

Vocality and Femininity in Post-Millennial Country Music

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy in Music Theory

Title: Vocality and Femininity in Post-Millennial Country Music

This dissertation examines the differences in feminine expression as communicated through musical output and carefully crafted personae, specifically focusing on the output of three modern country singers: Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, and Lainey Wilson. Though these women share physical attributes, these three country superstars are distinctly different. In particular, I show how each artist's unique feminine expression has a distinct musical signature, one crafted through vocal delivery, lyric choices, and persona. I investigate how femininity is communicated through the country vocal sound of Underwood, Lambert, and Wilson and show the importance of the feminine country voice in understanding the sounds of country femininity.

Not only do country women tackle tough narrative topics, but female country singers also represent the working-class wives and blue-collar women in America. Country music, and specifically women in country music, gives a voice to these women. When women in country music sing about life, they represent the unheard masses of rural white women who have experienced or can relate to the stories they tell. Feminine expression in country culture and music is nuanced and reliant on historical and socio-economic traditions. This project offers culturally sensitive song analyses and works towards recognizing the importance and power of the feminine country voice.

This dissertation contributes a new perspective to the ongoing surge of music-theoretical work on vocality and timbre. The historically informed analytical approach allows for hermeneutic readings of song performance and reception and moves toward a framework for interpreting vocal timbre across artist output and genre. This project employs an interdisciplinary methodological approach, combining music analysis, feminist studies, and country scholarship to show how artists create both an image and sound in their music that communicates their particular expression of femininity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

What does country femininity sound like? Though country culture is often seen as strictly adherent to traditional norms, female country singers have portrayed a wide array of feminine personas, challenging the notion of a singular feminine ideal. The stereotype of the blonde, white, country girl pervades country music and culture, and though it may be tempting to assume all country women who fit into this stereotype are the same, this would be in error. This dissertation examines the differences in feminine expression as communicated through musical output and carefully crafted personae, specifically focusing on the output of three modern country singers: Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, and Lainey Wilson. Though these women share physical attributes, these three country superstars are distinctly different. In particular, I show how each artist's unique feminine expression has a distinct musical signature, one crafted through vocal delivery, lyric choices, and persona. I investigate how femininity is communicated through the country vocal sound of Underwood, Lambert, and Wilson and show the importance of the feminine country voice in understanding the sounds of country femininity.

My dissertation contributes a new perspective to the ongoing surge of music-theoretical work on vocality and timbre. This project considers the importance of vocal timbre and moves toward a framework for analyzing and interpreting vocal timbre at a broad level by considering artist output and genre, rather than singular songs or albums. I draw on established methodologies for analyzing the popular singing voice and connecting vocal delivery with meaning and emotion, especially the work of Kate Heidemann 2016 and Victoria Malawey (2020). I employ an interdisciplinary approach

that combines music analysis, feminist studies, and country scholarship to show how artists create both an image and sound in their music that communicates their particular expression of femininity. I connect aspects of narrative to meaning in order to examine how listeners interact with songs through an understanding of the power of the voice. Through this project, I will show the importance of connecting ongoing scholarly conversations regarding country femininity and the voice by providing a model for analyzing gender expression in other genres as well. I draw attention to the ways in which the feminine country voice affects the way that we listen—and relate to—the powerful stories that country music tells.

In this introductory chapter, I provide a literature review, methodological overview, and a chapter-by-chapter outline of my dissertation. First, I discuss how my project engages with scholarly literature on country music, voice, and gender studies. I then provide a description of my methods for analyzing vocal delivery in tandem with lyric narratives. After a brief discussion of the project's significance, I describe the dissertation's organization in the following four chapters. Through this project, I show how country women singers express their femininity musically. My analyses show how—and to what degree—these three representative country stars conform to the industry's gendered expectation while expressing their unique femininities musically through their vocal delivery, persona, and lyric narratives.

Literature Review

To fully how consider country singers signify femininity through their voices, I draw on a variety of scholarship, from studies on country music to timbre and voice studies,

feminist studies, and research on lyrics and persona. The scholarly conversation regarding country, vocality, and femininity has three parts. First, there is ample scholarly work on country culture and its associated political and socio-economic factors, but this literature involves little if any music analysis. Second, there has been an increase in music scholarship in mainstream popular music, but few such studies consider country music. Finally, there is a body of literature on feminism, including in popular music and country music in particular, but this literature typically centers on cultural context, rather than music analysis. To investigate feminine country personae and vocality analytically, I connect these three bodies of literature from multiple academic disciplines, such as musicology, history, and cultural studies, as well as areas such as journalism and media studies. Country's unique position as both a musical genre and a broader culture demands both a thorough consideration of the music within specific socioeconomic and cultural boundaries, and a connection between the music and the socioeconomic features.

Country's relative absence in analytical music scholarship is unusual considering the increase in theoretical scholarship on popular music. As a genre, country continues to be a "major player in the music industry" even as hip-hop and pop seem to dominate streaming preferences (Lidner 2023). Perhaps the general avoidance of country music in academic settings is related to the sentiment "Anything But Country," which Nadine Hubbs addresses in her book *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music* (2014). Hubbs considers class to be a motivating factor for distancing oneself from country music and its associations (3). Her argument that the middle class will listen to "anything but country" as a way to solidify one's own socio-economic class likely holds true in

academia as well. As country has become associated with “rusticity, southernness, stupidity [...] and violent bigotry, especially racism and homophobia” (3), it makes sense that the educated elite would want to distance itself from these perceived connections with undesirable traits, regardless of the reality of those associations. But continuing to cast country as unworthy is problematic; not only is country a widely consumed musical genre in the United States, but country is also important in any consideration of American vernacular traditions. In music theoretical scholarship, country’s absence perhaps relates to the perception that the music itself is simple and unsophisticated, and therefore unworthy of scholarly study. However, even in recent history, mainstream popular music was thought to be musically simplistic (and therefore not worthy of academic attention). There has been an increase in scholarly interest in country music in the last few years, with the first ever session dedicated to country music at the 2023 annual meeting of the Society for Music Theory in Denver, Colorado. In the same way that vocality, sonic space, and groove have been a main focus in pop and hip-hop scholarship, these aspects and others are equally worthy of study in country music. The country industry relies on authenticity and persona which are communicated through song, and more specifically through the country voice. To exclude country music would be to continue to perpetuate the negative associations and forfeit a rich repertoire from scholarly study.

Country Scholarship

Country music relies on authenticity. At its heart, authenticity is culturally ascribed (Moore 2002, 210). Country music, perhaps more than any other genre, is tied

to a specific subculture: that of southern, rural, working-class, white Americans.

Country music prioritizes perceived authenticity in both its listeners and performers, focusing on *who* is being authenticated.¹ Thus, socio-cultural issues, especially relating to class and race, are often foregrounded in country music scholarship, as country is typically considered to belong to the southern white working class. Country scholarship includes investigations of geographical importance, socioeconomic status, race, and gender, the latter of these with a particular interest in Dolly Parton.

Music theorist Jocelyn Neal considers how twang signifies authenticity in country's instrumental and vocal sounds (2018). In her other work, Neal examines how form and lyrics can work as musical signifiers and reinforce thematic content in country songs (2007). Country's themes are important because they play a role in maintaining genre boundaries. Songs that step outside the normative narratives can become problematic.² The artists I examine within this dissertation, for the most part, remain inside industry boundaries, opting for subtlety that affords them a secure place on country radio. Radio play a notable role in the perception of authenticity in country.

Country authenticity and identity are heavily reliant on the relationship between place and country, which has been a focus of non-analytical work. In his 2021 book, Philip Auslander describes the complicated relationship of place and authenticity that country star Keith Urban has: Urban was born in New Zealand and raised in Australia,

¹ Allan Moore distinguishes between first-person and third-person authenticity. First-person authenticity in songs is ascribed when we believe the singer is singing about their own feelings. Third-person authenticity in songs is ascribed when a singer is perceived to be a member of a specific culture, and the song in question represents that culture (2002).

² A recent example is Kacey Musgrave's "Follow Your Arrow" (2013), which defies traditional family values and gender roles by encouraging female listeners to "Kiss lots of boys, or kiss lots of girls, if that's something you're into." Since the release of this song, Musgraves has been scarcely heard on country radio. Instead, she found success through streaming.

but sings with a Southern American accent, and country fans don't seem to mind (96). Other scholars have considered how country thrives in the rural American South as well as in urban centers such as Nashville, Atlanta, and Austin (Moss 2022; Hubbs 2014). Examining the roots of country music in Nashville, sociologist Richard Peterson's book *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* considers how authenticity was crafted in the early days of the genre (1997). Peterson considers how music promoters, as well as the artists themselves, impacted the genre and its perspectives on authenticity. Ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox argues in his book *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* that country music is more than what happens in Nashville—as a product of the working-class lifestyle, it is also the intellectual property of working-class people (2004). Fox focuses on how country culture and identity is crafted and communicated in the town of Lockheart, Texas, providing an analytical perspective of the culture of country music.

Identity is a common theme among scholars of country music. In addition to working-class identity, there is also an American identity, which Kenneth Meier argues is communicated through country's thematic content. In his consideration of country music's main themes, Meier asserts that “all art is political” (2019, 89), and thus country's inherent political nature informs the topics that country lyrics consider, such as nostalgia, traditional family values, patriotism, race, and religion. In his discussion on traditional family values, Meier identifies a feminist countercurrent in country that he dates back to 1952 with Kitty Wells and is still active today through artists like Miranda Lambert and Kacey Musgraves (2019, 92–94). Considerations of gender in country music that take a historical perspective are rare, although that is slowly being rectified.

And much scholarly work that focuses on the history of women in country is often less concerned with the music itself. Nonetheless, historical accounts such as *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music, 1800–2000* (2003) by Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann are invaluable resources in the study of country’s gendered history. My dissertation builds upon this by offering historically and culturally informed analysis of country music by women in the post-millennial era.

Collections of essays on gender in country music have become one way that scholars have moved toward recognizing the “vigorously controlled system that has constructed a very narrow view of what constitutes country music and who is eligible to participate” (Bishop and Watson 2023, 2). By acknowledging the framework that underlies the country industry, scholars can (and have) looked to the margins. There is a disconnect between traditional ideas of femininity in country culture and the ever more progressive ideas of gender in the 21st century. Kristine McCusker and Diane Pecknold have edited two collections of essays on gender in country music. The first, *A Boy Named Sue: Gender in Country Music (2004)*, sought to highlight women’s contributions in country music history. The second, *Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music* (2016) focuses on how gender as a social construct impacted country’s development as a genre. In her chapter “Why ‘Ladies Love Country Boys’: Gender, Class and Economics in Contemporary Country Music,” Neal considers how (and why) tropes of gender and class are communicated musically (2016). Other essays in this collection consider stars like Taylor Swift, Loretta Lynn, Gretchen Wilson, and Dolly Parton. In 2023, another collection of essays, edited by Paula Bishop and Jada Watson, was published, titled *Whose Country Music? Genre,*

Identity, and Belonging in Twenty-First Century Country Music Culture. This collection examines the often-unspoken barriers to country singers who are not white men, as well as how the industry has maintained a seemingly homogenous image into the 21st century. Artists considered in this collection include the Chicks, the Pistol Annies, Dolly Parton, and Beyoncé.³

Race has been explored alongside gender in country music. From chart performance issues with Lil Nas X⁴ and controversy around Beyoncé's country album *Cowboy Carter* (2024), country's issues with race are still as prevalent today as they were at the genre's creation. Jocelyn Neal (2006) discusses race in fan culture, noting that country music and its fans are often treated as a "monolithic whole" that is a "homogenous manifestation of politically and religiously conservative, southern whiteness, with its host of intrinsic associations" (556). But Neal complicates this perspective by considering the daily activities of country fans and the individuality present in the genre. In this dissertation, I take a similar approach, but I focus on the differences that country artists present. Juxtaposing country and soul, ethnomusicologist Stefanie Shonekan considers how race and identity are communicated in these genre's respective subcultures in her book *Soul, Country, and the USA: Race and Identity in American Music Culture* (2015). Specifically, Shonekan highlights the similar issues that women in country and in soul share, despite racial differences. A key element of Shonekan's research is that race is performed differently,

³ This essay focuses on Beyoncé's performance with The Chicks at the 2016 Country Music Association Awards Show. For more on this CMA performance, see also Tinsley 2018. Beyoncé's place in country music has been a point of contention, particularly with the release of her 2024 album *Cowboy Carter* and the commercial success of two of the album's hits, "Texas Hold 'Em" and "Jolene," the latter of which I discuss near the end of this chapter.

