Charles staked his claim to country music largely on the grounds that his sincere expression as a musician demanded that he disregard musical boundaries. In so doing, he forged a powerful critique of musical segregation, but one that is remembered primarily as a monument to Charles’s versatility and integrationist vision, not as the beginning of the end of country’s whiteness. In fact, the racial subtext of Modern Sounds so pervades these albums that they inadvertently reinscribe the genre’s racial associations rather than chipping away at it. What was shocking and exciting about Modern Sounds is that a musician so powerfully associated with black music was taking on the music most strongly associated with whites. But because Charles did not insist on a place within country music, his albums paradoxically served to underscore country’s whiteness rather than help bring it to an end.

It is important to understand Modern Sounds as the culmination of a series of Charles’s constant confrontation with white musical space. Charles had established himself as one of the most prominent voices in black music during the 1950s with a stack of R&B hits for the black music powerhouse, Atlantic Records. His trademark fusion of

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black pop and sacred music, introduced in 1954’s “I’ve Got a Woman,” so helped to define African American popular music that historian Peter Guralnick has characterized his early music as “an unabashed celebration of negritude.”

Charles considered the R&B with which he made his name to be “genuine, down-to-earth Negro music.” He did not make an effort to attract whites to his early sound, leaving “playing to the white folks to Pat Boone.”

_Ebony_ magazine describes in 1960 how Charles was assumed into the realm of black musical saints:

> To his large and ‘soul stirred’ following, the appeal of Charles lies basically in his funk…. Among musicians, he is generally spoken of with the kind of reverence reserved for Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday; for Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, and a select few others who are touched with musical genius…. Jazz drummer Chico Hamilton probably comes as close as anyone to the heart of the matter when he declares, fervently: “Ray Charles is the earth, the thing that everybody has contact with. He’s really saying something.”

But Charles grew to feel constrained by limiting himself to R&B and his black audience. “Doing my gospel-and-blues stuff wasn’t the answer to all my prayers,” he reflects in his autobiography. For much of his early career, Charles maintained double-life as a “serious” jazz performer. He released stereo LPs such as _The Great Ray Charles_ and _Ray Charles at Newport_ while releasing his R&B numbers as less-expensive, low-

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38 Quoted in Guralnick 64.


40 Charles and Ritz 152.
Charles felt an especially strong pull to musical outlets that were deemed off-limits to black musicians, particularly those who were associated primarily with the low-class world of R&B. Working with string arrangements had particular appeal. He recounts:

> I began thinking: One day it’d be nice to play Carnegie Hall. One day it’d be nice to record a country song. I’d also secretly held the hope that I’d get to sing with violins and cellos ever since I heard Frank Sinatra do “Nancy (with the Laughing Face)…. The strings sounded so lush and beautiful. I knew it’d be a thrill to hear all those romantic instruments behind me…. There weren’t that many black singers who recorded with strings. I remember Nat Cole doing “Nature Boy,” but us rhythm-and-blues musicians had a label slapped on us—strings were out.

Gaining access to these white musical worlds became one of his “private goals.” “I didn’t discuss them with anyone…. And I’m not sure I really expected to see them come true.”

By 1959, however, commercial success and an expanding audience had brought his dreams within reach. His popularity enabled him to raise his performance fees, making it possible for him to perform with a larger ensemble. His audience was also expanding beyond the black community to include a growing number of whites. “Little by little,” Charles recounts, “I saw that my music had appeal beyond my own people. I saw it breaking through to other markets…. It meant more work and more money….

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41 Keir Keightly documents in his dissertation that the LP was a format associated with “serious” music during the 1950s. It was marketed to older, wealthier white listeners who owned hi-fidelity audio equipment and, therefore, were interested in more concentrated listening; the 45 was for “‘teens,’ ‘blacks,’ and ‘working class’ listeners.” “Frank Sinatra, Hi-Fi, and Formations of Adult Culture: Gender, Technology, and Celebrity, 1948-62” (Doctoral Thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, 1996), 58.

42 Charles and Ritz, 152.

43 Charles and Ritz, 152.
[T]hat only convinced me to stick to my guns and follow my program.”\textsuperscript{44} When “What’d I Say” became the first of Charles tunes to break out of the R&B charts and rise to number one on the pop charts, his management, Shaw Artists, seized the opportunity to break Charles completely out of the R&B box. Hal Zeiger was retained as promoter, whose strategy, Charles biographer Michael Lydon describes, was to “shap[e] Ray Charles, king of the black dance halls, into a class act that he could present to integrated audiences in the theaters and concert halls of any big city in America.”\textsuperscript{45} Charles also left Atlantic Records for ABC-Paramount. As Shaw’s Larry Myers describes, “For all its growth, Atlantic was still a black label, and if Ray stayed there, he’d stay stuck in the black world.”\textsuperscript{46} This switch also gave Charles an unprecedented control over his sound—his new label allowed him to produce his own records and retain ownership of the masters.

This creative freedom allowed Charles to broaden his musical scope beyond R&B and towards the areas that had previously seemed “for Whites only.” He first pursued the string arrangements he had always dreamed of as part of a larger effort to participate in the record industry movement known as “Good Music.” In response to the rock and roll they considered facile and ephemeral, an older generation of pop singers—Frank Sinatra prominent among them—sought to elevate their music by making claims for its seriousness and timeless quality. The patina of classical music that clung to string

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\textsuperscript{44} Charles and Ritz, 174.
\textsuperscript{46} Lydon 165.
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arrangements made them especially important to defining this sound. Because of its popularity during the youth of Good Music singers and their audience, the big band also became a marker of the style. (Charles’s Good Music also was influenced by west coast “modern” jazz—he had recorded an album with the Modern Jazz Quartet’s Milt Jackson in 1958—which aspired to classical music’s gravity.) Good Music distinguished its repertoire from rock and roll by relying on “standards” composed on Tin Pan Alley or for the Broadway stage that seemed to have demonstrated lasting popularity. Good Music singers also materially separated themselves from rock and roll by releasing their music on LP rather than the 45 rpm single, a format that allowed them to record longer songs with more sophisticated arrangements.  

At ABC-Paramount, Charles began to appropriate these markers of Good Music. He shied away from singles, recorded with string sections and big bands, and abandoned original material for standards. As if fearing that listeners would miss the integrationist implications of his Good Music recording, Charles’s first album for ABC-Paramount was a travel-themed concept album that took its black musicians largely to southern states.

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47 Kier Keightly writes, “‘good music,’ which in the 1930s had been used to describe ‘classical’ music and opera, began to be used to refer to adult popular music in the 1950s…‘good music’ was seen…as explicitly opposed to rock and roll…refer[ing] to standards and especially to the music of the generational cohort who came of age during the Swing era,” 32-33.

48 Though Charles makes clear that his move towards the LP was driven largely by his desire to improve the sound of his recordings, it is also reasonable to conclude that the marketing infrastructure of ABC-Paramount may have played a role in this shift. ABC recruited Charles so aggressively because they were trying to make themselves a force in the black music market. Ironically, however, Charles came to them as he was trying to move beyond that market. The R&B singles Charles released when he first moved to ABC were total flops, which might be explained by the fact that they had not yet developed the marketing infrastructure and relationship with R&B disc jockeys needed to successfully promote music to African Americans. It seems likely that Charles’s interest in a sound more oriented towards the tastes of white consumers was reinforced by the unevenness of ABC’s marketing, which provided a commercial incentive to create music that targeted white listeners and a disincentive to target black ones.
“Georgia On My Mind” was one of the seven songs devoted to the South; the album also took him to Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.\(^49\) Against the backdrop of the challenges Charles and other black musicians had touring in the real South, this itinerary made a statement. Charles recalls with a crude poignancy, “The race thing hit us where it hurt—in the stomach and in the balls.”

We could be driving for hours and never find a gas station which would let us use the bathroom. If we stopped by the side of the road, we stood a chance of getting busted, so we’d open both doors of the car and piss between them. We could be hungry as bears and go half a day before we’d find a joint that would serve us.\(^50\) Charles also draws attention to the album’s racial dynamic by featuring five songs taken from the minstrel stage, including the brassy opening number, “Alabamy Bound.” Charles appears to have delighted in the consternation this caused. “Many people—and some critics—were surprised to see me doing ‘Alabamy Bound’ ” Charles writes. “I remember one cat saying to me, ‘Come on, Ray, you ain’t doing that tune?’ ‘That’s nothing,’ I said, ‘I’m also singing ‘Mississippi Mud.’ ”\(^51\)

Though none of its selections invoked country music, *The Genius Hits The Road* is important to this discussion because it debuted a set of strategies culminating in *Modern Sounds* that Charles would use to critique segregation. First and foremost, it reveals Charles’s use of genre to construct a spatial assault on segregation that paralleled the Civil Rights Movement’s most basic tactic: trespassing. By the 1950s, segregation

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\(^{49}\) This was not actually his first LP in the Good Music style. He released *The Genius of Ray Charles*, a collection of standards with big band and string arrangements, on Atlantic in 1959, but it flopped, perhaps in large part due to Atlantic’s limited distribution outside the African American community.

\(^{50}\) Charles and Ritz, 164.

\(^{51}\) Charles and Ritz 221.
had evolved into a system that, at its most material, worked by racializing space. Buses, water fountains, schools, lunch counters—every southern arena was divided into separate-and-unequal black and white zones. The civil rights strategies that stemmed from Rosa Parks’s refusal to vacate a seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus were based on the disruption of segregation’s spatial mechanisms. The lunch-counter sit-ins pioneered by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Freedom Riders who put integrated buses on southern roads were trespassing in order to bring an end to the separation of social space into territories into which blacks and whites were confined. Though he did so in a way that appears to have been non-threatening to his white fans, Charles seems to have given a musical form to integrationist trespassing in taking down the barriers that remained in adult-oriented music. He performed the musical equivalent of a sit-in—the black musician trespassing on the whites-only terrain of Good Music. Or, in the case of the Genius Hits the Road, a musical Freedom Ride.

This strategy is most strikingly audible in “Georgia on My Mind” and the song with which it was paired when released as a single, “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny.” Unlike SNCC members who could simply walk up to white lunch counters and stage a sit-in, Charles had to musically construct a white space before he could trespass upon it. “Georgia” accomplishes this by using the Good Music sound Charles most perceived as off-limits, orchestral strings, to set the stage for the entrance of his black-sounding voice.