⁴ In 2021, Lil Nas X, an Atlanta based rapper, released "Old Town Road" with Billy Ray Cyrus. For more information on the controversy it created, see Stanfill 2022.

even among groups that seem homogenous. Country music is a clear example of this, because of the socioeconomic associations. The narrative topics of many country songs, including quite a few discussed in this dissertation, are deeply connected to southern, rural, white culture, specifically those that grew up and/or live in poverty. The idea of being “poor white trash” is commonplace within country music, and the lived experience of the economically disadvantaged American white is a unique one.

One country superstar in particular leaned into her upbringing in the Appalachian Mountains and made it a key aspect of her wildly successful performance persona. Dolly Parton, the boisterous blonde from Tennessee, has had her own recent emergence of scholarly interest, with books such as Leigh Edwards’s *Dolly Parton, Gender, and Country Music* (2018) and musicologist Lydia Hamessley’s *Unlikely Angel: The Songs of Dolly Parton* (2020) that consider her songs, persona, and gender performance. Edwards argues that Parton relies on a “both/and” understanding by combining aspects of “the pure mountain girl” and the “white trash hillbilly hooker” (2018, 4). Hamessley focuses on Parton’s music, specifically by connecting her songwriting with her heritage. Parton has become an icon of country music femininity. In her prime, she accomplished something that other country singers would prove to be less successful at: she drew the love and admiration of a wide variety of fans from beyond just country and made the American populace admire her, regardless of any middle-class opinions on country’s cultural associations. The influence of Dolly Parton on modern country women cannot be understated, which is why in this project I investigate Parton’s influence on modern artists such as Lainey Wilson.

Dolly Parton's sympathies toward the LGBTQ+ community, along with other allies, has assisted in creating a space for queer artists in country music. Musicologist Nadine Hubbs explores how gender and sexuality interact with class in country music by contrasting rednecks and queers, highlighting problematic stereotypes that persist into the 21st century (2014). In her 2022 book *Her Country: How the Women of Country Became the Success They Were Never Supposed to Be*, journalist Marissa Moss considers how country music has maintained some of these stereotypes to keep certain groups of people from finding success on Music Row and how, despite the sexism and racism present in Nashville, modern singers like Maren Morris and Mickey Guyton have paved their own path to success beyond the confines of Nashville. In this dissertation, I focus on women who were commercially successful largely because they fit the image that Nashville desired for women. I examine how certain artists communicate aspects of individuality through their music and personae, even within the restrictive confines of Music Row and consider just how powerful the role of country radio is in defining country femininity.

Voice: Persona, Lyrics, Timbre

Singers' voices have seen increasing scholarly interest in recent years. Victoria Malawey notes that while the voice is one of popular music's "most gripping aspects, [...] it has challenged scholars analyzing popular music recordings" (2020, 2). One way that scholars have faced this challenge is by considering related vocal topics, such as timbre, persona, and lyrics. Nina Eidsheim asserts that "the timbre of a sung vocal line carries as much meaning as do the words uttered in a speech-act" (2008, 194). Voice is

intricately tied to identity, and Martha Feldman credits feminist and queer theory for creating a space that would lead to the “unleashing [of] works that deal with narrative voice, gendered envoicings, voice desires, and vocal divas and fans” (2015, 655). Another central idea in voice studies is the “grain” of the voice, a concept introduced by Roland Barthes. The grain, or body in the voice, comes from an understanding that language and voice together have special signification (1977, 181). This idea of grain has been reconsidered by Barthes and other scholars to the point that the importance of the grain of the voice is its sonic qualities, rather than linguistic content. Nonetheless, studies that prioritize language in song have also found a home in the overarching realm of voice studies (Burns 2010; BaileyShea 2014).

Musicologist Simon Frith raised the question “Whose voice do we hear?” in reference to popular song and considered the complexity present in any answer (1996, 183–85). Frith identifies four “headings” to consider voice: as musical instrument, as a body, as a person, and as a character (1996, 187). While the former two have influence on perceptions of gender and interpretation, the latter two are directly related to the discussion at hand. He discusses the ways in which the voice’s corporality influence the actions of both singers and listeners, noting that “the musical pleasure lies in the play we can make of both being addressed, responding to a voice as it speaks to us, [...] and addressing, taking the voice as our own, not just physically [...] but also emotionally and psychologically, taking on (in fantasy) *the vocal personality* too” (1996, 198). It is in the “taking on” of the vocal personality that Frith describes the complexity of voices. First, there is “the character presented as the protagonist of the song, its singer and narrator, the implied person controlling the plot” (198). By combining all of these labels—

character, protagonist, narrator, singer—Frith reveals that he is thinking of songs primarily in the first-person. Frith does note that there can also “be a ‘quoted’ character, the person whom the song is about” (198). I would add that there can be multiple characters who speak in implied (or literal) quotes, because stories can (and do) have more than two characters, especially those told in the third person. Finally, Frith notes that there is “the character of the singer as star”—the performance persona—and the “singer as a person”—the performer” (199). Understanding these multiplicities of voice is vital to hermeneutic readings of song.

Many scholars have built upon Frith’s work over the last three decades. Music and theater scholar Philip Auslander reconsiders Frith’s work and identifies three distinct identities related to voice: the *real person*, the *performance persona*, and the *character* (2009, 305). Auslander’s 2021 book, *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona*, focuses on the performance persona. In an attempt to untangle “how we interact with [a] track,” and the voices we hear, Allan Moore offers a similar distinction between *performer* (the real person), *persona* (or performance persona), and *protagonist* (character) in his book *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (2012, 179–181). Drawing on these scholars, Drew Nobile (2022) offers yet another division in the understanding of persona: Nobile differentiates the *song persona* or *narrator* (or the voice we hear in a song) from the *performance persona* (the projected image of the voice) and the *protagonist*. Both Frith and Nobile argue that the real person (or performer) is often detached from a listener’s perception of an artist and song. That is, most listeners conflate the performance persona and the performer or

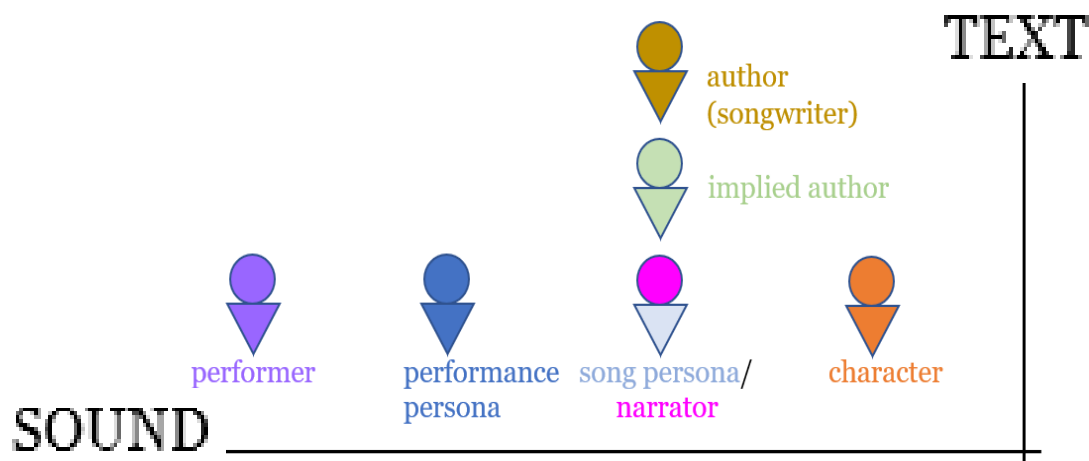
songwriter. The way that listeners understand persona directly relates to perceptions of authenticity. Nobile notes:

The relationship between persona and performer is a central factor in our perception of authenticity: generally speaking, the more we perceive the two as equivalent, the more we will interpret the song as an authentic expression. “Authentic” thus correlates with “unmediated,” as Allan Moore has described (Moore 2002, 213): any perceived technologies, training, commercial concerns, co-writers, or other external agents that transform performer into persona will reduce how much authenticity we ascribe. (2022, [2.1])

Thus, if it seems that a persona is not a true representation of the performer, listeners, especially in country, are quick to label something fake or inauthentic.

Authorship of songs has been a point of interest in the work of scholars such as Lori Burns, whose investigations of musical narratives and feminine agency rely on the inclusion of literary theory (2010). In the same way that there is a difference between the performer and the performance persona, there is a difference between an author and implied author. In songwriting this holds true—it is common for artists to purchase a song that someone else has written. The lyrical author and lyrical narrator exist in a

Example 1.1 Visual Representation of the Interaction of Persona and Author



different space from the sonic aspects like voice and persona, and thus, scholarship on lyrics is vital to understanding country songs. Burns considers the role of the (lyrical) author—or songwriter—in songs and asserts that “it is the narrator with whom the listener is ‘actually’ engaged [and] who serves as the mediator, agent, or voice of the story” (2010, 162). A large reason for this is the sonic aspect of song that does not exist in the same way in literature. We can *always* hear a voice singing to us—the song persona—who functions as the lyrical narrator. Example 1.1 shows a visual representation of how we might understand the ways that text and sound interact in song. Because the lyrics themselves (and the people who write them) are interpreted by a narrator, the way those words are spoken or sung can enhance the narrative, due to pitch variation and inflection, as well as the identity of the audible lyrical narrator. The way the narrator and song persona intersect highlights an intimate relationship between the two that directly influences how listeners understand and relate to songs.

The song persona is a sonic phenomenon: it exists when the singer opens her mouth. The narrator is textual entity, and can be a) omniscient and uninvolved, b) a character, or c) constantly changing (like from chapter to chapter or verse to verse). When they intersect in song, though, in popular song particularly, complications arise. If the singer is singing words, then *someone* is saying them, but who is speaking or singing those words? In Drew Nobile’s consideration of the narrator and song persona, he states, “We generally understand the persona to be the lyrical narrator, the one relaying the story in the text, and if the lyrics contain first-person pronouns we usually equate this lyrical ‘I’ with the singing persona” (2022, [2.1]). Nobile notes that exceptions exist, including when the narrator speaks in implied quotes. In songs that are not in the first

person (i.e. they lack a lyrical “I”), teasing out how we understand who sings requires nuance.

Why does it matter *who* sings the words? In Simon Frith’s discussion of vocal multiplicity, he notes that there is “the character of the singer as star”—the performance persona—and the “singer as a person”—the performer—and that through these multiplicities of voice “we like to imagine [what] they are really like, what is revealed, *in the end*, by their voice” (1996, 199). I am concerned with this final statement of Frith’s and the implication that the voice (in all its complexity) is capable of revealing things about the real singer that we imagine to be true.

We may be able to identify (and sometimes distinguish) the song persona and narrator. But it is also important to consider aspects of narrative authority and address. Narrative authority impacts listener ascription of authenticity because if a narrator does not carry the authority to tell a particular story, we won’t believe her, her sincerity, or the story. Additionally, Burns notes that “an evaluation of the narrative voice [can] signal that [a] narrator is not merely addressing a personal situation but is speaking for a larger community” (2010, 187). In country music, this is especially important, as the genre relies on storytelling. Singers take on the stories of characters that, at least in some cases, are distinct from the artist’s personal experiences. Yet they use these narratives and their characters as representative of the larger country audience. Narrative address is important in any textual context, because the question “who is speaking?” can be extended to “who is speaking *to whom*?” Lori Burns (2010) draws on the three modes of narrative voice developed by Sniader Lanser: authorial voice, personal voice, and communal voice. Authorial voice is the omniscient narrator who speaks in the third person to a broad, public audience. Because both this narrator and

the audience exist outside of the story world, they are granted the greatest degree of authority. Personal voice is arguably the most common in songs and refers to first-person narrators. According to Burns and Lanser, their authority comes from “self-consciously telling their own histories” and that women tend to be drawn to the personal voice because she “claims only the validity of one person’s right to interpret her experience” (162–63). Finally, the communal voice often employs the plural “we” and Burns notes that “narrative authority is invested in a definable community and is textually inscribed either through multiple, mutually authorizing voices or through the voice of a single voice who is manifestly authorized by a community” (163). While communal voice is less common, its power through community creates a strong sense of relation, which I explore more in Chapter II (especially pp. 29–30).