52 See my discussion of this interpretation of segregation in the Introduction and Chapter 1, which is largely suggested by Grace Elizabeth Hale’s “Bounding Consumption, ‘For Colored’ and ‘For White,’” Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940 (Vintage: New York, 1999): 121-198.
He maximizes the contrast between his voice and the arrangement by allowing a white-sounding chorus to anticipate his vocal arrival. This polished chorus leads Charles’s raspy voice and playful intonation through the verse, helping the strings to contain its “blackness.”

Until he arrives at the bridge, Charles minimizes his disruption of this white musical space by keeping his stylistic departures from the conventions of Good Music to a minimum. He begins to move farther into his R&B arsenal towards the climax of the bridge. He strains his chest voice to reach the high note on “peaceful dreams I see,” rendering emotion by making the work of vocal production audible. The cracks and rasp in his voice becomes more pronounced as he returns to the A section, most dramatically when he ornaments “Georgia” with a falsetto cry. This anachronistic decoration is accented by an enhanced backdrop—the male chorus is joined by a battery of sopranos—throwing Charles’s voice into dramatic relief.

Charles uses the B-side of the single version of “Georgia” to further stage an integrationist collision. When a listener who had purchased the single of “Georgia on My Mind” flipped the disc to its B-side, they would probably have been startled by Charles’s version of the 1890s minstrel tune, “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny.” It has neither “Georgia”-style string arrangements nor a classically-derived vocal chorus, nor even a big band. Instead, the accompaniment consists solely of Charles’s sparse piano and his

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53 While this chorus is portrayed as being heavily African American in the 2005 movie, *Ray*, there is little evidence that this is in fact the case. Though I was unable to find much information about the Jack Halloran Singers, their work with Bing Crosby and other white crooners received little comment. It seems unlikely that an interracial collaboration with such prominent musicians would have gone unremarked. Regardless, the chorus’s timbre could still be construed as white regardless of the actual race of the singers.
backup girl group, the Raelettes. Unlike “Georgia”—or any other tune on *Genius Hits the Road*—“Virginny” is the only song that recalls the black musical style for which Charles was known. Charles turns this minstrel song on its head, transforming its perverse yearning by a slave for his plantation in the Old Dominion into a spiritual that figures Virginia as both the home of an idealized childhood and the eternal home on high.

*Genius Hits the Road* was the first of a series of Good Music albums through which Ray Charles established himself as a giant of popular song. *Modern Sounds*, volumes 1 and 2 were the final installments that completed his transformation away from R&B, especially the hit single, “I Can’t Stop Loving You” (though Charles only consented to releasing the song as a single after Tab Hunter put out a knock-off of Charles’s album version.54) Charles explains, “These country hits wound up giving me a bigger white audience than black.”55 But as Daniel Cooper observes, these albums drew more on “country song than country style,”56 and the white fans they attracted were not country fans. Their very title, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, connoted jazziness and sophistication rather than the old-timey downhomeness that was country music’s trademark, signaling that the albums’ musical style maintained continuity with Charles’s Good Music recordings despite their country repertoire. Charles’s acknowledges that was his intention. “I only wanted to take country songs and sing them my way, not the country way,” he explains in his autobiography,

54 Charles and Ritz, 224.

55 Charles and Ritz, 223.

56 Quoted in the liner notes to *The Complete Country and Western Recordings.*
I had no special plans for the arrangements. In fact, I set some of the songs against strings with a choir, the way I was doing much of my material then. Other tunes were done with a big band—my big band, which I had just formed.57

_Modern Sounds_’ album covers also made this point. In contrast to the cover of 1965’s _Country and Western Meets Rhythm and Blues_ (Figure 4.1 above), which visualizes a distinct country persona for Charles who wears a cowboy hat and western suit, _Modern Sounds_ depicts the artist in the same non-descript clothing and dark glasses as the covers of _The Genius Hits the Road_ and his other most important Good Music album, _Dedicated to You_ (Figure 4.2).

57 Charles and Ritz, 223.
While the albums received acclaim in the country music world and the singles even got some country airplay, Charles recordings were never accepted as country music. Indeed, one listener singled out Charles’s recordings along with those of Connie Francis.
for particular denunciation in his contribution to the “Country Music Battle” letter exchange in the fan publication, *Music City News*:

> You would have us believe that anything can pass as country music as long as the singer puts “soul” into it. Nobody puts more emotion into a song than Ray Charles, but you can’t call him or Connie Frances country singers by any stretch of the imagination. If they want to record country songs that’s fine, but don’t call them country singers and don’t play their records on country music shows.  

The fate of “I Can’t Stop Loving You” is especially curious. Country singer Don Gibson’s original recording of the song peaked at number seven on the country charts in 1958. Though topping the pop charts, Charles’s version never made the country charts at all. It also topped the R&B charts, apparently because Charles was too prominent a black artist to ignore, even though black DJs initially resisted playing it. Charles explains,

> It didn’t get the initial airplay that it might have, but that’s ‘cause it wasn’t the kind of song black jocks normally programmed…. They told me that they played my songs only because it was me. Finally, “I Can’t Stop Loving You” made the black stations simply ‘cause they had no choice; the record was too important to be ignored.

The country music industry has occasionally found it useful to hold up “I Can’t Stop Loving You” and *Modern Sounds* as evidence of country’s responsiveness to the Civil Rights Movement. But such claims border on the disingenuous and serve to highlight the failure of the country establishment to truly attempt to build on Charles’s popularity to reach out to African Americans. For example, a Country Music Association representative told a 1963 gathering of the Radio and Television Executives Club:

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60 Charles and Ritz, 223.
Now let’s talk a bit about Country Music. In one aspect of America’s cultural life, integration has already taken place. This has occurred in the field of popular music…. The song “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” written and performed by a Country Artist, Don Gibson, was performed last year by a blind Negro Artist, Mr. Ray Charles, [who] walked off with some of 1962’s top selling honours in both single and LP record products.61

“I Can’t Stop Loving You” did in fact win a Grammy in 1962. But as if making an effort to drive home the point that Charles remained an outsider to country music, the song was awarded the Grammy for Best R&B Recording! Despite Charles’s continued success with recordings of country songs on the pop charts throughout the 1960s and 1970s, he first made the country charts with a 1980 duet with Clint Eastwood. The CMA only recognized Charles’s country work in 1983, when they named him Most Promising Newcomer!62

Though he remained an outsider to country music, Charles leveled a powerful critique at musical segregation. Placed conspicuously as the opening track of Modern Sounds’s second volume, “You Are My Sunshine” seems explicitly intended as a political statement. The R&B combo that accompanies this song might startle the listener who bought Volume 2 because of the Good Music arrangements on Volume 1. This small group of horns vamps on \( \frac{\text{G}}{} \frac{\text{G}}{} \text{F} \text{D} \text{G} \text{G} \), the rhythm that provided the foundation of the R&B tune that first made Charles famous, “I’ve Got a Woman.” He sings his tale of heartbreak with the same vocal style that he devoted to his R&B material, aided by the Raelettes on the chorus.


Deploying such a clearly “black” sound at the beginning of the sequel to an album that had brought him unprecedented success with white listeners, Charles seems to be sending two messages. The first, directed at his black fans, is a belated declaration of fidelity to the musical community that nurtured him. “Despite my popularity among whites,” he implies, “I’m still Brother Ray.” The second message, directed at his white listeners and the music industry more broadly, is a direct attack on the stylistic separation that enforced musical segregation: under the name of The Genius, Charles allows Brother Ray to trespass into the white musical space of his Good Music country recordings.

The instrumental break that follows the first chorus, however, turns this song into a meta-critique of the constructed nature of genre itself. The jagged R&B rhythms of the opening verses and chorus are abruptly dislodged by a steady swing shuffle. The small R&B ensemble’s horn section swells into a full-fledged big band, which proceeds through a jazzy give-and-take characteristic of Charles’s Good Music arrangements. At the break’s conclusion, the song returns to R&B just as suddenly as it left, Raelette Margie Hendrix’s powerful belting taking the lead.

Bringing together The Genius and Brother Ray on a single track, Charles radically fractures the segregation of black and white musical space by staging repeated disruptions of the musical boundaries between R&B and Good Music. The abrupt shifts between musical personae draw attention to the artificiality of the boundary that separates them. “You Are My Sunshine” no longer sounds like a musical act of racial trespassing—it is a wholesale deconstruction of the barriers erected between white and black music.
This reading of “You Are My Sunshine” correlates with the song’s history that links it to southern resistance to desegregation. It was initially made famous by Jimmie Davis, a successful Jimmie Rodgers imitator from Louisiana who adopted a pop-oriented country sound in the mid 1930s. Following the model set by Texas’s Pappy O’Daniel, who parlayed his association with a country band into a successful bid for the Governor’s Mansion, Davis defeated Earl Long in Louisiana’s 1944’s gubernatorial election. “You Are My Sunshine” was Davis’s campaign song in that election. It was also his campaign song when he came out of political retirement to make a second successful run for governor in 1960 as an “unstinting, unyielding, unreconstructed states-rights segregationist” during the height of the Civil Rights Movement.63

Whether or not Charles knew the precise history of this song in Davis’s career (I find it hard to imagine that this escaped the notice of a musician as historically-minded as Charles), the singer reports an interaction with Davis shortly before Modern Sounds, Volume 2, came out that suggests that his choice of the Governor’s song for this integrationist statement was no accident. Telling readers of his autobiography that Davis “happened to be the same guy who wrote a song I did on one of my country-and-western albums,” Charles reports receiving a call from the Governor following a 1962 concert in Baton Rouge in which Charles compelled the promoter to integrate his venue. “ ‘I am proud to say the Negroes acted better than the whites,’ ” Charles quotes Davis. Though Charles is vague about the nature of his reaction, this comment clearly angered him—

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perhaps because Davis’s comments implied he had such low expectations of black
concertgoers. Charles records his response: “‘All right, man. Whatever’s fair,’ was all I
could say in reply.”

Charles’s virtuosic genre-bending constructed a musical subjectivity unfettered by
stylistic conventions of racialized genres. He never felt the need to distance himself from
his blackness—he transcended boundaries through his music. Charles is rightly
remembered as a visionary for this accomplishment. But while Modern Sounds may be
remembered as one of his boldest integrationist gestures, it did not tear down country
music’s racial limits. Film theorist Laura Mulvey offers a helpful formulation for
assessing Modern Sounds’s significance. “It cannot be easy to move from oppression and
its mythologies to resistance in history,” she writes. “[A] detour through a no-man’s land
or threshold area of counter-myth and symbolization is necessary.” The songs on
Modern Sounds are works of “counter-symbolization,” none more pointed than “You Are
My Sunshine.” They offer an attractive image of a musical world where Brother Ray can
sit down with the Genius to sing country songs. But they do not suggest that such a

64 Charles and Ritz, 165. Though “You Are My Sunshine” has been widely attributed to Davis, his
authorship of the song is in dispute.