These three modes of narrative voice can also be considered in tandem with the idea of addressee identity. Burns considers both public and private voice, the former meaning the narrator addresses a broad audience, and the latter indicating that “the narrator is communicating to a specific individual *inside* the narrative” (2010, 164, emphasis mine). To complicate matters more, there is also the possibility of a narrator addressing both a public and private audience simultaneously, a phenomenon Matt BaileyShea calls the “double address” (2014, [22]). This possibility of “double address” works in song because of the smoothness with which singers navigate change of address.

Aspects of address (specifically, addressee) also highlight that voice can also expose information about the listener(s). In Philip Auslander’s performance-centric approach to the analysis of persona, he stresses the social aspect of performance, stating that “the performer’s persona is precipitated by interaction with an audience, and is, in that sense, a social construct,” one that is bound and framed by genre (2021, 123).

Auslander expands on the importance of audience investment in the creation of personae, noting that “this investment is not purely economic; it is also cultural, emotional, ritual, sometimes political or even spiritual” (123). Audiences have the power to accept or reject a performer’s presented persona, and Auslander argues that audiences are “cocreators” of musical personae. Country listeners, therefore, carry a burden to determine perceived authenticity and narrative authority, which is often considered by comparing a specific performance persona to what Auslander calls the “normative persona for a given genre” (121). Auslander considers the personae of Keith Urban and Darius Rucker in comparison to the normative country persona, who should “be from the American South, preferably a rural area, is supposed to be working class, and is supposed to look and sound like such a person” (95). While singers do not have to fit the normative mold to have success,⁵ those that do are likely to be easily granted authenticity and authority. Once a singer has an established and accepted performance persona (within the context of their respective genre), they are able to play with narrative roles, taking on the voice of the narrator, a character, or their own performance persona. This flexibility opens up a new interpretive lens.

I cannot analyze voice without considering one of its most prominent features: timbre, or tone quality. Timbre is understood through three domains: perception, acoustics, and production. Thus, I draw on recent research that focuses on each of these domains. Kate Heidemann considers how the body plays a role in perception and understanding of the voice (2016). Following Arnie Cox’s (2011; 2016) mimetic hypothesis, Heidemann draws on embodiment and imitation in her analyses of the

⁵ Auslander states “The existence of a normative persona does not mean that all musicians necessarily have to adhere to it—they may choose to adopt it or resist it or critique it or challenge it or change it through their own performances,” (2021, 121).

popular singing voice. By employing the body in her analyses, she is able to consider why vocal timbre in songs like “Respect” by Aretha Franklin creates such a powerful response in listeners. In her 2020 article, Megan Lavengood focuses on the acoustic domain, drawing connections between the sonic information of timbral qualities and narrative in popular song. Through this, she provides a lens to consider a song’s meaning and reception. While Lavengood focuses primarily on instrumental timbre, her introduction of marked binaries and spectrographic analysis is a useful tool in the analysis of vocal timbre. In contrast to Megan Lavengood’s focus on measurable spectral qualities, in his book *Nothing But Noise: Timbre and Musical Meaning at the Edge*, Wallmark draws on music cognition and describes timbre as more than an aural phenomenon, but a perceptual event as well (2022a). This follows definitions of timbre offered by other scholars (Eidsheim 2019; Fales 2002). By viewing timbre as a verb, Wallmark foregrounds those aspects of timbre that are not measurable or simply defined.

It is common for scholars to consider timbre through more than one domain. Victoria Malawey’s 2020 book *A Blaze of Light in Every Word: Analyzing the Popular Singing Voice* presents three main aspects of vocal delivery: pitch, prosody, and quality. Combining physiology, spectrographic analyses, and hermeneutic associations, Malawey offers a comprehensive list of terminology through which to describe the singing voice. She shows how emotional and narrative meanings of certain “vocal qualities vary dramatically in different (song, genre, social, cultural) contexts,” (2020, 27). Malawey’s book offers a framework for considering how a signifier can have different implied meanings based on their musical context and combination with other signifiers. In his

analyses of Alanis Morissette, Drew Nobile considers timbre in yet another way (2022). By categorizing different vocal timbres based on production and perception, Nobile examines how timbre interacts with narrative and form. I draw on the work of all of these timbre scholars in my research to provide analyses that are informed by the body of the performer and listener, as well as the quantifiable aspects of timbre alongside the more ineffable. Persona, lyrics, voice, and timbre are all intricately connected in popular song. In addressing the identity of voice, my analyses also consider how the body of the performer and listener impact interpretations of timbral aspects. Country culture and industry play a major role in crafting personae, especially for women. This directly impacts the way country women sing and how we understand their voices and stories. I examine persona, lyrics, voice, and timbre in tandem to offer culturally informed interpretations of country songs by women.

Feminist Studies

At the heart of my research is an understanding that gender is constructed through performative actions in a given sociocultural context (Butler 1988). Though gender has been part of music scholarship for some time—opera has apparent gender restrictions, for example—it was not until musicologist Susan McClary began to question how gender explorations might interact with music that gender was considered to be important to understanding musical meaning (1990). Where previous scholars looked at gender through the literal people musical performance involves, McClary viewed gender as a metaphor through which we can understand musical processes. Beyond simply labeling phrase endings as masculine or feminine based on their relative strength and

dominance (Marx 1845, 122), McClary argues that a “feminist criticism of any music [...] must also be alert to the politics of race, of class, of subjectivity, of popular music: those elements that have been traditionally relegated to the ‘feminine’ slagheap” (1990, 15). Thus, my examinations of feminine personae also rely heavily on another typically feminine aspect of music: bodily experience. Drawing on Butler’s theory of performed gender, musicologist Suzanne Cusick considers how musical performativity is also gendered (1994). Cusick asserts that the act of composition is associated with the mind, which is gendered masculine, while the act of performance relies on the body, which is gendered feminine. By prioritizing the body through mimetic engagement, my analyses foreground not only feminist perspectives as they relate to persona, but also feminist analytical methods.

In music analysis, the relationship between feminism, identity, and music has been a topic of growing interest in the last two decades. Lori Burns and Melisse Lafrance’s book *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, & Popular Music* considers how artists like Tori Amos seemingly undermine mass culture while still thriving in it (2002). More recently, Zachary Wallmark has examined gender and identity as it relates to branding and persona in rapper Megan Thee Stallion (2022b). Wallmark argues that Megan Thee Stallion’s signature vocable functions as a timbral trademark that is associated with representations of gendered pleasure and vital to her identity as a performer. Combining gender, popular music, and branding as well, communications scholar Kristin Lieb (2013) considers how female artists like Beyoncé, Madonna, and Taylor Swift followed a model path to stardom that relied as much on their musical abilities as their expression of femininity. My project continues in the same vein as these

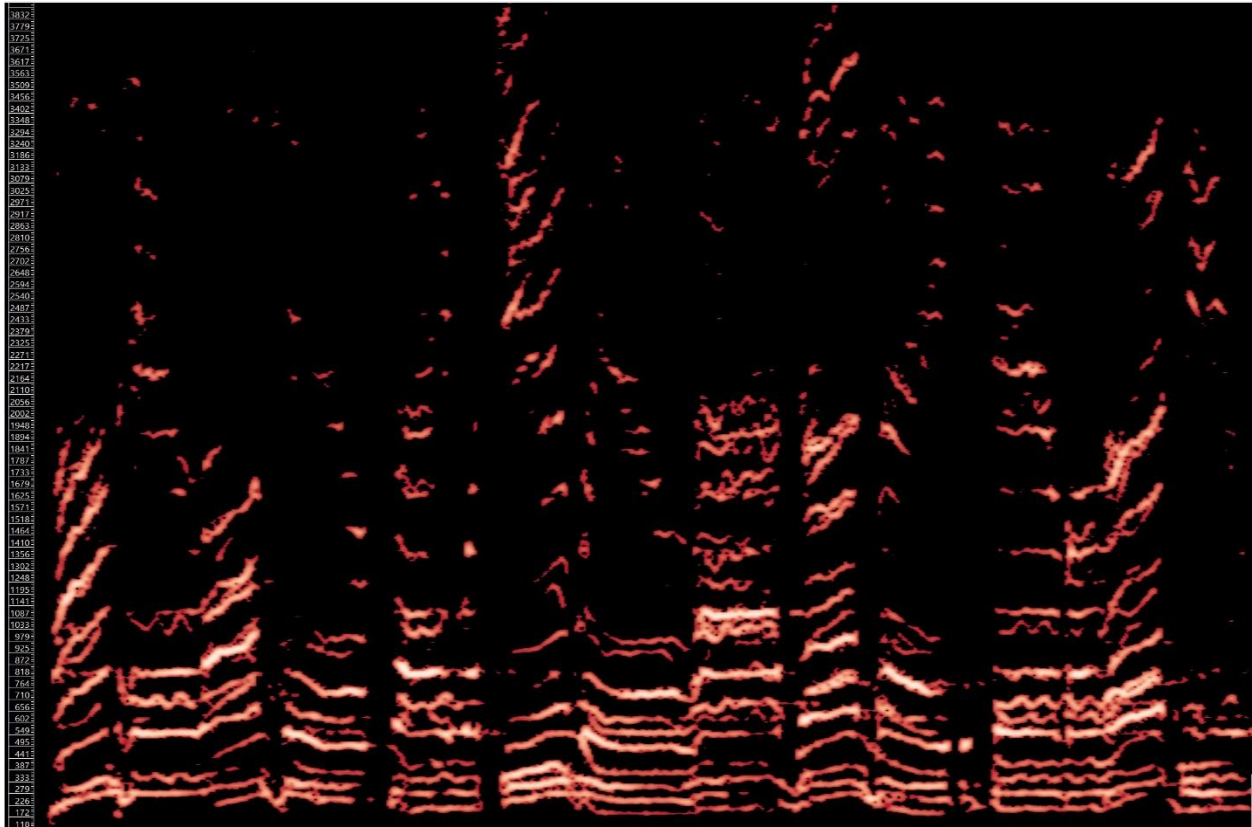
scholars by closely examining gendered expectations and conformity in country music performance personae.

In the same way that there is more than one way to do feminist scholarship, there are also multiple ways of expressing femininity. Feminist scholar Samantha Holland addresses this in her book *Alternative Femininities: Body, Age, and Identity* (2004). Recognizing that there is typically a mainstream version of femininity put forth by the media, Holland examines those women who intentionally rebel against this singular model of womanhood. More recently, Nordic scholar H  l  ne Ohlsson considers how women expressed rivaling femininities on stage at Stockholm’s Royal Theatre in the 19th century (2018). Ohlsson examines how two women, performing as divas, conveyed unique feminine expressions, despite the fact that they occupied the same performance space and genre. Ohlsson’s investigation focuses on artist “agency in the construction of their public image” (63). This dissertation takes a similar approach by considering women who share physical attributes, performance venues, and cultural norms. In an examination of Serbian rapper Sajsi MC, Adriana Sabo considered how expressions of femininity can be found musically. Sabo argues that Sajsi MC’s success stems in part from the rapper’s deviance from industry norms. While my research complements these, I consider country stars who appear to conform to the mold of a singular model of womanhood. I show that despite surface level similarities, women country singers push subtly against the genre’s gender boundaries while still thriving musically and socially.

Methodology

To analyze vocality, I employ various methodologies. Because vocal timbre is perhaps the most important in my analyses, I take two different approaches. When considering vocal timbre, I use spectrographic analysis to determine quantitative aspects of tone, such as the intensity of frequencies present in a given sound. Spectrograms, such as the one shown in Example 1.2, show time on the x-axis, frequency on the y-axis, and intensity on the z-axis. These visual representations of sound allow me to compare timbral qualities and certain aspects of vocal delivery. Following Lori Burns (2020) and Michele Duguay (2022), I use the program Izotope RX to isolate the voice within a recording. This allows me to focus on the voice itself without bleed through from other instruments (such as electric guitar or banjo). I annotate spectrograms with lyrics and other pertinent information, but because they are not readily accessible to some readers and because they can only provide quantitative data on the voice, these methods are often less useful. Nonetheless, the data on spectrograms offers valuable insight into how and why a voice sounds the way it does and how that connects with communicating meaning. Though we can hear sonic traits like brightness, hollowness, and fullness, the acoustic information is shown on a spectrogram and allows for more nuanced and specific hermeneutic readings.