In a conference paper presented at the 2003 meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, I argued
that Charles may have been using this song to directly call Davis a hypocrite. In his early career, Davis was
one of the only hillbilly musicians to record with black musicians, even working with black vocalists.
Evidence indicates, however, that the integrated nature of these early recordings was unknown until record
collectors unearthed them, which likely did not occur until the 1970s or 1980s. If it had been known that
Davis had recorded with black musicians, there is no doubt that this would have been used against him in
the 1960 campaign. Although his opponents did bring up these records, they attacked them for being
smutty, not integrated. Knowledge of Davis’s integrated early career, however, does allow the modern
listener to hear yet another layer of meaning in Charles’s version of Davis’s hit.

65 Laura Mulvey, “Changes: Thoughts on Myth, Narrative, and Historical Experience,” History Workshop
Journal 23 (Spring 1987), 11.
meeting can take place *inside* country music—the pair must come together in a “no-man’s land” and bring the country songs they want to sing with them.
Chapter 5
“The Whole United States is Southern”
Country Music’s Geography of Values

It is as if somewhere, sometime a while back, [Alabama Governor] George Wallace had been awakened by a white, blinding vision: … Great God! That’s it! They’re all Southern! The whole United States is Southern!


Is Middle America a backwater, or a reservoir? … I often think Red America serves as…[a] sort of reservoir for the rest of the country, supplying the moral perception and practical instincts, the life-giving moisture of good citizenship, that are necessary to the long-run survival of our nation.

—Blake Hurst, writing in *American Enterprise*, 2002

I suppose there is some element of “épater les bourgeois” [sic] about a Greek fruitman [in New York City] whistling something by Tammy Wynette, because he ain’t just whistling Dixie; he’s whistling America.


On March 16, 1974, Richard Nixon made country music history by becoming the first president to visit the genre’s oldest institution, the Grand Ole Opry. This program, broadcast on Nashville’s WSM since 1925, was inaugurating its new home in Opryland, a giant suburban entertainment center built for the growing legions of country fans. In the middle of the three-hour program, Roy Acuff—the stringband leader who had been the

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* Tr.: Épater les bourgeois = “to shock the conventionally-minded.”

Opry’s elder statesman for almost two decades—introduced President Nixon. The President began his remarks by telling the audience in the auditorium and those listening on the radio and television “what country music has meant to America.”

Country music is American. It started here. It’s ours. It isn’t something that we learned from some other nation, it isn’t something that we inherited…. It’s as native as anything American we could find.

Country music also has a magnificent appeal all across the country. It’s not regional. It comes from the heart of America, because this is the heart of America, out here in Middle America.

It talks about family. It talks about religion, the faith in God that is so important to our country, and particularly to our family life. And as we all know, country music radiates a love of this nation. Country music, therefore, has those combinations which are so essential to America’s character, at a time that America needs character.

And so, he concluded, “I wanted to take this opportunity on behalf of all the American people to thank Country Music…for what it does to make America a better country.”

A little over a year before Nixon came to country music’s high church to thank the genre for its contributions to the nation, Nashville’s most powerful trade group sent a letter to the White House thanking the President for his contributions to country music. This missive was delivered in the form of a one-of-a-kind LP housed in an elaborate hand-tooled leather jacket, entitled Thank You Mr. President, compiled and custom-pressed by the Country Music Association (CMA). In his introductory narration, former

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5 CMA, Thank You Mr. President LP, 1972. Two copies of Thank You Mr. President are known to exist—one is in the collection of the Country Music Hall of Fame, Nashville, Tennessee; the other is in the possession of the National Archive’s Nixon Project, College Park, Maryland. I am grateful to Dawn Oberg.
CMA president Tex Ritter tells President Nixon that the disc is “our way of saying thank you for the recognition you, more than any other president, has [sic] given to country music.” As a show of gratitude, Ritter asks the President, “May I be so bold now…to take your words and elaborate—to sort of try and prove them, and with the music of the people illustrate all you have said…[in] the speeches you have made.” Ritter introduces each of the fifteen songs—climaxing with Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee”—by marrying them with excerpts from Nixon’s speeches, asserting that their sentiments line up at every point.

Country music had indeed come a long way since it began its life as a throwaway music packaged by northern record companies for the poor southern whites near the bottom of America’s social hierarchy. No one less than the President of the United States had embraced the music and sung its praises to the world. Southerners had largely taken over the production and marketing of their music, and formed powerful trade associations that helped shaped the music’s image and its fortunes. Thanks in part to a sustained marketing campaign by the CMA, by the 1970s country musicians sold more records than artists in any other genre except rock. Country actually outstripped rock on the radio, consuming more time on the nation’s airwaves. It had found an enthusiastic audience that stretched from California to Maine—by 1970, in fact, over two-thirds of country sales were made outside the South.6

and Alan Stoker at the Country Music Hall of Fame and the staff of the National Archive’s Nixon Project for granting me access to this extraordinary disc.

Country music’s partisans were no longer at the margins. When Tex Ritter proudly told Richard Nixon on *Thank You Mr. President* that “our country music…in reality is the voice of your ‘Silent Majority,’ ” he was not only asserting country music’s ideological sympathy with the President’s politics. He was claiming the President’s political base—the conservative working people whom Nixon had first labeled the “forgotten Americans” and rechristened the “Silent Majority” after his election—for country music. In the slew of press reports about country’s growing prominence, it became a cliché to refer to country music as the Silent Majority’s “voice.”

But country music—like President Nixon himself—kept a chip on its shoulder. The country community—musicians, businessmen, and fans—continued to feel condescended to by media elites, urbanites, and non-southerners. Material success, audience devotion, and presidential accolades were not enough to lay these anxieties to rest. Marketing material produced by the CMA reveals the insecurity felt by many of the music’s devotees, who saw themselves fighting an uphill battle against country’s lingering marginalization. 1970’s *What You Don’t Know About Country Music is Probably Costing You Money* explains that it was written “to document the strength and pervasiveness of country music.” “While the roots of country music are rural and southern,” the pamphlet asserts, “its popularity and influence has always been

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widespread.” The CMA felt the need to reiterate this message six years later in *Country Music Goes Uptown*.

Twenty years ago, country was looked upon as a specialized musical form with limited appeal. Country has come into its own. Grossing a volume of more than $300 million per year in recording sales in the U.S. alone, country music is big business. It has arrived. Country has moved uptown!

As late as 1995, when the genre had arguably become America’s most popular, the CMA still felt the need to put out press releases that asserted, “Country Music is Mainstream.”

Though written to rebrand country music to attract national advertisers, such materials reflected the lingering inferiority complex that infused country music with an attitude of defiant pride. Rising to the defense of its humble southern roots, country singers like Loretta Lynn proudly declared, “When you’re looking at me you’re looking at country.” This posture, perhaps curiously, was largely responsible for country’s resonance with middle-class Americans outside the South. As Richard Nixon had come to learn, country music gave voice to the anger of so-called “backlash voters” who felt increasingly marginalized in their own country. During the late 1960s and 1970s, white working people across the country increasingly believed that the government was putting the needs of a small segment of the population above those of the bulk of the citizenry. To many, America’s power structure seemed beholden to a vocal minority advocating

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August 8, 1969, Time magazine published an essay entitled “Time to Remember ‘Forgotten America.’ ” “Once … the heroes of American democratic mythology,” it begins, “the white middle class feels dangerously ignored…. With justice, Richard Nixon calls them ‘forgotten Americans.’ ” For the 40% of Americans earning between $5,000-$10,000 a year—suspended perilously on the edge of poverty (at the time, the Department of Labor considered an urban family earning $5,915 or less as “poor”)—“middle-class” financial security was undermined by rampant inflation, rising taxes, and debt. Time quoted social activist and organizer Saul Alinsky, who explained why a man in this demographic “feels himself more alone than any other member of society.”

He is almost out of his mind with frustration—call it hate. He sees his Government, [sic] with programs for blacks and for the indigent and programs for everyone except him, and he figures, “God dammit, I’m paying for this out of my pocket.” He’s got some bungalow in a development and whole bookfull of installment payments and he is mad as hell.
Lower middle-class whites also felt (with some justification) saddled by an unfair share of desegregation’s burden. The busing of children to integrate public schools was especially galling. *Time* reported that

> [A]lmost everywhere lower-middle-class whites feel that they are being forced to pay the real price of integration while assorted social planners and liberal moralists retreat at night to their suburban fastnesses. Such whites view busing…as a scheme to move their children to worse public schools while rich children escape to private schools.\(^{13}\)

White southerners had long seen themselves in just this hostile, alienated relationship to the federal government, national media, and cultural elites. The recent federalization of the Civil Rights Movement only intensified long-standing antagonism towards Washington, DC, and the broadcasters who put the region’s worst sins on national television. Southern defiance first became a force in national politics through the surprisingly successful presidential campaigns of the segregationist icon, Governor George Wallace of Alabama, a stance that Richard Nixon brought into the mainstream of American politics and used to lay the foundations of the modern conservative movement. Southern popular culture—country music—provided a musical home for the growing number of Americans who began to share the South’s anger at the government and mass media. By the end of the 1960s, defiance had become a southern brand; in the 1970s, country music help export it to the nation.

The most extraordinary sentiment President Nixon expressed during his visit to the Opry was his assertion that “Country music…[is] not regional. It comes from the heart of America, because this is the heart of America, out here in Middle America.” For

the first time in over 150 years, a southern city like Nashville was plausibly placed at the
center of America’s symbolic geography rather than relegated to its margins. Sociologist
Larry J. Griffin explains that the South had long been an “American Problem,” “an image
of something opposite to America”:

The South was an *American Problem*—…not just a problem for itself…. [F]or two
centuries … life in the region was so harsh and so at odds with the nation’s self
understandings that America repeatedly had to step in and clean up the mess the
South had intentionally or otherwise created. It had to solve the problem of the South,
to remove the blight the South created on the broader American cultural and political
landscape.

This was perhaps especially true during the Civil Rights Movement, which used the clash
between American ideals of liberty and equality and southern oppression and bigotry to
mobilize Americans against Jim Crow. As Griffin sums up, “America never understood
itself to be Mississippi.”

Less than a decade after Mississippi had become emblematic of southern bigotry
(with folk singer Phil Ochs telling the state to “find [it]self another country to be part
of”¹⁵), the American President was proclaiming the South to be “Middle America” and
praising its music as containing “those combinations which are so essential to America’s
character.”¹⁶ The South was no longer an “American problem”—it had become an

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¹⁴ Larry J. Griffin, “Why Was the South an American Problem?” in *The South as an American Problem*
(Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 13, 28. In this second quote, Griffin is responding to
Malcolm X’s often-cited indictment of northern racial hypocrisy, “As far as I’m concerned, Mississippi is
anywhere south of the Canadian border.”


¹⁶ Reflecting on polls during a speech two years earlier, Nixon refuted Deep South exceptionalism: “[D]id
you know that busing is a much hotter issue in Michigan today than it is in Alabama?… [This fact] means
parents in Michigan, like parents in Alabama and parents in Georgia and parents all over the country, [sic]
American solution. While America probably still did not “understand itself to be Mississippi” (Massive Resistance to integration had left the state’s reputation uniquely bruised), America was increasingly coming to understand itself as North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Texas and other states absorbing flocks of “white Americans…fle[eing] the heterogeneity and the racial conflict of northeastern cities.”

Nixon owed his two national election victories to a growing cadre of southern Republican voters—both natives and the newcomers who settled in the booming suburbs of the up-and-coming “Sunbelt”—and to the growing appeal of southern politics to middle-class and working-class whites in the troubled metropolises outside the region. For the Americans who could not relocate to the South, it was possible to enter a southern circle of resonance—and show their affiliation with its values—through country music.

_Time’s_ powerless and marginalized “forgotten Americans” could not have become the empowered majority that dominated late-twentieth century American politics if the South had not been restored to the center of America’s moral geography. By the time Richard Nixon proclaimed in 1970 that “the time has come to stop kicking the South around,” historian Bruce Schulman explains,

He had detected not only the rise of the Sunbelt but the growing influence of a Sunbelt mind-set in American life generally. The South and Southwest seemed to embody a new set of cultural attitudes about race, taxation, defense, government spending, and social mores...that might eventually spread into the suburbs and working-class neighborhoods of the old North.

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17 Schulman, 108.

18 Schulman, 37.
Americans, however, were more familiar with “the South” from the country music that permeated their everyday lives, not from the occasional speeches of presidential candidates. The South’s most conspicuous cultural export, therefore, deserves at least some of the credit (or blame) for a growing national identification with the region’s conservative, oppositional “mind-set.” This is not a new idea—academics, journalists, and others have long recognized country’s association with conservatism—but often “interpretation” means simplistically and uncritically looking for correlations between lyrical themes and political sentiments.19 While understanding the political significance of lyrics is important (and this chapter’s analysis of Merle Haggard’s conservative anthem, “Okie from Muskogee,” focuses largely on its lyrics), this chapter argues that country music did more than give Nixon’s “Silent Majority” a voice. It even did more than put “forgotten Americans” on the map. Rather, “Okie from Muskogee” and the country music that followed it used musical style to draw a map upon which forgotten Americans could find themselves in the majority. Country music offered a symbolic geography offering the South as a homeland to those who felt displaced by changes in modern life. The South’s rise to political power drew strength from those outside the region who identified with its politics; and non-southerners who identified with the region’s politics could draw strength from the South’s political victories. As the South became more powerful, so did those who had become a part of country’s circle of resonance—they no

longer saw themselves as “forgotten” or “silent,” but as a powerful and vocal majority backed by the South’s electoral muscle.

Country music’s geography of values—crystallized by “Okie from Muskogee”—resonated powerfully at the birth of the modern conservative movement, bringing the music’s themes, its circle of resonance, and modes of distribution into alignment. As an expressive form, country music had always been heavily dominated by celebration of and yearning for “old-fashioned” values centered around an idealized family life. (“Old-time” was one of the first names given to country music in the 1920s, eventually replaced by the rustic “hillbilly.”) These sentiments acquired a new significance as conservatism staked its moral authority on its fidelity to the old-fashioned. As a circle of resonance, country music defined an imagined community of the listeners most alienated from American culture and politics in the late 1960s—white southerners and, now identifying with them for the first time, lower middle-class whites elsewhere in the country.

Circulating in a symbolic market economy where consumers displayed cultural sympathies through buying habits, country music provided a way for consumers to affiliate themselves through cultural consumption with others who were unhappy with the nation’s direction.

20 The portrait of the era’s country music audience is based largely on anecdotal evidence. DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco provide one of the few contemporaneous attempts to empirically study the country audience. Though their analysis is problematic—based largely on a 1970 radio audience study by Pulse Corporation that omitted key data—it provides some idea of who may have been listening to country radio. Though it is no surprise that they find country music fans are “nearly absent among the well-to-do who make over $15,000 per year,” their conclusion that country fans are “concentrated in the lower half of the middle-income ranges while being underrepresented among the poor who make less than $5,000 per year” is intriguing. Though they have no data on race, they accept as axiomatic that country fans are white, while alluding to a study that claims “the small group of black country fans…[are] older blacks raised in the South and Southwest.” They lack data on the geographic distribution of country fans, but they show small cities are more saturated by country radio than large ones (47-50).
The map country music drew under President Nixon eerily foreshadows the electoral maps broadcast on the night of November 7, 2000, which color-coded the political and cultural divide that persists to this day. Over thirty years, country music helped turn Nixon’s South into George W. Bush’s “red states”—a region whose cultural conservatism derived much of its authority from the way Americans interpreted their geography.

**Proud to Be a “Patri-Okie”**

*Geography, Oppositionalism, and Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee”*

I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee.  
A place where even squares can have a ball.  
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse,  
And white lightnin’s still the biggest thrill of all.  

When I think of the current emergence of country music in New York—blue-collar Brooklynites suddenly discovering their affinity for Nashville entertainers, cabbies with their ears tuned to…New York’s newly converted station for the “closet country fan”[—]I’m reminded of a tribe of Indians embracing Christianity and…being driven piously off their land.21


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Country music and politics had “discovered” each other long before President Nixon visited the Opry in 1974. Nixon’s host that evening, Roy Acuff—a southern Republican when southern Republicanism wasn’t cool—had run unsuccessfully for governor of Tennessee in 1948, using his fiddle playing to draw crowds to his campaign rallies. (These crowds reportedly dissipated once Acuff put down his fiddle to speechify). Though Acuff stood out as a Republican in the one-party South, his campaign tactics were in time-honored southern tradition. In 1938, flour magnate Pappy O’Daniels, who had led a hillbilly band in his ubiquitous radio advertisements, used his musical entourage to win the Texas’s governor’s mansion. Five years later, Jimmie Davis—the popular hillbilly singer who had abandoned Jimmie Rodgers-inspired blues for a more wholesome sound in the mid-1930s—recruited members of the O’Daniels outfit to help him parlay his musical celebrity into a successful run for governor of Louisiana. We encountered Davis in Chapter 4, reprising this strategy and his campaign song, “You Are My Sunshine,” during his second gubernatorial run, as a states’ rights segregationist, in 1959. (As if to subtly remind the historically-aware, Acuff featured the song as one of his opening numbers on the night President Nixon visited the Opry.)


23 A review of newspaper reports of Jimmie Davis’s second campaign contradicts Bill Malone’s assertion that "Racial politics had played little role in Jimmie Davis’s election in 1959" (*Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002, 247). It is true that Davis did not employ overtly racist demagogy to defeat his opponent, Chep Morrison. But he probably did not need to. As mayor of the largely black city of New Orleans, which maintained much more complicated interracial dynamics than the rigidly Jim Crow South, Morrison’s commitment to white supremacy was already in doubt. Moreover, a right-wing segregationist candidate had inflicted damage on Morrison during the first round of voting before endorsing Davis over Morrison in the runoff.
Watching Nixon and Acuff from the audience was a former member of Acuff’s band, Cornelia Snively, who had intimate country and political connections of her own. No longer in the business, she was there to escort her husband, Alabama Governor George Wallace, who became the first politician to deploy country music as part of a national campaign, running for president in 1964, 1968, 1972, and 1976. Though initially reluctant to use country entertainers in his campaigns, Wallace became a convert during his first run for governor in 1958. Emulating his predecessor in the governor’s mansion, Big Jim Folsom (he was also Cornelia’s uncle), Wallace kicked off his 1958 campaign with an appearance of Grand Ole Opry comedienne Minnie Pearl. Singer Webb Pierce also helped to draw a large crowd to Wallace’s initial rally, and from that day on, writes Bill Malone, “every Wallace rally… contained its country music component.” If that 1958 gubernatorial campaign was representative, southern politics provided good work for country entertainers. All but one of the fourteen candidates employed musicians. The lone abstainer (ironically, a musician himself) scoffed, “Can’t you just imagine the confusion of a lot of voters when they go to the polls on election day and [aren’t] able to find the names of their favorite gospel-singing quartet on the ballot?”

After making himself (in)famous with his “Stand in the School House Door” to block the integration of the University of Alabama, George Wallace nationalized this country campaign tactic with three presidential campaigns that drew surprisingly strong

support from such unlikely places as Michigan, California, and New York City.\textsuperscript{25}

Wallace’s success outside the South was only partly attributable to Americans’ explicit racism. The oppositional politics he perfected fighting federally-mandated integration lent itself to tapping the anger of the “millions of Americans who felt that nobody was paying any attention to them.”\textsuperscript{26} A rally held in Milwaukee during his first presidential campaign opened Wallace’s eyes to the fact that his southern political style resonated in decidedly un-southern places. Wallace later waxed rhapsodic about the event:

“Thousands of Polish-Americans had come to hear me and with them was a very fine band that kept playing, ‘Way Down upon the Swanee River.’ … Then when we were least expecting anything new, the band struck up ‘Dixie’ and three thousand or more voices sang ‘Dixie’ in Polish.”\textsuperscript{27}

“For the man from Barbour County, Alabama, [this rally] was an epiphany,” Wallace biographer Dan Carter explains, “He had been right all along: these chunky Serbs and Hungarians and Poles, these hardworking Catholics, these \textit{Yankees}, had embraced him

\textsuperscript{25} Dan Carter’s \textit{The Politics of Rage} details Wallace’s campaigns and explains their impact on American politics. Entering the 1964 Democratic primaries, Wallace won a startlingly large percentage of the vote in the decidedly unsouthern state of Wisconsin and almost beat President Lyndon Johnson’s stand-in in Maryland. He came within a hairs-breadth of winning enough electoral college votes as an independent candidate in 1968 to deny a victory to either Richard Nixon or Democrat Hubert Humphrey; and his 1972 run for the Democratic nomination was causing chaos until an assassination attempt took him out of the race the night before he won the Maryland primary.