Example 1.2 Sample Spectrogram (from “Hell on Heels”)



Understanding timbre relies on three domains: the perceptual domain, the acoustic domain, and the productive domain (Malawey 2020, 95). Spectrograms offer information regarding the acoustic domain, but as Kate Heidemann has argued, understanding through the productive domain can also yield fruitful insights (2016). Drawing on my experience as a trained classical singer in tandem with the theories of embodiment and mimesis presented by Heidemann and Cox, I am able to assess how my body produces specific sounds. This requires consideration of vocal anatomy and physiology, as well as vocal pedagogy knowledge. By employing my body in analyses, I can consider why some songs have such visceral impacts on listeners. I also use color-coded lyrics to indicate different timbral profiles, following Nobile 2022. This embodied analytical method is often more accessible to those outside of music analysis, and the

combination of a subjective methodology that prioritizes the qualitative aspects of timbre with the quantitative tools of spectrographic analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of vocal delivery. Employing these methods in tandem recognizes both the importance of the productive domain and the acoustic domain, while also considering that “timbre resides in the eyes (ears?) of the beholder” (Malawey 2020, 98). The perceptual aspect of timbre is quite individual. The way that we hear and process sounds is directly related to our upbringing, including sociocultural aspects and musical training. As a native country listener, I am keenly aware of the genre-specific nuances in song. My own perception of a sound’s timbre and my interpretation of the narrative may be different from a listener who lacks the cultural knowledge and experience of country music. For example, I can hear how Ella Langley’s twang shows her Alabama roots while Lainey Wilson’s twang is distinctly Louisianan, just as someone else might be attuned to, say, the aesthetic differences between a Telecaster and a Stratocaster.

In my analyses, I rely on aspects of vocal delivery (such as register, phonation, resonance, nasality, and twang) and persona (at all levels and including aspects of narration and address), and relate these musical elements to norms of country femininity. I consider how each of the three artists examined use vocality to conform enough to a singular model of femininity, while at times pushing the boundaries of country femininity vocally. Though vocal timbre alone can carry meaning and influence narrative, when vocality is considered in tandem with persona, our understanding of meaning is enriched by the cultural context that an artists’ performance persona exists within. For example, when Carrie Underwood sings about keying her ex-boyfriend’s car

with a belted, powerful delivery in the chorus of “Before He Cheats,” her vocal timbre and narrative interact differently from when Miranda Lambert sings with a belted, powerful delivery about waiting on the front porch with a loaded shotgun for her ex-boyfriend to return home in the chorus of “Gunpowder and Lead.” Though the vocality of these two choruses is similar, the narrative meaning is different because of each singer’s persona. Lambert is known to have “cultivat[ed] an image—as a ‘crazy ex-girlfriend’ [...] but it was also meticulously crafted and steeped in country music tradition,” (Moss 2022, 62). By contrast, when “Before He Cheats” was released, Underwood was known as the American Idol winner and singer of “Jesus, Take the Wheel.” Thus, Lambert’s vocal delivery matches her performance persona while Underwood’s is surprising in this context. From this perspective, then, intended audience and reception of these songs can be considered individually, despite the vocal similarities. Considering persona and vocal delivery together allows for meaningful and culturally informed analyses.

Vocal timbre and persona are the two primary factors I consider in my analyses, but at times I draw on other supporting musical elements, such as form, texture, instrumentation, lyrics, and aspects of pitch, melody, and rhythm. I incorporate texture and instrumentation to consider how things like sonic density and telos factor into a song’s narrative. Additionally, because country music’s soundscape is distinct—even a few notes played on a banjo can signify country—the inclusion or exclusion of certain instruments or prevalence of twang can change a song’s understood meaning, especially since country music since the turn of the century shares similarities with other popular genres (e.g. many genres feature an electric guitar, bass guitar, and drum kit as the sonic

basis). I include lyric analyses because the words present in songs is important—perhaps as much as *how* those words are sung. Aspects of pitch, melody, and rhythm are tied to vocal delivery and therefore I often consider these alongside other features of vocality. Together, these additional musical elements with vocal delivery and persona offer a more comprehensive perspective of the musical happenings within a song.

Significance

As popular music scholarship has gained widespread acceptance in academic music theory over the past two decades, the genre of country remains marginalized within the field. As music theory has sought to diversify the repertoire it examines, it has expanded popular music analysis beyond the classic rock canon to include contemporary pop, EDM, global pop, hip-hop, and a host of other subgenres (metal, grunge, K-pop, etc.). A quick survey of *Music Theory Online*'s publications since 2000 reveals where academic music theory's interests lie: in addition to the large number of articles on Western classical music, nonwestern music has had two special issues (plus quite a few articles), rock has one special issue and at least twelve articles or essays, and rap has a few articles and a special issue that focuses on Kendrick Lamar. But country music? A mere three articles exist, and in two of those, country is not the primary focus. Additionally, all of the country articles mainly consider country music before 2000. The diversity initiatives of the Society for Music Theory have been ample and effective for the primary areas of focus: race and gender. But focusing only on those areas leaves the field's geographic and socio-economic biases intact.

Country music appears to exist in a blind spot in music-theoretical scholarship—one that includes music that is associated with lowbrow, white, uneducated Americans. This is perhaps because there is a seeming lack of crossover: few academics are country fans (or at least proclaim to be).⁶ This project works toward rectifying the issue. I was born and raised in the American Deep South, and am intimately familiar with country music and culture, but I am also an academic music theorist, so my perspective is valuable in the analysis of country music. I was also raised in a Southern Baptist church and understand the nuance of how religion interacts with country culture.

Most of the radio stations I heard growing up were either country music or Christian music (and since I lived in Georgia, there were one or two hip-hop and/or pop stations as you drove closer to Atlanta). In church communities, country music was fine because it often talked about God or reinforced themes of evangelical Christianity, but other genres were associated with the Devil. Politics were not discussed at the pulpit, but there was an unspoken understanding that if you were a democrat, there was no way you loved Jesus, too.⁷ Church was preached as a daily lifestyle, but in reality, many Sunday church-goers attended only for social reasons, leading to what is known in the South as “social Christianity”: one might attend church weekly, but that is the extent of the Bible’s influence on their life. Social Christians play the part of a good, reverent Christian, but they could just as easily have been at the bar the night before or cursing up a storm. But it wasn’t really acceptable for people to *not* go to church, because then

⁶ Nadine Hubbs discusses this at length in the introduction of her book *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, citing the common phrase “Anything But Country” that pops up in college classrooms across America when asked about preferred musical genres.

⁷ This was mostly due to progressive stances on abortion, cannabis, and sexual freedom. These ideals threatened a holy lifestyle, and therefore, they threatened the church, too. For more discussion on this, see Brockway and Phillips 2025.

you'd be a heathen, and the societal structures that remain from the Antebellum South wouldn't allow an upstanding Christian to be associated with a heathen. The irony was always there, because southern evangelical Christians could be some of the biggest drinkers and most unkind people. In the hospitality industry, it is known that the Sunday after-church crowd is one of the rudest groups of consumers, and on top of that, one of the worst for tipping. Turning the other cheek and being generous may have been preached about in church, but it seldom made an impact on how people actually lived their lives. And country music knows this. There are numerous songs about the hypocrisy of social Christianity, often told from an insider perspective.

But calling out the hypocrisy doesn't mean that country singers can abandon the church or the Biblical principles taught therein. Rather, country singers have learned how to communicate with subtlety. They know the phrases to sing and the jokes to make to signal to their audience that they're a believer, too, and this perception of belief affords them the freedom to sing about morally questionable topics. The fine line in country music exists between acknowledgement of cultural and belief practices of the southern church and telling stories that address the ugly, immoral, and sinful nature of humankind. My goal with this dissertation is to bring a cultural awareness of country music into the music theoretical world.

In the same way that music theory needs to consider country music as it increases inclusivity and diversity, country music studies need music theory, too. While other fields have examined the culture that surrounds country music, music theory and analysis offers a way to get into the *music* of country. I focus on country vocality because the *sound* of the singer's voice is important in this genre. Victoria Malawey argues for

the importance of analyzing the singing voice “because most listeners ascribe indexicality to singing voices. In other words, voices function as indices of personal emotional states and identities” (2020, 28). The voice adds layers of meaning to lyrics and directly impacts how listeners relate to a song’s narrative. Voice’s intimate relationship with authenticity means that country singers must work hard to sound like they haven’t worked at all (Neal 2018, 51). Country vocality relies on a perception that the singer has a natural, or untrained, voice. Achieving this sound functions as a cultural statement of belonging. I bring music-analytical methodologies into the conversation to show *how* and *why* the voice imparts meaning at such an emotionally powerful level.

Finally, gender in country music has been established as a scholarly problem, but to truly understand the social role of music requires listening to women’s voices. The way country women sing matters. The use of head voice is often associated with femininity, and breathiness is often associated with fragility (Nobile 2022; Malawey 2020). By contrast, the use of a throaty sound or excessive belting is more often associated with masculinity. When a singer expresses a feminine persona but the quality of her voice evokes masculine associations, that conflict invites closer consideration. In the same way, the choice to pair vocal techniques that remind a listener of feminine fragility with a lyrical narrative that exclaims feminine strength and independence (such as Miranda Lambert’s “If I Was a Cowboy”) raises questions regarding the meaning and reception of a song.

Because gender performance relies on socio-political context, it is necessary to consider how women country singers express their femininity within the confines of conservative beliefs on race, equity, and gender. The complexities of right-wing

ideologies have gained scholarly attention in recent years (Brockway and Phillips 2025), but the connection to musical expression and feminine persona negotiation within this context has been largely overlooked. My dissertation therefore comments on the current political moment and culture wars that continue to divide American society. From opinions on what defines a woman and religious beliefs to the growing pulse of patriotism on the political right, the women of country music are in the middle of these controversies. Understanding how these women communicate their femininity musically is vital for comprehending the impact they have on their listeners.

In this way, this dissertation counteracts three scholarly problems: 1) music theory's general exclusion of country music and country music's need for music-theoretical approaches, 2) the application of voice studies to country vocality in a cultural context, and 3) the inclusion of music and voice analysis in the conversations about gender in country music. By synthesizing scholarship from many fields, I offer an analytical perspective into *how* women country singers express their femininity musically. By relying on my own cultural experiences and knowledge of country music, this dissertation works toward rectifying the underrepresentation of these artists and their music. Additionally, my dissertation moves towards an understanding of modern performance of gender in country music, based on the genre's century-long history. The artists I discuss have not only specific and individualized personas, but they also exist in conversation with archetypal women in country's cultural imaginary. This project not only foregrounds country music but also offers a model for considering how social boundaries (in any genre) might be pushed musically in subtle, but effective, ways.

Chapter Outline

My dissertation focuses on three women country stars: Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, and Lainey Wilson. After this introduction, my first main chapter considers country vocality. I show how analyzing songs by specific artists in the country genre requires nuance and careful attention to vocal traditions and expectations in the music industry. The following three chapters examine each of these artists as case studies. Despite the surface level similarities that these women share in regards to race, genre, hair color, and commercial success, Underwood, Lambert, and Wilson express their respective femininities in unique ways. I provide musical analyses of a selection of songs by each artist to show how they express their femininity vocally through song. Each woman fits within the expected boundaries of gender expression in the genre, but each also pushes against the norms in different, subtle ways. I conclude by examining how these three women, when considered in tandem, present a model of country femininity that both conforms to industry expectations and subtly pushes against the genre's boundaries.

2. Country Vocality

The first main chapter considers country vocality. I begin by considering country women throughout the genre's periods. I examine the social and musical boundaries and unpack the history of twang in country, showing that at times, the twang is dialed up (like 1950s rockabilly and 1990s country), while in other eras twang is nearly non-existent (like the 1960s Nashville sound and post-2000 glam country). Regardless of how much twang is present, twang is a vital aspect of the country sound, even if only as a novelty effect. Following a discussion on the production and perception of twang, I

briefly consider country's relationship with mainstream pop and rock. Specifically, I examine country's "coolness" over the years and how that impacts the way country women sing. I then discuss country's countercurrent of feminism and the importance of the feminine country voice. I compare the *sound* of country vocality over time by drawing on a variety of artists and establish norms of feminine vocality in post-millennial country music. I conclude with two brief analytical examples that demonstrate different expressions of country femininity. First, I discuss Dolly Parton's unique feminine persona and consider her smash hit "Jolene" (1973). Second, I examine one of the most successful all-girl country groups, The Chicks, and investigate how the famous murder ballad "Goodbye Earl" (1999) was in touch with 1990s feminism and paved the way for modern murder ballads by women. By considering the history of women and twang in country, I outline how and why country femininity for the post-millennial woman exists the way that it does.