\textsuperscript{26} Hubert Humphrey, quoted in Carter, 471.

\textsuperscript{27} Quoted in Carter, 207-208. Though racial tensions flared when three black protestors confronted the Governor, Wallace won over his audience by redirected their anger towards targets ranging from Polish communists to a Supreme Court that had “outlawed Bible reading in schools and led to a move to remove references to God from the Pledge of Allegiance.” When he did attack civil rights measures, he did not attack African Americans directly. Instead, he derided civil rights legislation as an affront to the union seniority system, a threat to quality public education, and a restriction on homeowners’ rights to sell their property as they chose.
with the same adoration that marked his passage among the masses of white Alabamians.”

Country celebrities including Tammy Wynette, Roy Clark, and Grandpa Jones made appearances on Wallace’s behalf, drawing crowds to his presidential rallies in the same way musicians had drawn crowds to his gubernatorial ones. But the Governor appears to have realized that country music could do something for him nationally that it could not do in Alabama, according to former Wallace aid Tom Turnipseed. In most of the nation, country music was a niche market (and a large one), not the ubiquitous presence it was in Alabama. Country radio stations targeted the same demographic Wallace hoped to reach, and advertising on them was an easy way for him to go where his votes were. Such advertising was so efficient, Turnipseed recalls, that Wallace once exclaimed, “The good people that like country and western [music] are gonna elect me president!”

As it turned out, however, the “good people that like country and western” elected Richard Nixon president, not George Wallace. In 1968, Nixon beat Wallace by three points in the eleven southern states, and Wallace voters in the rest of the country defected from the Alabaman’s campaign in large numbers during the campaign’s final months. But Nixon bested Wallace by “unabashedly appropriating some of the Alabama governor’s principal weapons of attack.” In his 1974 book, The Americanization of Dixie:

29 Malone, 238.
30 Quoted by Tom Turnipseed, conversation with the author, October 13, 2003.
The Southernization of America, journalist John Eagerton described how Nixon learned to sing Wallace’s tune: “[Nixon] came out against busing as a means of achieving school desegregation, he promised to appoint ‘strict constructionists’ who shared his judicial philosophy to the Supreme Court, he took a tough stance on ‘law and order.’ …”\(^{31}\) His supporters also aped Wallace’s use of country radio, developing ads to place “on or adjacent to country and western programs.”\(^{32}\)

Eagerton never connects the dots between Nixon and Wallace’s infusions of southern influences into national politics and the politicization of country music. But he does frame the Nixon and Wallace campaigns as part of a cultural trend:

To be sure, the Americanization of Southern politics is a more complex and ambiguous development than the election and reelection of Richard Nixon alone suggests, just as there is more to the Southernization of American politics than the rise of George Wallace can explain by itself. The one represents a bringing of the South in the midst of national trends and movements; the other is a national acceptance of things Southern in origin.\(^{33}\)

One-hundred pages later, Eagerton closes his chapter on “Culture” with a curious country music vignette that begs for political analysis: the 1973 board meeting of the Country

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\(^{31}\) Eagerton, 129; Carter, 368.

\(^{32}\) Mississippi Republican and Nixon campaigner Fred LaRue, quoted in Carter, 363. Nixon himself and his campaign team would not understand the utility of country music until after the 1968 election. Carter explains that Harry Dent, who headed up “[Strom] Thurmond Speaks for Nixon-Agnew,” was forced to get outside funding for the country spots to circumvent Nixon’s advertising director, Harry Treleaven, who was “aghast at the notion of buying advertising time from Buck Owens, Earnest Tubb, the Wilburn Brothers, or the Wally Fowler Gospel Hour.”

\(^{33}\) Eagerton, 131. Charley Pride’s substitution of “American” for “negro” or “African American” (see Chapter 4) played on the political connotations of “Americanness” at the time. “American pride” was being position by conservatives in opposition to movements calling for political and social change, of which the increasingly militant struggle for African American rights was one.
Music Association held—of all places—in New York City. One guest to the 500-person hoedown held at the high-class Plaza Hotel enthused,

I think it’s very refreshing to see this coming in…In the fifties and sixties, rock and roll rolled over the country, getting more and more raucous as it went along, especially when the drug aspects got into it. Now there’s a swing over to the simple, the clean, to the healthy.

Anticipating Nixon’s remarks at the Grand Ole Opry the following year, this New Yorker asserts that country appeals to universal, “American” values. “Country music celebrates the goodness of America, faith in America, patriotism.”

An article published in Mademoiselle in June of that year puts this New Yorker’s sentiments into political context. As if directly responding to Eagerton’s Plaza Hotel hoedown attendee, journalist Richard Goldstein warns New Yorkers, African Americans, and liberals everywhere that country music’s spread is as dangerous as Richard Nixon’s occupation of the White House. In the alarmist “My Country Music Problem—and Yours,” Goldstein writes,

[T]here is nothing neutral about the current country revival, and especially its emergence in New York…. Country music comes equipped with a specific set of values, which include (and I will list them at the risk of offending its partisans): political conservatism, strongly differentiated male and female roles, a heavily punitive morality, racism, and the entire constellation of values around which is centered the phrase “rugged individualism.” To me, it is, truly, the perfect musical extension of the Nixon administration, which has sought a restoration of such values as would hamper progressive legislation, dampen minority demands, and render the influence of urban life inconsequential. There is something utterly sinister about the image of Richard Nixon inviting Merle Haggard to appear at the White House…this is a political gesture with a very specific ideological intent. The President wishes to identify with the system of values which country music suggests, which is to say [those of] a strongly suburban, strongly conservative,

34 Quoted in Eagerton, 206.
strongly Protestant audience\textsuperscript{35} which damned well ought to frighten every long-haired progressive urbanite, [sic] and every black man who is not part of it…. Though President Nixon would undoubtedly have objected that his motives were not “sinister,” he would probably have conceded that Goldstein got his political motivations for embracing country music right. (The President’s personal tastes favored easy listening over country.\textsuperscript{36}) Nixon’s electoral strategy rested on appealing to George Wallace’s constituency, a combination of: white southern Democrats alienated by their party’s embrace of civil rights; the growing numbers of new southerners transplanted to the booming Sunbelt suburbs; and the middle- and working-class whites (many Catholics among them) living anxiously in the suburbs surrounding the Rust Belt’s decaying cities. Without any political prodding, country musicians and fans had already turned their circle of resonance into a home for such voters, proclaiming their music’s opposition to changing social mores, protest movements, and the surrender of independence to the federal government. And country music helped turn the South—whose electoral votes were critical to Nixon’s electoral strategy—into a region whose politics were at the center of American life.

The Country Music Association went to great lengths to make this point to President Nixon in their \textit{Thank You Mr. President} LP.\textsuperscript{37} With the aid of commentary

\textsuperscript{35} Goldstein appears to use “Protestant” to mean non-Jews. If he intends to exclude Catholics from the President’s constituency, he is simply incorrect—the working class white ethnics that voted Republican in the urban North and Midwest included many Catholics.

\textsuperscript{36} Malone, 243.

\textsuperscript{37} While the trade association did not speak for the entire country community—Nashville’s industry leadership was challenged by Southern California and Austin, and the organization represented the music’s
supplied by former CMA president Tex Ritter—who, as it happens, was the Tennessee
GOP’s candidate for Senate in 1972—Thank You Mr. President’s jumble of country
recordings and Nixon quotes takes on something of a narrative shape. Tables 5.1 and 5.2
outline the album’s contents and reproduce excerpts of Ritter’s comments upon them
(with my emphasis added). The four songs that open the album (three of which feature
banjo accompaniment)—Bill Anderson’s “Po’ Folks,” Frankie Miller’s “Black Land
Farmer,” Tex Ritter’s “Boll Weevil,” and Loretta Lynn’s “Coal Miner’s Daughter”—
depict a southern pastoral populated by hard-working men, long-suffering farmers, and
poor families rich with love. Intimations of moral corruption and violence appear at the
end of Side A. Henson Cargill’s “Skip a Rope” describes children warped by bad
parenting, and Johnny Cash’s “Don’t Take Your Guns to Town” tells of a young man
killed because he ignores his mother’s advice before a night on the town. Side B opens
with Johnny Horton’s “The Battle of New Orleans,” which throws a patriotic haze over
concludes with a celebration of the virtues that will see America through its moment of
danger: Faith (Charley Pride’s “All God’s Children,” Red Foley’s “God Walks these
Hills) and Charity (Glenn Campbell’s “Try a Little Kindness”). But these songs primarily
serve to set the album’s rhetorical jewel, the clincher, of the CMA’s political argument
was Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee.”

produces and distributors, not fans—it spoke for the sizeable portion of the country world who believed
their music was in harmony with Nixon’s politics. If political endorsements are any indication, country
musicians were overwhelmingly conservative. 1968 was the first year in which country singers openly
supported presidential candidates for the first time, and all who made public endorsements backed either
Nixon or Wallace (Malone, 238)
Table 5.1. CMA’s *Thank You Mr. President* contents and narration (excerpts), Side A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tex Ritter’s Narration (excerpts)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Artist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intro</td>
<td>“America the Beautiful”</td>
<td>Charlie McCoy <em>harmonica solo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. You once said, “we believe in the family as the keystone to the community.”</td>
<td>“Po’ Folks”</td>
<td>Bill Anderson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In another speech, Mr. President, you were talking about agriculture, when you said of the <em>farmer</em>, “these are people of courage, self-reliance and independent spirit.”</td>
<td>“Blackland Farmer”</td>
<td>Frankie Miller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The <em>farmer</em>, you also said, must by nature be an incurable optimist.</td>
<td>“Boll Weevil”</td>
<td>Tex Ritter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Country music, Mr. President, like yourself, has always <em>gloried in the hard work that men do</em>. Our country writers and singers have always paid homage, as you have, to the workingman. In one of your speeches you said, “We must give more respect to the proud men and women who do work that is all to often considered menial.”</td>
<td>“Coal Miner’s Daughter”</td>
<td>Loretta Lynn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In simple language, Mr. President, you have said “If peace and freedom are to endure in this world, there is no task more urgent than lifting up the hungry and the helpless, and putting flesh on the dreams of those who yearn for a better life.” In simple words our country writers have a solution.</td>
<td>“That’s all this Old World Needs”</td>
<td>Stonewall Jackson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Mr. President, you once said “Together let us seize the moment so that our children and the world’s children live free of the fears, and free of the hatreds that have been the lot of mankind through the centuries.” Country music is aware of the child and the care with which we must treat them. Henson Cargill gives us all something to think about…. A warning in our troubled times.</td>
<td>“Skip a Rope”</td>
<td>Henson Cargill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. In dedicating a library in South Dakota you said, “We live in a deeply troubled and profoundly unsettled time. Drugs and crime, campus revolts, racial discord, draft resistance, on every hand we find old standards violated, old values discarded, old precepts ignored.” Country music has taken stands on what you have spoken of, sometimes painting the consequences of ignoring the warnings of voices wiser than we….</td>
<td>“Don’t Take Your Guns to Town”</td>
<td>Johnny Cash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tex Ritter’s Narration</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. “When we think back to your October proclamation, we see the phrase, “love of country.” And we believe as you do that most Americans love this country and express it in a variety of ways, one of which has been fighting for it. You once said of America, “It could not be the land of the free if it were not also the home of the brave.” Country music has sung many songs about our brave men.</td>
<td>“Battle of New Orleans”</td>
<td>Johnny Horton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “I guess it’s easy to sing about a war in another time, but our country music—which in reality is the voice of your ‘silent majority’—can sing about the troubles of the present with as much love of country as in the past. And country music can break the enormity of war down to the very personal.</td>
<td>“The Lights of Albuquerque”</td>
<td>Billy Mize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. You once said, Mr. President, “I believe a resurgence of American idealism can bring about a modern miracle. And that modern miracle is a world order of peace and justice.” Merle Haggard, truly a great example of the opportunity available to all men in America, has spoken simply yet eloquently of American ideals. He has answered those who would forsake those ideals…. It is sometimes said that the country songwriter uses a scalpel to go directly to the heart of the matter.</td>
<td>“Okie from Muskogee”</td>
<td>Merle Haggard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. In your inauguration speech of 1969 you spoke to the heart when you said, “When we listen to the better angels of our nature, we find they celebrate the simple things, the basic things, such as goodness and decency, love, kindness.” The word “love,” Mr. President, has to be the end word as far as songwriters are concerned. Let me show you what I mean, first with Jerry Reed.</td>
<td>“A Thing Called Love”</td>
<td>Jerry Reid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Love takes many forms, as we all know, and an integral part of it is understanding one another.</td>
<td>“All God’s Children”</td>
<td>Charley Pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. In your inauguration speech of 1969, you followed the word “love” with the word “kindness.”</td>
<td>“Try a Little Kindness”</td>
<td>Glenn Campbell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. At a speech in Tennessee you said, “America would not be what it is today—the greatest nation in the world—if this were not a nation which has made progress under God.” Then, in your comments about the Apollo Mission of 1968 you said, “we share the glory of man’s first sight of the world as God sees it.”</td>
<td>“God Walks these Hills”</td>
<td>Red Foley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
No possible version of *Thank You Mr. President*, could have omitted “Okie from Muskogee.” It became an instant anthem of cantankerous conservatism after its 1969 release. (Its popularity won Haggard the invitation to the White House that Richard Goldstein describes as “sinister.”) Fans’ enthusiasm for the song surprised even Haggard, who claims to have conceived the song without serious intent. He explained to *Penthouse* magazine in 1976,

> Me and the band were on a bus in Oklahoma when we passed a sign sayin’ “Muskogee, 100 miles” or something like that, and somebody said, “I bet they don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee.” I thought that was a funny comment, so we started making up some more lines, and in about 20 minutes we had us a song.

But if Haggard wrote the song in jest, he quickly realized that he had nailed the feelings of millions of conservative Americans who felt forgotten by popular culture. Haggard told *Penthouse*, “Okie from Muskogee” “said something to those people who were called ‘the silent majority.’ Finally, *they* were having something said [on] their behalf, and they really came unwound when they heard it said the way they wanted to hear it said.”

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Journalist Paul Hemphill’s contemporary description of a Haggard performance in Dayton, Ohio vividly captures the song’s explosive effect on this audience:

Memorial Hall… is bulging on a blustery Friday night when the new king of country music comes on. It is Merle Haggard, a wiry ex-convict whose Okie parents endured the same degradation in Depression California that the [Appalachian migrants known as] Briars suffer in Dayton, and when he strolls out in a flared black Western suit and $350 rattlesnake skin boots from Nudie’s in Hollywood, they wildly applaud. His “Workin’ Man Blues” touches nerves (“I ain’t never been on welfare, that’s one place I won’t be”), but as he moves on to his autobiographical ballads about liquor, ladies and the law, you sense the crowd’s restlessness. They have come for one thing this night. “‘Okie,’ ‘Okie,’ ” they are pleading. Personal-sized American flags begin coming out of purses. Haggard grins nervously. “Hey, Merle, how ’bout ‘Okie’?” Finally, having teased them long enough, Haggard lays it on them—“We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee, and we don’t take our trips on LSD”—and suddenly they are on their feet, berserk, waving flags and stomping a whistling and cheering, joining in on the chorus: “… we still wave Ol’ Glory down at the Courthouse, white lightnin’s still the biggest thrill of all…. [F]or those brief bombastic moments, the majority isn’t silent anymore. 39

Ritter allows the President to directly hear the enthusiasm of a constituency he presumably shared with Haggard, featuring the live version of “Okie” recorded in Muskogee shortly after the studio-recorded single had become a hit.40 Over the cheers of the Muskogee audience, Ritter tells the President that Merle Haggard “has answered those who would forsake [American] ideals.” Haggard sings:

We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee.
We don’t take our trips on LSD.
We don’t burn our draft cards down on Main Street.
We like livin’ right and being free.

Leather boots are still in style for manly footwear.
Beads and Roman sandals won’t be seen.
Football’s still the roughest thing on campus,
and the kids here still respect the college dean.

We don’t make a party out of loving.
We like holding hands and pitching woo.
We don’t let our hair grow long and shaggy.

And I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,
A place where even squares can have a ball.
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse.


40 Originally released on Merle Haggard, Okie from Muskogee: Recorded Live in Muskogee, Oklahoma, Capitol ST 384.
like the hippies out in San Francisco do.
And I’m proud to be an Okie from Muskogee,
A place where even squares can have a ball.
We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse,
And white lightnin’s still the biggest thrill of all.

by golly!
And white lightnin’s still the biggest thrill of all.

We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse,
In Muskogee, Oklahoma, USA.

On its face, this selection is an odd culmination to this album’s political sentiments. Except for burning their draft cards, the miscreants “Okie” describes are forsaking social norms, not a political creed: they take drugs, engage in “free love,” wear their hair long. How does the Okie from Muskogee’s preference for “leather boots” over “roman sandals” make him a champion of the American way? To a listener who has not lived through the historical moment, the explosive response to a resident of a small southeastern Oklahoma town musically lashing out at what even in 1969 were out-dated hippie stereotypes might sound more pathetic than threatening. At a time of war, economic stagnation, and energy crisis, wouldn’t a song that spoke to the real difficulties people had getting by be more electrifying?

If Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee” was a member of the Silent Majority who had found his voice, then his anger and that of his fellow constituents had a lot more to do with culture than with government policy. Shortly after “Okie” exploded onto the radio, political scientists Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg diagnosed a new dynamic in American politics they observed coalescing in the late 1960s, which they famously labeled the “Social Issue”:

The Social Issue… may be defined as a set of public attitudes concerning the more personally frightening aspects of disruptive social change. Crime frightens. Young people, when they invade the dean’s office, or destroy themselves with drugs, or destroy a corporate office with a bomb, frighten. Pornography, nudity,
promiscuity are perceived to tear away the underpinnings of a moral code, and this, too, is frightening. Dissent that involves street riots frighten.\footnote{Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg, \textit{The Real Majority} (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1970), 43.}

If Haggard’s protagonist proceeded to vote on the basis of the song’s clearly expressed resentment of the counterculture and protest movements rather than on bread-and-butter issues like inflation and taxes, he would not have been alone. Scammon, Wattenberg, and many other notable political observers saw voters increasingly preoccupied with cultural issues rather than the economic issues that had previously been their primary concern.

“Okie” not only spelled out the Social Issue, it also gave a musical form to the oppositionalism that was a driving force behind the conservative resurgence of the late-'60s. Kevin Phillips, whose political analysis, articulated by \textit{The Emerging Republican Majority}, largely inspired Richard Nixon’s political strategy, explained that the voter frustration that buoyed Nixon into the White House in 1968 was a negative one: It was not a “movement in favor of” any particular ideological agenda, but rather one that was “opposed to” resented groups, institutions, and cultural forces. “[T]he whole secret of politics,” Phillips summarized, is “knowing who hates who.”\footnote{Kevin Phillips, quoted in Gary Mills, \textit{Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), 265 and 266; italics in the original.}

The syntax of Haggard’s anthem articulates the singer’s identity in just such negative terms. The “Okie” is an Okie not because of who he is, but because of who he is \textit{not}—not a drug user, \textit{not} a draft dodger, \textit{not} a hippy. (“Don’t” is the second most frequent word in the first two stanzas, second only to the “we” it usually follows.) The refrain proclaims his opposition to changes in modern life, proudly labeling himself a
“square” looked down upon by contemptuous (and contemptible) urbanites for being out of touch and uptight. The Okie’s positive attributes are almost entirely reflections of his old-fashionedness. (Where “we don’t” begins almost every line of the first two stanzas, “still” appears in five out of the eight lines of the refrain and final verse.) In “a place where even squares can have a ball,” men still dress like men, kids still respect authority, and things still get no rowdier than a football game.

But the most important line to understanding “Okie”’s potency is, ironically, one that seems the most like an afterthought, its tag line: “In Muskogee, Oklahoma, USA.” In the studio recording that became a hit single, Haggard stops singing when he reaches this line, allowing the collective voice of a vocal chorus to replace his individual one. It is as if “Muskogee,” the place itself, ratifies the cultural attitudes to which Haggard’s “Okie” has given voice. “Okie” casts the political divide across the Social Issue in geographical terms, imagining this southern town as a preserve for “old-fashioned” values. The Okie gets his politics—and the moral authority that backs them up—from the land.43

43 Haggard’s revision of “Okie from Muskogee” for the live version featured on Thank You Mr. President further underscores the claim of Americanness that this song represented to its listeners. In the original, the final couplet begins by repeating the last line of the refrain—“White Lightnin’ still the biggest thrill of all”—before the tagline, “In Muskogee, Oklahoma, USA.” After the song had caught fire as a nationalist anthem, the repeated reference to White Lightnin’ is replaced by the line of the refrain that preceeds it—“We still wave Old Glory down at the courthouse”—making a closing and even more emphatic claim to “Americanness.”