3. The Good Christian Girl:

Carrie Underwood, Biblical Country, and the Narrator's Role

My first case study considers a model of country femininity that aligns with the Good Christian Girl trope. In this chapter, I consider the subgenre of "Biblical Country," which I understand as country music with an explicitly evangelical message. Carrie Underwood's rise to fame through *American Idol* and immediate success with country songs that talk about faith made her a family-friendly favorite on Music Row. I examine how her performance persona developed in her early career through songs like "Jesus Take the Wheel" (2005) and "Something in the Water" (2014). The former of these helped establish the perception of Underwood as a Good Christian Girl. The latter

reinforced that image almost a decade later, reminding listeners that though Underwood had challenged this established persona (through songs like “Before He Cheats” [2009]), and contributed to a new type of women’s country song that focuses on revenge. Yet Underwood still remains a moral authority in country music, even when she sings about murder and revenge. To demonstrate this, I interrogate the role of the narrator in country songs and consider a selection of songs from the album *Storyteller* (2015), including “Blown Away” and “Church Bells.” I investigate how Underwood employs pronouns, lyrical address, and the song persona to communicate aspects of her performance persona. Through these analyses, I show that Underwood’s image as a Good Christian Girl and moral authority contributes to how and why listeners grant Underwood the authority to tell stories about spousal murder and family abuse.

4. The Relatable Rebel:

Miranda Lambert, Vocal Rebellion, and Gendered ‘Crazy’

Chapter IV considers Miranda Lambert, whose persona I call the “relatable rebel.” Lambert has a history of stubbornness and defiance of various traditions and norms, both socially and musically (Moss 2022). In this chapter, I consider what vocal rebellion sounds like in country music before interrogating the idea of “gendered crazy.” I analyze a selection of Lambert’s songs, including “Mama’s Broken Heart” (2013) and “If I Was a Cowboy” (2021) to show how Lambert communicates a rebellious persona that remains within the expected boundaries of the genre. “Mama’s Broken Heart” displays a conflict between vocal delivery and lyrics through a conversation about generational differences in handling break-ups. “If I Was a Cowboy” raises questions about gender norms in country music, referencing older outlaws like Waylon Jennings

and Willie Nelson. Lambert sings as a male character, but her twangy vocal delivery includes a large use of head voice, which is associated with femininity. In the final sections of this chapter, I examine how Lambert's established performance persona interacts with that of other artists. Specifically, I look at "Hell on Heels" (2011) by The Pistol Annies and Lambert's duet with Carrie Underwood, "Somethin' Bad" (2014). Through these analyses, I show that Lambert's persona is not only influenced by the other singers, but it also influences song narrative and the way that other singers sing. Lambert's specific brand of 'crazy' is relatable to country audiences, and her "relatable rebel" persona contributes to the powerful emotional connections she creates through her songs.

5. The Hillbilly Hippie:

Lainey Wilson, Audience Variety, and the Untrained Voice

The final artist I examine is Lainey Wilson. Wilson is massively popular in post-millennial country music, and her authenticity and vocality have contributed to this success. A self-proclaimed "hillbilly hippie," Wilson's performance persona has a knack for connecting with different audiences, including those that might otherwise turn away from her twangy southern drawl. I begin with a discussion of audience variety to demonstrate that country listeners are not a homogenous entity. Rather, they span wide political and socio-economic divides, especially as country moves toward the mainstream. I consider how Wilson's follows in the footsteps of her musical idol, Dolly Parton. In addition to vocal similarities between the two, I examine how both women were able to reach audiences with different beliefs. I briefly consider the importance of the untrained voice in country before analyzing a selection of her songs, including "LA"

(2021), “Heart Like a Truck” (2022), and “Smell Like Smoke” (2022) to demonstrate the subtle vocal and lyric choices that allow her to speak to a wide variety of listeners. In “LA,” Wilson draws on the understood differences between the intended country audience and the mainstream in tandem with the use of narrative images that evoke the rural *other*. Though she begins with a first-person address that seems to simply solidify Wilson’s performance persona’s authenticity, her shift in pronoun usage invites the listener in to create a communal identity. “Heart Like a Truck” compares the resilience of the heart to one of country’s favorite lyric topics: trucks. With a powerful vocal delivery that showcases Wilson’s belted voice, this song interrogates feminine fragility by contrasting the use of vibrato with straight tone and raises questions not only about what it means to be human (and vulnerable), but also what it means to be country—the country voice’s authenticity comes from its perceived lack of formal training. I conclude this chapter with a brief examination of how Wilson’s vocality and established persona influence interpretations of the murder ballad, “wait in the truck” (2022) by Hardy and featuring Wilson, and how her voice raises questions about female victimhood.

II. COUNTRY VOCALITY

Patsy. Dolly. Reba. Shania. Carrie. Taylor. Lainey. The voice of a country woman is not monolithic, but is rather situated within a specific time and culture. Some voices are twangy, some are raspy, some are soft and sweet and innocent. But all of them belong to country women, and their voices are important because they represent the unheard masses of rural American women. They tell the stories of life in rural America from a woman's perspective, highlighting the joys and challenges of life as working-class wives, mothers, and friends. The woman's voice in country music is constantly changing, evolving with cultural norms while nostalgic for an era long gone. Despite the outside appearance of a singular model of country femininity, country women's voices represent the variety of country listeners. Through song, women express varied types of femininity, highlighting the strength, fragility, independence, anger, and jealousy that are all part of feminine expression. These differences bring women together by acknowledging that a woman's lived experience includes a range of emotions, rather than a singular, ideal feminine identity that women should conform to. In this chapter, I offer a historically informed discussion of women throughout country music's history. I then examine the history and significance of twang in country music, including how twang—or the lack thereof—impacts genre boundaries and crossovers success. I investigate why and how certain sonic elements signify meaning in the genre of country. Finally, I offer a brief discussion of gender in country music before turning to Dolly Parton and the Chicks (previously the Dixie Chicks), presented as preliminary examples of the discussion to come. This chapter ultimately considers the creation of gendered personae and sheds light on the complexities of country womanhood.

Country Women in Context

Women in country music have trudged through decades of stereotypes and gendered expectations in their pursuit of artistic freedom and stardom. From the genre's earliest days, there have been industry- and society-enforced regulations on how country women should dress, behave, and sing, as well as what was acceptable to sing about. Though the post-millennial country woman now enjoys considerable freedom in her presentation and performance, getting to that point was a century-long journey. In this section, I provide a concise history of women in country music to show how femininity evolved among women country singers, and to contextualize the modern stars I discuss in the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

Before I turn to the historical survey, it is important to recognize the idea of the cultural imaginary, or the collective set of values, beliefs, and narratives that shape societal identities and perspectives (Bieger et al. 2020). Examining identity formation cannot be done ethically without considering how society shapes the imaginary. In the context of country music, there are idealized archetypes of women that exist in the minds of country artists and listeners. As women have navigated industry requirements and musical expression, they have reinforced the idea of culturally imagined country women, who may never have existed, but are nonetheless real in the minds of country listeners. This can create tension between the imagined country authenticity and real (or perceived) country authenticity (or personas). The tension does not have negative connotations, but it does provide a rich area for scholarly investigation, because it is in the messiness that one finds the nuance with which artists navigate persona in song.

The Prewar Years

In the early twentieth century, most commercially successful women were not solo acts; women were expected to appear in public—and especially on stage—only when accompanied by their family or a male partner.⁸ The famous Carter family was one of the early country industry's biggest successes, and Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann note that “women performing in families were a reassurance that the traditional social order endured, and record companies wanted to stick with their successful ‘family’ formula” (2003, 58). The Great Depression saw an influx of young women moving to cities to find work, and there was a place for them in show business. Sister acts like The Three Wisconsin Honeybees, The Three Little Maids, and The Melody Sisters became an acceptable alternative to an unaccompanied woman (78–87). Country music thrived during the Depression, because even when money was tight, people still wanted to be entertained. Country was—and still is—the music of the working class, and during the Depression, the working class desperately needed an escape from life's harsh realities. A global financial crisis tested their resolve and mental fortitude. This exhausting daily life meant that country listeners, more than other audiences, needed the entertainment to keep their sanity intact and hope alive.

In 1930s Chicago, the National Barn Dance often featured women with strong personalities in the musical comedy shows. Lulu Belle, daughter of a convicted moonshiner, found success on this stage, albeit accompanied by her husband, Scotty, shown in Example 2.1. According to Stephanie Vander Wel, Lulu Belle “cultivated a

⁸ Examples of accompanied women in early country include Flora Baker and husband Jim, who recorded “The Newmarket Wreck” (1927), and Mrs. Westbrook and spouse, the singers of “Will the Circle Be Unbroken” (1929). See chapter three in Bufwack and Oermann 2003 for a more detailed discussion of women's role in the early country music industry.

vocal approach that satirized the nasal twang techniques associated with country singing [and her] slapstick routines called into question gender norms” (2022, 88). Bufwack and Oermann note that Lulu Belle’s trademark look included “pantaloon, gingham dresses, high-topped shoes, and her ever-present chewing gum” (2003, 66). Appearance mattered, because the industry wanted women who would stay inside the lines of socially acceptable behavior and dress. The unladylike qualities of Lulu Belle’s character were understood as lovably foolish and reinforced gendered expectations of the pre-war era, but audiences loved the comedic aspect of her performance. A rowdy woman with a powerful voice was humorous. Lulu Belle’s performance persona (and her outfit) eventually evolved into what media feminist scholar Kathleen Rowe calls the “unruly woman,” which is defined as “an ambivalent figure of female outrageousness and transgression with roots in the narrative form of comedy and the social practices of comedy” (1995, 10). Comedic behavior among country women was common, but when

Example 2.1 Lulu Belle and Scotty



used transgressively, Vander Wel notes that this behavior becomes “signifiers of white rustic working-class womanhood, which often and purposefully stand in stark contrast to the control and rigidity of dominant society” (2022, 88). The profitability of Lulu Belle’s quintessential “man-hungry” performance persona made her the first Queen of Country Music and her unique image was, according to Bufwack and Oermann, “the single most important step in bringing broadcast country music to national popularity” (68).

Compared to buying records or seeing shows, broadcast radio was affordable. Bufwack and Oermann note that it was called “the housewife’s companion” and radio programming was often targeted towards women (2003, 70). In addition to Lulu Belle’s “man-hungry” persona, other portrayals of country femininity in this era became long-lasting stereotypes. Linda Parker was the country sweetheart in her matching gingham bonnet and dress. June Carter, who first appeared with the Carter Family, exemplified at least two contrasting feminine personae during her performing career. On the radio in the late 1930s, according to Vander Wel, June Carter “invented the comedic role of Aunt Polly, an old maid character straight from vaudeville” (2022, 90). But after the Carter family dissolved in 1943, June Carter remade herself as a respectable young country woman.⁹ Maybelle from Mother Maybelle & the Carter Sisters became the image of motherly womanhood and domesticity. This is ironic, because after lead singer Sara quit performing with the Carter Family, Maybelle tried to settle down as a mother. Bufwack and Oermann assert that after six months her husband told her to go find

⁹ Stefanie Vander Wel discusses June Carter’s performance and persona on the song “Country Girl” and asserts that despite Carter’s rebranded image, her vocal delivery and lyrics function as comedy that directly comments on gendered norms in the 1950s (2022, 90–91).

somewhere to sing, because he couldn't "stand seeing [her] long face anymore" (128). Country star Patsy Montana combined elements of the sweetheart and tomboy with her knack for yodeling and popularized the cowgirl image, which Bufwack and Oermann describe as "an alternative to the shy country sweetheart, [that] sidestepped the lone-woman sexuality of the cabaret torch singers, jazz chanteuses, and Broadway stars of the day" (75). Traces of these stereotypes of country femininity can still be seen in the modern-day industry, though not as blatant as in the pre-war era.

The Postwar Years

In the wake of World War II, women's roles in American society shifted. With soldiers returning home, many women were pushed out of the workforce and back into the home as America's suburbs grew. Country music responded to the swift post-war changes by shifting the topics of lyrics to address issues head on. Women were viewed as domestic entities again, but since they'd had a taste of life working outside the home, perspective and attitudes changed. Rather than the Victorian-inspired cultural ideals of the early twentieth century—such as innocent romance, family, religion, and sentiments of home—Bufwack and Oermann note that the "previously taboo subjects such as infidelity (cheatin'), alcohol, and divorce became common in country songs" (143). The Barn Dances were replaced by honky-tonks, where men could go after work to drink and dance, often to the sound of a jukebox or a small ensemble of four or five. Honky-tonk vocalists were known for their emotionally expressive singing, which included wailing, moaning, shouts, cries, pleading, and whimpering, slippery yodels, and bent-note effects. Diane Pecknold notes that these technical imperfections were a "deliberate

aesthetic of vulnerability” (2007, 179). Finding a place as a woman in country was trickier than ever, because this style of music and the places it was performed in were dominated by men. But some women challenged the men on their own turf, including Texas Ruby (born Ruby Agnes Owen). Bufwack and Oermann describe her voice as a powerful “vocal bellow” that easily cut through rowdy honky-tonks and note that her “deep, almost-masculine alto” had no issues performing the new vocal techniques (144). Texas Ruby had a temper, was often envious, and wasn’t afraid of profanity. But while this confident individuality could be sold as entertainment, it didn’t last in more mainstream commercial settings.

Feminist Betty Friedan claims that “anything that disturbs a woman’s adjustment into her postwar role as a housewife was thought to be a problem” (quoted in Bufwack and Oermann 2003, 150). So, it made sense when Kitty Wells (shown in Example 2.2), a polite, shy wife and mother in her thirties, entered the honky-tonk music scene. Wells sang about guilt, remorse, illicit love, and betrayal in a way that was simultaneously intense and restrained, with a piercing nasality (Bufwack and Oermann 2003, 150). Subtle pushes against gendered norms in country seem to trace back to Wells, because she donned the gingham (or often polka-dot) dresses and was dignified and proper while singing what Bufwack and Oermann describe as “a doleful catalogue of cheatin’ songs that spoke directly to women victimized by the honky-tonk lifestyle” (2003, 150). Country women had now returned to their place in the home as wives and daughters, and their lyrical narratives changed to reflect the issues of domestic life. But by highlighting abuse and infidelity, women recognized their role as a victim in this traditional nuclear family lifestyle.

In his discussion of country music feminism, Kenneth Meier states, “the origins of feminism in country music and the opposition to the double standard for men and women can be traced to Kitty Wells’s response to Hank Thompson’s ‘Wild Side of Life’” (2019). Her famous response song, “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels” held hypocritical men responsible for fallen women, not God.¹⁰ The 1952 song was banned from radio and Opry broadcasts for being too suggestive (Rumble 2007). Wells herself noted that “They didn’t seem to write songs for women before then. Mostly, they were for men” (PBS 2023). And the country industry was made for men, too. As Nashville became synonymous with country music, Wells was passed over as a headliner for tours, with Roy Acuff advising “Don’t ever headline a show with a woman. It won’t ever work, because people just don’t go for women” (quoted in Bufwack and Oermann 2003, 154). This sentiment lasted for a long time in the industry. Producer Chet Atkins

Example 2.2 Kitty Wells



¹⁰ Hank Thompson seems to blame God for making “honky-tonk angels,” while Wells’s lyrics state: “Too many times married men think they’re still single, that caused many a good girl to go wrong.”

echoed the idea, claiming that “it wasn’t because they had any prejudice against women. They just didn’t think they could make any money off of them. No one ever had in the past, and in those days, women were confined by conformity” (quoted in Bufwack and Oermann 2003, 154). Conformity would continue even as country’s twangy honky-tonk style faded in popularity and gave way to the beginnings of pop-country.

The mid-1950s gave rise to a new style of country music—the Nashville Sound—that Jocelyn Neal asserts emerged “as a sonic modernization, urbanization, and sophistication of country music” (2018, 54–55). This emergence was a result of many factors, such as improved musical technology and the advent of rock ‘n’ roll. As the youth were drawn towards rock ‘n’ roll, country adjusted to appeal to an older, more sophisticated audience. This meant drastic changes to country’s sound, such as the effective elimination of twang, as well as changes in instrument construction and performance (Neal 2018, 55). Country women needed to change with the industry in order to continue seeing commercial success, and a prime example is Patsy Cline. Known for her smash hit “Crazy,” Cline’s debut album *Patsy Cline* (1957) was steeped in older country traditions: twangy instruments, pitch bends, and a carefree vocal delivery. This album included the initial release of “Walkin’ After Midnight.” But four years later, Cline re-released the song on *Showcase* (1961). This new version replaces the twangy strings with doo-wop style vocables and piano backing Cline’s now resonant and completely twang-free voice. Cline’s choice to change with Nashville meant that country as a whole genre reached new audiences. Her success as both a pop singer and country artist led to the genre-bending and crossovers that have kept country relevant and successful even today.

The Dolly Era

Country women often found crossover success after establishing themselves in the country industry, and this is particularly true of Dolly Parton. Her debut studio album *Hello, I'm Dolly* (1967) was aimed at country audiences. In a 1967 review of the album, Billboard writers asserted, "Dolly Parton has a little girl voice but it's Lolita in style on the honky-tonking, carousing 'Dumb Blonde.'" Parton's baby voice and blonde hair would become signatures of hers. I discuss Parton at length in the next section of this chapter, but I cannot overstate the importance of Dolly Parton as not only a blonde, but also as *the blonde*. Her performance persona is tied to her blonde wigs and the choice to portray herself as blonde was intentional. Tressie McMillan Cottom writes:

Almost all of the world's "blondes" get that way through chemical intervention. But *a blonde* is a body with a cultural history of purity, power, and inheritance. Dolly Parton could have chosen any kind of poor Southern woman to caricaturize, of any size or hair color or shape. She certainly is enthusiastic about body modification and performative gender. And the performance she chose is a blonde. (2021)

In country music, blonde became the standard. McMillan Cottom asserts that "when pop culture leverages 'blonde,' it is always as an unmarked racial identity. Blonde is code for white" (2021). And so the white, blonde, country girl became the stereotype because it evoked nostalgia for the past, a past that the industry wanted to claim as homogenously white and conservative.¹¹

Around the same time that Dolly Parton's boisterous blonde persona was changing the trajectory for country women in America, another woman was pushing feminist strength forward for the working-class. Loretta Lynn, shown in Example 2.3

¹¹ Scholars have discussed the racial history of the country music industry and the exclusionary practices of artist recruitment and promotion. See Watson 2021, Parler 2017, and Pecknold 2007.

and famed for her 1971 hit “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” was born during the Great Depression and experienced an early life of poverty and hardship. Married at age 13, Lynn had four children before the age of 18. It was her husband who encouraged her musical career, and her first record “I’m a Honky Tonk Girl” (1960) was inspired by Kitty Wells. According to Bufwack and Oermann , Lynn “mingled Kitty’s tense, pent-up quality with Patsy’s more exuberant belting and came up with her own style” (2003, 266). Producer Owen Bradley called her “the female Hank Williams” and “the spokesman for the ladies,” and Lynn herself said that “most of my songs were from the women’s point of view” (quoted in Bufwack and Oermann 2003, 266). Though her career benefited from the energy of the Women’s Liberation movement, Lynn wasn’t a fan of the movement. Her target audience was not the factory girl; it was the hardworking housewife afraid that her husband would stray for one of those girls (267). The idea of writing country music *for* women was novel. And Loretta Lynn proved that it was profitable, too. As her career blossomed into the 1970s, Lynn made history with “The Pill” (1975). The song’s celebration of birth control made it controversial, and many radio stations refused to play it—until Lynn’s fans pressured them into putting it on air. Lynn’s pride in her upbringing and humble roots ensured that the country music industry continued to value working-class dignity. Songs by country women upheld these ideals, but from the wife’s perspective: better to be poor and in love; than rich and in a loveless marriage (270). By merging Kitty Wells and Patsy Cline, Lynn seemed to unite country women. But the politically charged divide that was growing in mainstream America would impact the women of country music, too.

Example 2.3 Loretta Lynn



While anti-war protests and hippies pushed for a more progressive America, the country industry doubled down on American pride, including a commitment to traditional family values and gender roles, praise for God and country, and nostalgia for times before racial integration. Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" (1969) highlights country music's politically conservative bent, and many of the rebellious actions (like drugs escapades and illicit affairs) were concealed for the sake of a pure image (Bufwack and Oermann 2003, 281). Country women also had a role in maintaining and upholding these ideas. In 1968, Tammy Wynette's hit "Stand By Your Man" encouraged wives to forgive their working-class husbands. But it was more than forgiveness, because, as Bufwack and Oermann note, the song "typecast Tammy as the long-suffering housewife, forlornly putting up with abuse for the sake of love" (2003, 286). Songs like "Stand By Your Man" seem to suggest that women can find a redemption of sorts through enduring suffering, and reinforce that identity for a woman

is often defined through her man (2003, 286). Wynette's response to feminist critiques of the song was to flip the song's "problematic" lyric: she hoped that a man would say, "If you love her, you'll forgive her. After all, she's just a woman" (2003, 287). Wynette represented the women of conservative, working-class America and encouraged maintaining the family unit—even if she herself was married five times.

Another country star grew up watching Tammy Wynette and singing Patsy Cline songs before finding her big break in the early 1980s. Reba McEntire, shown in Example 2.4, with her "heart-in-throat" vocal intensity, auburn hair, and "howdy-neighbor personality," became one of the most awarded women in country music (Bufwack and Oermann 2003, 455). She embraced the music-video era by leaning into storytelling songs where she could play a variety of characters: suburban widow, cowgirl, waitress, and prostitute. Her showmanship and flair would eventually lead to a career in film, but in the last two decades of the twentieth century, McEntire was focused on, as she puts it,

Example 2.4 Reba McEntire



“trying to sing songs for women, to say for women what they can’t for themselves [...] I want to be those women’s friends [...] There’s a lot of women out there who just want to have that three minutes of rebellion” (quoted in Bufwack and Oermann 2003, 457). McEntire recognizes the social boundaries for country women. Though they might have strong emotions—and perhaps the desire to act on them—most women know that they shouldn’t rebel, because the repercussions are not worth it. So instead, rebellious songs fill this need. McEntire embraces the independence of country women by leaning into a sassy and powerful performance persona but keeps many of country’s grounding themes at the forefront (i.e. faith in God and authenticity). McEntire has attempted to stay apolitical throughout her career, famously saying in a 2017 interview with *The View* that “It’s not my place to share my political opinions on stage.” But not all country singers share her views on separating politics and entertainment, and for one all-female country group—the Chicks—sharing political opinions on stage would change the trajectory of not only the group’s commercial career and success, but also of the entire country music industry.

The 1990s and Early 2000s

The Chicks, formerly the Dixie Chicks, were formed in 1989 as the Dixie Chickens. A few years later, they changed their name to the Dixie Chicks and released their debut album—which was massively successful—during the height of one of the most booming decades for country music women—the 1990s. Though sexist practices still ran rampant in country radio and Nashville, country women were everywhere. Jada Watson’s data analysis reveals that women occupied the top of the country chart for

nearly 40% of each year between 1996 and 2000 (2019). In addition to the established careers of Reba McEntire, Tammy Wynette, and Dolly Parton, new voices such as Shania Twain, Martina McBride, Lee Ann Womack, Faith Hill, and Trisha Yearwood graced the airwaves. Their vocal deliveries varied: some were extra twangy, some were powerhouses, and some had crossover success with their pop-influenced country songs. All of these women are white, and many of them are blonde, reinforcing traditional ideals of what a country girl should look like. Lyric and narrative content was effectively a free-for-all—in the wake of feminism’s second wave, many country songs considered more progressive ideas, especially those considered women’s issues. And many songs from the 1990s, according to Kristine McCusker, “capitalized on the genre’s gendered roots from the 1920s and 1930s” (2023, 31). But in 2003, while performing in London, England, lead singer of the Chicks, Natalie Maines, made a comment about George W. Bush’s desire to invade Iraq, saying, “We don’t want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas” (quoted in Clarke 2003). The problem here was two-fold: first, the Chick’s assumed their listeners agreed with them politically, and second, the comment was not a women’s issue. The backlash from the country industry was swift and harsh, with the Chicks’ music gone from country radio within months (McCusker 2023, 27). I discuss the Chicks at length at the end of this chapter, but the removal of their music from country radio didn’t just impact the Chicks. Slowly, the presence of all country women on radio dwindled, leaving few slots for songs by women. The industry viewed women as primarily consumers, and the few women that were given airtime were the “safe” choices who evoked nostalgia for a time when women knew their place and knew better than to challenge it.