The importance of the geographic dimension in “Okie”’s conservatism is thrown into relief by the lyrics of an answer song published as part of “Merle Haggard and the Right: The Origins and the Blame” in People’s World, the official newspaper of the American Communist Party (February 20, 1971), which substitutes “Olema, California, Planet Earth” for “Muskogee, Oklahoma, USA.”

Refrain: Well, I’m proud to be a hippie from Olema Where we’re friendly to the squares and all the straights. We still take in strangers if they’re haggard, And we can’t think of anyone to hate…

Tag line: In Olema, California, Planet Earth.

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Merle Haggard once reflected on the opening line of his hit’s chorus, “‘No one had ever said those words before, ‘I’m proud to be an Okie.’”\(^{44}\) The declaration inverted a derogatory epithet applied to the southerners who fled agricultural poverty for the West Coast into a defiant badge of honor.\(^{45}\) But Haggard’s “Okie” is not a migrant. He has been displaced by changes in the modern world, not by physical relocation. The song’s geography opens the southern experience to Americans who are similarly unsettled by social change, even if they have no actual connection to the South.

Cultural geographer Ben Marsh recognized the importance of “Okie”-influenced country music’s geography of values in a 1977 Harper’s magazine article, “A Rose-Colored Map: Country Music’s Ideal Landscape.” “Right and wrong in country music are not distributed randomly across the American landscape,” Marsh explains, “Goodness is concentrated in the South and the countryside, while badness is far more common in the cities and in the North.”\(^{46}\) Marsh’s article was accompanied by a map (Figure 5.1) that shows the North shrinking under its financial and moral woes—bankruptcy, crime, corruption, and vice—while the South is enlarged by its virtues. (This graphic was an implicit rejoinder to the 1976 New Yorker’s View of the World from 9th Avenue which depicts “Middle America” as empty space between Manhattan and the Pacific Ocean; see Figure 5.2.) This remapping of American virtues was possible because of the way time

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\(^{45}\) La Chapelle, 349.

was charted on the landscape. Americans who voted the Social Issue looked anxiously out on an uncertain future and longingly back at an idealized, stable past. The South was could be held up as a preserve of American virtues because it was constructed as a preserve (complete, in Thank You, Mr. President with banjos and the “Battle of New Orleans”) of America’s past:

The South is presented as a virtuous place to country music fans all over America not for what it is, but for what it is not. [T]he South is not responsible for the shape we are in…. [T]he South has had nothing to do with inflation, taxes, shortages, abuses of federal power, Supreme Court rulings [mandating bussing], and so forth….

(In fact, Marsh might have added, the South fought many of these things tooth and nail—its actual history as a defiant and troublesome region lends credibility to the stubborn “we don’ts” of Haggard’s song.)

Country music’s gloomy image of the North is a reflection of what the audience feels about what is happening to America in general. The South, in contrast, is a picture how the nation would be if it had not gone astray…. Country music’s South is above all old-fashioned. Life in the South means old-fashioned family, old-fashioned religion, old-fashioned values. This is what country music’s rural Southern perspective is really about—the South has none of the problems of the North, and the country has none of the problems of the city, because the past has none of the problems of the present.47

47 Marsh, 80-81.

President Nixon explicitly elided country music’s associations with a past free from modern America’s troubles and its patriotic appeal in an anecdote related during his Opry appearance. Bragging about the parade of country stars he had brought to the White House (and taking a slap at his predecessors), Nixon pauses to reflect on Roy Acuff’s 1973 appearance on a White House program honoring Vietnam prisoners of war.

Before we had country music at the White House…we had some very sophisticated audiences there listening to the great stars, opera stars and all that sort of thing, and then Johnny Cash came, and he was a big hit at the White House. And Merle Haggard came, and he was a big hit at the White House… Glenn Campbell, Roy Acuff—Let me tell you something about that POW night. We had some fine Hollywood stars, singing some of the more modern music that, well, it’s a little hard to understand. I mean…you pay a little more attention to what the girls are not wearing than hearing the music…. I was sitting at that historic evening when these magnificent men who had
The “ideal landscape” Marsh describes is what cognitive linguist George Lakoff calls a “conceptual metaphor,” “a conventional [and largely unconscious] way of conceptualizing one domain of experience in terms of another.”\textsuperscript{48} Country music encouraged Americans to think of social change and political turmoil in geographic terms. This conceptual metaphor was not neutral. It was what Lakoff calls a “frame”—a “mental structure … shaping the goals we seek, the plans we make … and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions”\textsuperscript{49}—giving the advantage to conservatives. To a growing number of Americans who thought about the nation’s predicament with country

served the United States in Vietnam and who had been prisoners of war were being entertained at the White House… All six of them had been in prison for six years or more, and all of these stars went on, the modern stars [of rock and roll] and the older stars and the rest, and the new types of music and the rest. The one that got the biggest applause was Roy Acuff. And I asked one of them, I said, “now that’s rather curious that you would find that music the one you liked the best.” And they said, “You’ve got to understand, we understood it….” In other words, it went back a few years, but they understood it, and it touched them, and it touched them deeply after that long time away from America.

Nixon’s telling of this event is misleading, and his revision of the evening’s proceedings reveal a great deal about what country music signified to the President. Though his remarks suggest that the program contrasted rock (“modern music that [is] a little hard to understand” likeable only because of “what the girls are not wearing”) with the music of the Opry patriarch, the program in the collection of the White House Curator reveals that no counter-cultural rock performers appeared that night. (The evening featured Bob Hope, the New Christy Minstrels, John Wayne, Edgar Bergen, Vic Damone, Ricardo Montalban, Phyllis Diller, Joey Heatherton, Jimmy Stewart, Sammy Davis, Jr., Irving Berlin, Les Brown, and several military ensembles.) It is not difficult to see why Nixon would want to remember the evening that way, however. Nixon positions the POWs as if they had been sheltered from the late 1960s most tumultuous years by their internment in Vietnam, and Roy Acuff’s music as having the unique power to reconnect them to their country because it “went back a few years.” (It helps that Acuff’s music was old-fashioned even by country standards.)


\textsuperscript{49}Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004), xv.
music’s “rose-colored map” as a guide, the conservative South was not just “middle American,” it was a better America. Or quite simply more American.

Figure 5.1. Illustration accompanying Ben Marsh’s “A Rose-Colored Map: Country Music’s Ideal Landscape.”

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50 Marsh, 80.
Figure 5.2. Saul Steinberg’s cover of The New Yorker, March 29, 1976, entitled The View of the World from 9th Avenue depicting “Middle America” as empty space between Manhattan and the Pacific Ocean.

But “Okie” was more than just a song; it was also a record you could buy. As market commodities, country records like “Okie” and its descendents gave Americans who yearned for an idealized, trouble-free past a powerful tool to express their solidarity with a “southern” worldview and the moral authority of its historical connections: their wallets. Audiences showed their enthusiasm for this music by buying records and concert tickets, and their buying power bent radio programmers to their will. “Okie,” the Wall
Street Journal suggested in 1970, rocketed up the charts because conservative consumers had a pent-up demand for popular culture that they could claim as their own.

“Okie from Muskogee” and songs like it appeal to the truck drivers, ranch hands, farmers, factory workers, hardhats and others who work hard, support their local police, honor their flag… who now are reacting sharply against the drug culture, the New Left, the hippie movement and other real or imagined threats to what they believe in and hold dear.

“This looks like a hot field,” says a record industry executive. “Nobody has really appealed to these people’s political beliefs before.”

Having awoken to the fact that ideology was a powerful marketing tool, “other songs and other singers keep joining the backlash almost weekly,” the Journal continues, pointing to Guy Drake’s attack on public assistance, “Welfare Cadillac,” and Tex Ritter’s patriotic joint effort with Bobby Bare, “God Bless America Again.” Merle Haggard catered to the market he stumbled upon with “Okie” with its follow-up, “The Fighting Side of Me,” which calls out malcontents who are “running down a way of life our fighting men have fought and died to keep.” The Journal positions country as the conservative counterpart to progressive, youth-oriented Sixties rock. “Just as rock music often has challenged the values of the “straight” world and tapped a reservoir of alienation among youth, the patriotic, conservative songs now gaining vogue are tapping growing resentments in Middle America.”51

Country music gave Americans a way to take a defiant stand on cultural issues as consumers while its geography provided a narrative through which to validate its

listeners’ experience of a changing world. Country repackaged its homeland—the troublesome, defiant South—into the symbolic home of all Americans frightened and angry about the array of challenges that added up to the Social Issue. Americans could buy into the worldview by buying country music.

Epilogue:
Three Maps, Two Americas
A Progressive History of How Nixon’s “Forgotten Americans” Became W.’s “Red Staters”

In the backlash imagination, America is always in a state of quasi-civil war: on the one side are the unpretentious millions of authentic Americans; on the other stand the bookish, all-powerful liberals who run the country but are contemptuous of the tastes and beliefs of the people who inhabit it. When the chairman of the Republican National Committee in 1992 announced to a national TV audience, “We are America” and “those other people are not,” he was merely giving new and more blunt expression to a decades-old formula. [House Speaker] Newt Gingrich’s famous description of the Democrats as “the enemy of normal Americans” was just one more winning iteration of this well-worn theme.

—Thomas Frank, What’s the Matter with Kansas, 2004

With these words, liberal cultural critic Thomas Frank begins his attack on the “current installment of this fantasy” of “two Americas” that captivated political discourse after 2000’s closely-contested election. As news networks posted voting totals on the evening of November 7, the colors of the American map came to symbolize a country

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evenly yet irrevocably divided by the modern-day equivalent of the Social Issue (Figure 5.3), now a set of lower-case and plural “social issues” (abortion, gay marriage, and other battlegrounds of what have become known as the “culture war”). The Democratic “blue states” of the Northeast, Great Lakes, and West Coast, were portrayed as locked in mortal struggle with the “red states” of the Southeast, the Great Planes, and Southwest. This map was over-interpreted to reveal more than two voting blocs. Red states and blue states, Frank complains, were discussed as “complete sociological profiles, two different Americas at loggerheads with each other.”