In this politically and morally charged atmosphere, newcomer Gretchen Wilson checked many of the boxes the industry was looking for. She wasn't sexy, so her image was starkly different from the poised and polished country women of the 1990s (such as Faith Hill, Trisha Yearwood, or Reba McEntire). This made her relatable to the average country woman listener. Wilson was proud to be a redneck, as she shouts on her 2004 hit "Redneck Woman." The song praises a simple country life, free of luxuries like Victoria's Secret and champagne. In the song, Wilson sings "I'll stand barefoot in my own front yard with a baby on my hip," celebrating the primarily domestic role of a wife in a nuclear family. Because she's not put together or fancy, she's not a threat. Wilson continues the legacy of Lulu Belle's tomboy persona and Texas Ruby's honky-tonk spunk. Marissa Moss notes that, "By default, a woman's path to 'authenticity' went two ways: Gretchen Wilson, scruffy and wild like the 'outlaw' boys, or Patsy Cline, captive to traditions" (2022, 163). Where once there were many models of country femininity to choose from, in the wake of the Chicks, the choice became more binary.

The 2000s Blondes

The year after "Redneck Woman" topped the charts, another young woman was forging her beginnings in the music industry through one of the most popular singing competition television shows. Carrie Underwood, a sweet, innocent blonde from Oklahoma, won American Idol in 2005, launching her career. She became the epitome of what the country industry wanted in a woman: white, Christian, blonde, and safe. Industry executives were not worried about political statements or scandalous wardrobe

mishaps¹² with Underwood, because her persona was a sweet, domestic, and safe woman. Marissa Moss notes:

American Idol also had an opportunity to help reset country radio away from one singular blond and blue-eyed image, but, for the most part, it rolled out a successive line of women, who, despite all being talented, fell exactly into that mold: Carrie [Underwood], Kellie Pickler, Lauren Alaina. Blond, blond, and more blond. (2022, 88)

And the country music industry would continue to roll out blonde women. The prevalence of blondes in country music became so pervasive that Moss states that “blond women were interchangeable” (2022, 93).

Over the next decade, the most visible female country artists were blonde (and, of course, white). One blonde would complement Carrie Underwood through her contrasting persona. Miranda Lambert’s 2005 hit “Kerosene” introduced the star as a rebel, willing to set high society on fire. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Lambert said, “I grew up on the classics, with Dolly and Loretta and Tammy and Patsy. And then there was Reba, and then there was Faith and Martina and Shania. And then...there was a gap—and it was a big gap. I didn’t really have a lot of help—like, no one” (quoted in Moss 2022, 63–64). This gap meant that for a few long years in country music, the two main women were Underwood and Lambert, and Moss notes that “Comparing and contrasting [these two] became the lazy crutch of not just the industry but the culture at large—you didn’t need to let two of them in at the moment, and you certainly couldn’t play them one after another on the radio” (2022, 92). The unspoken

¹² Country music has a history of wardrobe malfunctions onstage, including Dolly Parton, Taylor Swift, and Lainey Wilson. With women especially, accidentally flashing cleavage or other unintended body parts disrupts the portrayal of the modest country girl. Even as recently as 2025, Miranda Lambert received backlash online for performing in a short skirt that showed more than her legs. The wardrobe move was considered distracting and not family-friendly, especially since that was an intentional choice.

industry rules around programming women on the radio contributed heavily to women's commercial success in country music before the advent of streaming.

Aside from Underwood and Lambert, there was only one other woman—blonde, of course—who had commercial success in the early 2000s country industry. Taylor Swift, shown in Example 2.5, made her break into country music with the single “Tim McGraw” in 2006, though she transitioned away from country into mainstream pop after crossover success with multiple singles from her 2008 album *Fearless*. She was young and seemed a safe choice for radio executives. Her songs were about innocent young love (like “Love Story” or “Teardrops on My Guitar”) and she was able to reach the younger generation in a way that Underwood and Lambert couldn't, securing a new market for the country industry. But country radio still had problems with women, as Moss notes “the delta for women on radio was growing stranger and stranger, though there was mass superstardom like Taylor Swift, reality-born stardom like Carrie [...] and then little in between [...] Miranda, as usual, was the lone mainstream female rebel, but it wasn't even a straight ahead road for her, especially when it came to radio” (2022, 143). It would take over a decade for country radio to begin to embrace women as singers with the same appreciation as before the Chicks.

Example 2.5 Taylor Swift (ca. 2006)



Contemporary Country

The turning point for country radio's acceptance of women can probably be traced to what is known as "Tomato-gate." In 2015, *Country Aircheck* published an interview with expert music scheduling consultant Keith Hill. In this interview, Hill states:

If you want to make ratings in Country radio, take women out. The reason is mainstream Country radio generates more quarter hours from female listeners at the rate of 70 to 75% and women like male artists. I'm basing that not only on music tests from over the years, but more than 300 client radio stations. The expectation is we're principally a male format with a smaller female component. I've got about 40 music databases in front of me and the percentage of females in the one with the most is 19%. Trust me, I play great female records and we've got some right now; they're just not the lettuce in our salad. The lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban and artists like that. *The tomatoes of our salad are the females.* (2015, emphasis mine)

Understandably, the women of country were upset by these comments, and the Twitter wars and general media outrage that followed became known as “Tomato-gate” (or sometimes “Salad-gate”). Writing for *The Tennessean*, Melonee Hurt notes that “the industry’s first and very public food fight [...] ultimately created a platform for gender equality in country music” (2025). While the country radio industry still favors male artists, in the wake of Tomato-gate, women have seen more airplay. And it is not only the women who were already established stars by 2015, but it is also new singers that are modernizing country music for the post-millennial woman.

This modernization includes a return to extra-twangy vocals paired with lyrical topics that push against gendered and societal norms. Many of the new artists are still blonde and white, including Lainey Wilson, Lauren Alaina, and Kelsea Ballerini, but artists with dark brown or black hair—such as Maren Morris, Ella Langley, and Kacey Musgraves—are also seeing commercial success. Perhaps this is because, as Diane Pecknold notes, “the form of femininity that’s getting the most attention in mainstream country today is that sort of tough-talking, sassy, deliberately trashy country girl [...] think Miranda Lambert, or the version of Carrie Underwood who swings the Louisville Slugger” (2004, 43). Many of the newer female artists embrace feminist freedom and independence, lyrically and vocally. The twangy vocals of Wilson and Langley are paired with murder ballads or explicit seduction songs, respectively. Musgraves and Alaina are both outspoken supporters of the LGBTQ+ community, which some country executives are not pleased with. Radio host Todd Starnes said, “It’s sad to say, but Ms. Musgraves is part of a new wave of liberal artists who are determined to change the culture and twang of country music” (quoted in Moss 2022, 255). Linking country culture with

twang shows just how deeply rooted in tradition the industry is. But tradition isn't going away any time soon in country music, as evidenced by the continued relevance and popularity of country stars from decades past, such as Dolly Parton and the Chicks, who have both resurfaced with renewed vigor.

Though radio reigns supreme in country music, modern country music—and the women who sing it—have been changed by technological and social progress in the last decade. Streaming offers a new avenue for artists to release music, and modern fans of all genres are moving toward platforms like Spotify, Apple Music, and Amazon Music. Without the restriction and expectations of country executives, country singers can and have released songs that have been massively successful, without relying on radio airplay. The result creates interesting award shows. For example, Kacey Musgraves took home the Grammy for Best Country Song for “The Architect” (2024), a song that never broke the top 30 on country charts and had little to no airplay but has over 19 million streams on Spotify alone. More famously, Beyoncé’s 2024 hit “Texas Hold ’Em” has been commercially successful, topping charts and earning certified platinum status twice. The album tour for *Cowboy Carter* has been touted as the most profitable country tour of 2025, but many radio stations, artists, and country fans find this comical, because they don’t consider it real music. Country singer Gavin Adcock went viral for talking about *Cowboy Carter* at a concert, saying it “ain’t country music and it ain’t ever been country music and it ain’t gonna be country music” (Nicholson 2025). Adcock further clarified that though he respects Beyoncé’s artistry and success, the album “doesn’t sound like country, it doesn’t feel like country.” These sentiments were echoed in the many comments on the viral video, reinforcing the tension that surrounds what—

and who—defines country music. I personally remember one local radio host reporting on the tour's success who ended his report with, "Oh, let me check to see when the last time we played Beyoncé was..." and left a silent pause before fading in the next song, an Alan Jackson classic. Radio still reigns supreme in country music, but for those artists who don't fit the industry mold in some way, streaming offers a valid alternative for country singers to communicate with their listeners.

Twang

Though country music might appear synonymous with twang, history has proven that as the genre has evolved over the last century, the presence and pervasiveness of twang is more like a pendulum, swinging back and forth from extra twangy to the absence of all twang. For most of country's history, the pendulum seems to swing towards twang. In this section, I consider country music's history with twang. But what is twang? As a perceptual phenomenon with an acoustical basis, twang relies on change. Most commonly used to describe the plucking of a string, the word twang itself mimics its definition. Jocelyn Neal describes the sound of the word like this: it starts with a sharp, stop-plosive "t" before quickly moving to a "w" glide that "launches into multiple vowels including the diphthong ([e] followed by [i]), change in pitch over the span of its pronunciation, and a pinched, nasal conclusion ([ŋ]) that rings as it dies away" (2018, 44). But twang also has other definitions, ones that are understood culturally to signify either positive or negative associations (52). And twang can be understood as an aesthetic musical value, formed by the combination of various twangy instruments, production techniques and values, and a listener's own cultural experience (2018, 52).

In addition to change, twang relies on difference—that is, twangy sounds are intended to stand apart. They don’t blend in the same way that other acoustic sounds might. For the country vocalist, this is a good thing, because a twangy voice cuts through the noise of the band or a dance hall with ease.

Singing with twang requires more than what Waylon Jennings famously called “singing through [the] nose.”¹³ Voice scholar and pedagogue James McKinney states that vocal twang “is caused by a constriction somewhere in the pharynx [that] forms a small resonator of high pitch [...] or emphasizes a high partial through muscle tension” (1994, 135). Twang is typically associated with a raised larynx and a pinched feeling that results from the aforementioned constriction. According to Barb Jungr, vocal twang also involves “a tilted thyroid which stretches the vocal folds to thin them” (2002, 106). In her considerations of twang, Kate Heidemann focuses on where twangy sounds resonate (and vibrate). Specifically, she notes that twang can result in “sympathetic vibrations far forward in the nose or in the nasal passages” (2016, [3.21]). These vibrations often signal to singers that their voice is producing a resonant (and in country music, often loud) sound. When I sing with a twangy voice, I can feel the tightness in my throat and the resonance in the front of my face. Though there is resonance around my nose, the sound itself is not overly nasal, rather, the sound is bright because of the forward placement in the mask. The nasal aspect of twangy singing is also noted by Victoria Malawey, who notes that twang is a marked style trait in country music, and adds that twang “emphasizes the higher partials of a tone’s harmonic spectrum” (2020, 118–19). Malawey also pairs another useful term with twang in her consideration of vocal tone:

¹³ This lyric comes from the chorus of Jennings’s 1978 hit “Don’t You Think this Outlaw Bit’s Done Got Out of Hand.”

diphthongization, or the addition of diphthongs into what would normally be a pure vowel (2020, 119). For example, the word “pet” would be pronounced “pay-et.” This phenomenon is often associated with a vocal drawl, especially that of Southern American English, so it makes sense that it is prevalent in country music. Thus, the aspect of change in twang is forcibly added to words, enhancing the word’s twanginess.

The specific sound of vocal twang in country is distinct. Jocelyn Neal sums the sound of twang thus:

Twang in a vocal utterance is generally a combination of a tight throat, a nasal whine, and diction that features a Southern drawl, a rural Southern accent, or another marked regional accent that carries associations of rurality and working-class identity. (2018, 49)

Twang is distinctive and Neal identifies three analogies between the sound of a plucked string and the voice: an emphasis on a “tight tone, a tinny sound or buzz, and higher frequencies in the timbre,” an emphasis on change, particularly with vowel sounds and drawl, and a “wider range of pitch bending, alterations, and impressions” (2018, 49). Neal connects these vocal techniques with typical sounds of steel and slide guitars, as well as fiddle playing. While these instruments may have once been typical of country bands, post-millennial country has moved away from overly twangy string instruments, preferring a standard rock ensemble instead (electric guitar, bass guitar, and drums) with the addition of acoustic guitar and/or piano. With this shift in instrumentation, much modern country music now relies on the voice as the source of twang. Neal notes that “to sing with a twang is to affect a country performance” (2018, 50). One way to understand how vocal twang functions in country music is to consider textural layers. In addition to the four functional layers posited by Allan Moore (explicit beat, functional bass, harmonic filler, and melodic), Megan Lavengood’s proposed fifth layer—the

novelty layer—is particularly useful when considering country music. Lavengood notes that the novelty layer “comprises instruments whose timbral characteristics are more resistant to blending with the rest of the ensemble” (2020 [3.5]). Employing the novelty layer creates distance and “non-conformity to the mainstream pop/rock sound” (2020 [2.22]). For country music, then, understanding twang as a novelty layer makes sense. The use of twang functions as a self-exoticization. But the reduction of overly twangy instruments over the last quarter-century means that the country voice—especially a twangy one—is even more important in signifying country music.