Figure 5.3. Map of the 2000 election returns color-coded Republican red (the South, much of the country’s midsection, and New Hampshire) and Democratic blue (Northeast, Upper Mid-West, West Coast, and New Mexico). 

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53 Frank, 16.

Much to his frustration, the prevailing storyline legitimized Bush’s questionable installation in the White House following a month-long court battle over the election’s outcome. Frank paraphrases,

From this one piece of evidence, the electoral map, the pundits simply veered off into authoritative-sounding cultural proclamation. Just by looking at the map, they reasoned, we could easily tell that George W. Bush was the choice of the plain people, the grassroots Americans who inhabited the place we know as the “heartland,” a region of humility, guilelessness, and, above all, stout yeoman righteousness. The Democrats, on the other hand, were part of the elite. Just by looking at the map, we could see that liberals were sophisticated, wealthy, and materialistic. While the big cities blued themselves shamelessly the land knew what it was about and went Republican, by a margin in square miles of four to one.55

After 2004 produced an even more extreme version of this map (Nevada and New Hampshire corrected themselves to blend in with their neighbors, Figure 5.4), a parody began circulating on the internet that showed “blue-staters” were internalizing this narrative, feeling as marginalized as their Democratic representatives in Tom DeLay’s House of Representatives. North America was now divided into two new countries: the blue “United States of Canada” and the red “Jesusland” (Figure 5.5).

55 Frank, 16.
Figure 5.4. 2004 election returns with the South and midsection of the country Republican red; the Northeast, Upper Mid-West, and West Coast Democratic blue. \(^{56}\)

\(^{56}\) [http://majikthise.typepad.com/photos/uncategorized/cartopgraph_0.png](http://majikthise.typepad.com/photos/uncategorized/cartopgraph_0.png) (accessed October 23, 2005).
Frank rails against manipulative talking-heads who capitalized on the ability of the “red-state narrative” to confer “majoritarian legitimacy to a president who had actually lost the popular vote” in 2000, and used it to “present their views as the philosophy of a region that Americans—even sophisticated urban ones—traditionally venerate as the repository of national virtue, a place of plain speaking and straight shooting.”\textsuperscript{58} Though those who share Frank’s politics may enjoy watching him debunk the red-state mythology of conservative pundits and politicians, Frank is blinded by his focus on political rhetoric. Red-state/blue-state language did not catch on because it


\textsuperscript{58} Frank, 16.
suited the purposes of biased pundits and opportunistic politicians. Rather, the electoral map had finally come into alignment with the geography of values Americans had long been carrying in their heads, one that was drawn largely by popular culture. Cultural geographer Ben Marsh presaged 2000’s red and blue map almost a quarter-century before it became reality, with his description of country music’s “Rose Colored Map” (Figure 5.1).

It is surprising that Frank, whose first book documents how business fell in love with the values and imagery of the 1960s counterculture, would fail to recognize the role of popular culture circulating in a consumer market in shaping the way Americans think about politics. In The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism, Frank turns the conventional narrative of 1960s counterculture on its head. The counterculture was not antagonistic to consumer culture, he argues. Instead, advertisers bankrolled its transgressiveness by making youthful adventurousness a hallmark of modern marketing campaigns. Frank’s What’s the Matter with Kansas should really have told a parallel story: the market forces that lead to big business’s “conquest of cool” also drove it to construct a market for the “square” with a soundtrack courtesy of its largest pop-cultural preserve, “old-fashioned” country music. Southerness became the youth culture’s conservative doppelganger.

As American politics became increasingly framed as a contest between the left’s pursuit of “social change”—a concept that grew to encompass the struggle for equal

rights by African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, among many others—and the right’s efforts to conserve “traditional values,” it was inevitable that popular culture and political rhetoric would draw on the same geography of values. The constituencies of marketers and politicians increasingly came to coincide. Cultural consumption became a vehicle for expressing social values, and social values drove decisions about how to vote. My argument has come full circle. The story of how we arrived at red and blue America, I believe, cannot be separated from the story of how country music came to cater to conservative consumers. And that story begins where this dissertation began, with the record companies’ decision to segregate and regionalize popular music in the 1920s. Hillbilly music carved out a distinct circle of resonance for white southerners, where whiteness and southernness were abstracted to bridge local musical styles and community relationships. This generic “southern white music” was ready to be nationalized in tandem with southern white politics: both found use for a geography of values that championed the South’s righteousness.

For many progressives under the presidency of George W. Bush, this moral geography feels almost insurmountable. They consider the South a lost cause, embracing a cultural prejudice that parallels the unsuccessful electoral strategy of 2004 Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry. Kerry competed seriously for votes only in Florida and West Virginia, ceding most of the South to President Bush without a fight. That year’s Democratic Convention in Boston invoked the city’s Revolutionary War mythology in seeming to recognize that a man could not abandon the South and still get elected unless
he offered a geography of American values that contested southern claims to patriotic virtue.

Though Kerry lost to Bush by the narrowest of margins, I believe this strategy is wrong-headed, and not only because it gives the Republicans a large block of Electoral College votes before campaigning begins. The South continues to have a special place in the American imagination, and Democrats need to reclaim southerners’ loyalties if they hope Americans will return Democrats to power. I share Thomas Frank’s conviction that an important step in this direction is making the hardships facing working people as a central theme. (North Carolina Senator John Edwards ran a strong bid for the 2004 Democratic nomination talking about the class division between the “two Americas” in his solidly southern accent.) And country music can be an ally in turning values coded as “southern” into an asset for the Democrats or a progressive revival, rather than a liability.

It may seem ironic to make such a claim at the end of a dissertation documenting how country music became complicit with segregation in the 1920s and fueled conservatism in the 1970s. I offer this history not to argue that progressives should repudiate country music—quite the opposite. My hope is that explaining why country music got wrapped up in these historical currents will make it possible for progressives to

60 I discuss my personal beliefs in the Introduction to this dissertation.

61 Frank, 245.

62 These are not necessarily one and the same—I would hope that the Democratic Party will be revived as a progressive force, but if it does regain strength, it may not renew its commitment to progressive values.
hear past the elements that make country music—and the South—threatening.

Progressives can hear country currents running throughout the periods covered by this study sympathetic to their politics if they learn to listen for them.

Explicating country’s progressive strains could consume another full-length study, so I conclude with a recent example that hints at the music’s potential. Songs celebrating everyday pleasures have come to comprise their own subgenre within country music. One of the most endearing in recent years is Lonestar’s 2003 chart-topper, “My Front Porch Looking In.” In the verses, the singer tells us of the land he has obtained, the traveling he has done, and the beauty he has had the luck to witness. But, he proclaims,

My blessings are in front of me—
it’s not about the land.
I’ll never beat the view
of my front porch looking in.

The beauty celebrated in the climactic chorus overshadows the accomplishments described by the verses.

There’s a carrot top who can barely walk with a sippy cup of milk.
A little blue eyed blonde with shoes on wrong ’cause she likes to dress herself.
And the most beautiful girl holding both of them.
The view I love the most is my front porch looking in.

At a time when there are so many impediments to such an idyllic home-life, songs like this one have powerful political resonances. This domestic portrait remains a dream for millions of Americans, who must work so hard to provide for their families that it is difficult for them to enjoy the view of their front porch looking in (if they are lucky

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63 Lonestar, “My Front Porch Looking In,” From There to Here: Greatest Hits, BNA 67076.
enough to own a home with a front porch). Part of what is so appealing about this song is that the stress that overwhelms many parents—who cannot afford healthcare for their families, who have to fight to make sure their children are looked-after and well-educated, and who are forced to work long hours at multiple jobs—does not intrude on this household.

While it would be easy to tie this song to progressive government programs, candidates who attempt to run on them are hampered by the cultural gulf that makes many working people skeptical that Democrats actually have their interests at heart. To Thomas Frank, this hostility is epitomized by a Kansas City bumper sticker: “A working person that supports Democrats is like a chicken that supports Col. Sanders!”  

Frank rightly points to popular culture representations of liberalism as part of the problem.

[When you flip through People magazine, you … read about movie stars who go to charity balls for causes like animal rights and the “underprivileged.” Singers who were big in the seventies express their concern with neatly folded ribbons for this set of victims or that…. [B]eautiful people of every description don expensive transgressive fashions, buy expensive transgressive art, eat at expensive transgressive restaurants, and get edgy with an expensive punk sensibility of an expensive earth-friendly look.

People, of course, is an unfair straw man for unflattering representations of liberals in popular culture. But this should not invalidate Frank’s underlying point: if politicians do not articulate progressive values credibly and other liberal media voices sound like they originate on another planet rather than in your own back yard, why should people in parts of the country who lost trust in progressive politics in the 1960s start doing so now?

64 Frank, 2.

65 Frank, 240.
Country music is now the choice of an even broader cross section of America than it was three decades ago. The imagery of country music provides a vast resource to frame progressive values in a way familiar to the Americans who must support them if the movement is to regain strength. How many songs have there been on rock, hip-hop, or pop radio stations in recent years that so lovingly describe home life? How many top singles on other formats have mentioned “sippy cups”? I, for one, have come to think of myself as a Jacksonian Democrat. Not the kind that came into existence under our seventh president, Andrew Jackson, but one inspired by the country singer, Alan Jackson. The refrain of Jackson’s 2002 hit, “That’d Be Alright” provides one of the best summaries of a twenty-first century progressive Democratic party should stand for: “If everybody everywhere had a lighter load to bear and a little bigger piece of the pie, we’d be living us a pretty good life, and that’d be alright.”

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“[T]he ironic interpretation of history is rare and difficult,” writes C. Vann Woodward in the book I discuss in the Introduction to this dissertation, *The Burden of Southern History*. The historian “must be able to appreciate both elements in the incongruity … [in a historic] situation, both the virtue and the vice to which pretensions

of virtue lead. This study has focused on the “vice” that give lie to the “pretensions of virtue” so heavily associated with country music. My intention has not been to deny the presence of genuine virtue, however. While much work remains to be done on understanding popular culture’s role in racism and conservatism, I hope that this study will free progressives to seek out common ground with country music fans. To close on a truly ironic note, I am moved to paraphrase Richard Nixon’s 1970 proclamation, “[T]he time has come to stop kicking the South around.”

The time has come to stop kicking country music around—understand the history of its vices and learn to hear its virtues.

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68 Quoted in Schulman, 37.
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