Vocal twang not only signifies country music, but it also holds a connection with the body. Musicologist Suzanne Cusick’s work on the mind/body problem—that acts of performance are not only bodily, but also gendered feminine—can be aptly applied to twang, too. The sound of vocal twang draws attention to the body in its production, specifically the nose and throat, creating a timbral typology of gender. Twang does not blend and is often purposefully used as a means of differentiation. When we hear twang, especially in a woman’s voice, the feminine gendered body is highlighted. And in the opposite manner, when vocal twang is less prevalent, the individuality of a woman’s voice is tempered.

The use of twang has become synonymous with country music and all of the associations that come with country culture, including political, moral, and religious conservatism. Country music and the Protestant church have a long history. Country historian Bill Malone notes that “religious inspiration [...] influenced the way country entertainers sing,” (1998, 218). The twangy country voice and the full-throated belt that have been popular since country’s commercial beginnings exist, at least in part, because

of specific Calvinist and Pentecostal traditions of the early twentieth century. Specifically, Malone asserts that the former's "repressive doctrine" encouraged twangy singing with a tight or pinched throat because of the "inhibit[ion of] free expression of emotionalism" (1998, 218). The Pentecostal evangelists, on the other hand, encouraged singing, according to Malone, in a "free-wheeling, open-throated manner" (1998, 218). Because most social singing in rural southern communities happened at church, the way people sang (and were encouraged to sing) in church bled into the vocality of early country music. These sonic roots still exist today and account for at least some of the variety of singing styles in post-millennial country music.

But if twang is such an important sonic element of country music, why do singers like Miranda Lambert assert lyrically that "Country don't twang" anymore?¹⁴ Surprisingly, though twang is often important in country music, it can be taken out. The first notable instance of taking out the twang happened with the creation of the Nashville sound,¹⁵ perhaps best represented by Patsy Cline. The twangy honky-tonk sound of country in the 1950s was replaced by the Nashville sound of the early 1960s, which was effectively devoid of all twang (Neal 2018). Twang is an element that *could* be removed, and in this context, its removal was needed for the broader commercialization and mainstream appeal that the industry desired. For example, rockabilly star Wanda Jackson's twangy voice on her 1954 hit "You Can't Have My Love" is nowhere to be found on her 1961 hit "In the Middle of a Heartache." But twang would make its

¹⁴ In her nostalgia-filled song "Strange" (2022), Miranda Lambert sings, "Country don't twang, rock'n'roll ain't loud." This is a comment on the recent trend in country to be cooler—like mainstream pop—and implies that twangy country and loud rock music aren't cool anymore. Ironically, Lambert sings these lyrics with her signature twangy voice, making sure that her country songs have twang.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of twang in this era, see Neal 2018.

comeback, slowly. A few decades later, twang was back in full force. By the 1990s, twangy stars such as Reba McEntire and Shania Twain ruled the country airwaves. Country music would slowly start to dial back the twang in the 2010s as stars like Hillary Scott (lead singer of Lady A, formerly Lady Antebellum) and Maren Morris found crossover success with less twangy vocals. But this time, it wasn't a sweeping industry change. Some artists chose a more mainstream vocal delivery, but others leaned into their twang with everything they have. In the 2020s, on country radio it's common to hear extra twangy voices such as Ella Langley or Lainey Wilson followed by Kelsea Ballerini's sweet, but not very twangy, voice.

It seems that as twang rises in country music, country women get more brazen with the things they say. Twang's associated aesthetic code of "irony, defiance, and individuality" means that women can sing defiantly (Neal 2018, 53). In 1952, at the height of the twangy-voiced honky-tonk era, Kitty Wells dared to suggest that God wasn't responsible for making honky-tonk angels. After the rise in twang in the 1990s, the Chicks pushed too hard in 2003, resulting in a near-permanent radio ban, and a shift in women's freedoms on air. Perhaps the country industry is headed that way again, with brazen seduction songs such as Ella Langley's "You Look Like You Love Me" (2024) and Ashley Cooke's "Your Place" (2023). But these songs have had crossover success, too, despite their obvious twang. Country, as Lainey Wilson put it in a 2022 interview, is "becoming cool again." But unlike country in the 1960s, post-millennial country is keeping its twang—or at least making it a viable option—as its appeal broadens to a more mainstream audience.

When, then, did country start to become "cool" again? It may be impossible to nail down a specific time, but ethnomusicologist Stephanie Shonekan notes that there

seemed to be a shift that started in the early 1990s (2015, 12). Some scholars even go so far as to posit that country has “won at least grudging respect if not universal approbation,” (Malone 2002, xiii). Shonekan’s pinpointing of 1990 perhaps has to do with change in how Billboard ranked their top songs. In the early 1990s, Billboard introduced a sales-based scanning system (SoundScan) which ranked songs on the charts based on their actual sales, rather than reported sales or radio play alone. In the wake of this change, the trend that music producers saw back in the 1920s became evident (again): country music was popular, in fact more popular than previously assumed. Though the 1990s revealed country’s popularity among American listeners, in the last five years, country music has gone mainstream. This could be a result of social media and influencers. Lainey Wilson, who rose to fame in 2022 because of a viral TikTok reel, released a song in 2024, “Country’s Cool Again.” The chorus of the song asserts: “Everybody wanna be a cowboy, drive a jon boat, whip a John Deere. Everybody want a backwoods front porch with a tub full of iced-down beer. Must be something in the water flowing out of the holler, blue collar musta caught a new wind. Doggone, dadgum it, didn't see that coming, country's cool again.” Wilson notes that the things once considered trashy or redneck are now aspirations for many Americans.

In the post-millennial era of country music, the boundaries of the genre are impacting the way country sounds and its popularity. Writing for *YardBarker*, Amy McCarthy states that “country music is officially mainstream” (2025). But rather than the stricter boundaries of the past, crossover songs seem to be at an all-time high. And even songs that are distinctly produced and billed as country show the influence of a permeable genre boundary. For example, it’s commonplace now to hear a trap beat in

most Morgan Wallen songs, or to have a featured artist that is distinctly *not* country, such as Jessie Murph on “High Road” (2024) by Koe Wetzel. The shift extends beyond country radio and to local dance halls and honky-tonks, who now play hip-hop and pop songs alongside country hits. But it’s not just having them play in the background that’s interesting: these songs have dedicated line dance choreography. Country’s once rigid genre boundaries now show influence flowing both directions. Country artists produce songs intended for crossover success, and country fans have accepted and normalized aspects of other genres in country culture. Perhaps this is also a reason for the move toward less traditional appearances among country stars, such as Jelly Roll and Post Malone, who both sport face tattoos. And for women in country, it seems the model of blonde femininity, is slowly expanding. But even as the appearance of country stars changes, twang is still an important aspect to the sound of country music, whether instrumental or vocal twang. And the way the latter is implemented impacts the way we understand and relate to country songs.

Gender

Being a woman in country culture is complicated. Modern country music’s love of nostalgia means that singers can draw upon historical associations between gender and the voice, many of which became more solidified in the early twentieth century, particularly with the rise of recording and radio. In 1927, the Carter Family traveled to Bristol for what would become a historic recording session. The records that resulted were “the birth of the country music industry,” and rural Americans couldn’t get enough of the tight harmonies and songs that had been passed down for generations (Bufwack

and Oermann 2003, 43). Their music belonged to “the tradition of homemade, private, living-room music that had long been the province of mountain women,” and thus the image associated with the Carter Family was one of “home, hearth, [and] family [...] theirs was a universe of old-fashioned female ideals, of traditional male domination,” (2003, 49-50). Not only were the women in the Carter Family only successful because they were chaperoned by men, but also their voices were simple and unadorned, like a proper mountain wife ought to be. There were no frills or fancy vocal techniques, there were only plain voices that matched with the plain life of poor, rural Americans in the 20s and 30s.

A few decades later, in the wake of World War II and in the midst of the baby boom, Mary Bufwack and Rob Oermann note that “child rearing and housewifery became the renewed focus of women’s lives [...] Women’s responsibilities as homemakers and wives included being beautiful, gracious hostesses, as well as sexy, alluring partners” (2003, 142). As discussed above, country music changed with the Second World War, too. Bufwack and Oermann describe the shift thus:

Much of prewar country music had drawn its inspiration from Victorian culture. Innocent romance and sentiments of home, family, and religion predominated as country themes. Old-time country music mourned dead children, praised the Lord, revered Mother, waxed nostalgic for the good old days, pitied the poor, idealized rural life, preserved our folk music heritage, and venerated hearts-and-flowers love. WorldWar II and its aftermath changed all of that forever. [...] Such previously taboo subjects as infidelity (cheatin’), alcohol, and divorce became common in country songs [...] The intimate, plaintive sound of the *National Barn Dance* harmonizers and the softly mournful style of acts like the Carter Family seemed totally outmoded. Singers became histrionic. Instrumentation thudded with bass and whined with steel guitars. (2003, 143)

With the wider variety of lyrical topics and instrumentation, women expanded the way they sang, too. Gone were the days of the unadorned, simplistic country voice, replaced

by women who knew their sex appeal would sell and sang like it. Kenneth Meier identifies six themes of country music (the goodness of the common man, family values, patriotism, race, religion, and nostalgia) and talks at length about the “feminist countercurrent” in his discussion of family values in country music (2019). He traces this movement back to Kitty Wells and her 1952 smash hit about honky-tonk angels. As the feminist movement pushed through waves of change, women in country music responded.

But mainstream feminist thought has been at odds with rural white women. In Emmaline Soken-Huberty’s descriptions of the four waves of feminism, she notes that in the second wave “three main types of feminism emerged: mainstream/liberal, radical, and cultural” (2021). Mainstream feminism is primarily focused on institutional reforms; radical feminism desires a complete reshaping of society away from a patriarchal structure; and cultural feminism focuses on the distinct “female essence” (2021). In this dissertation, I refer to mainstream feminist thought as it is often the loudest type of feminism portrayed in the media, and the type pushing for the most institutional change. For example, fourth-wave mainstream feminism often focuses on transgender rights and racial activism. Both of these ideas tend to run counter to the values that the country industry holds dear. Marissa Moss notes that feminism is “often as dirty a phrase in Nashville as the Chicks” (2022, 236). This is perhaps also due to the differences between coastal elite images of feminism and the experiences of country women. Stephanie Shonekan notes that these women forged their own version of a new woman’s identity “that allows for a customized characterization of self-esteem and self-empowerment” (2015, 100). Customization is important here, because as the tides of

political movements and gender barriers rose and fell, country women adopted a sort of “take it or leave it” mentality. Dolly Parton embraced women in the workplace with “9 to 5” and Loretta Lynn sang about birth control in “The Pill,” but neither singer will categorize herself as a feminist (Moss 2022, 236).

Some singers choose to subtly embrace aspects of feminism, and one common way is to rebel against the “stereotypically masculine good ol’ boy character” that pervades country music (Neal 2016, 6). This alpha-male character often searches for a specific type of country girl embodied by “The Dukes of Hazzard” television character Daisy Duke, shown in Example 2.6 below. In country music, her character began to represent what a girl in a country song should be, and includes the short cut off jeans now known as Daisy Dukes. The stereotype was so pervasive that in 2014 country duo Maddie & Tae released “Girl in a Country Song.” The song’s chorus highlights the problems with the stereotype: “Bein’ the girl in a country song, how in the world did it go so wrong? Like all we’re good for is looking good for you and your friends on the weekend, nothing more. We used to get a little respect, now we’re lucky if we even get to climb up in your truck, keep our mouth shut and ride along, and be the girl in a country song.” The song references multiple bro-country songs of the early 2000s and 2010s and laments the loss of an era of country music when women were treated (supposedly) with more respect. Marissa Moss notes that other country women “represented a way to subvert masculinity that the rest of the genre was most interested in peddling,” specifically artists like Kacey Musgraves, Reba McEntire, and the Judds (2022, 170). Themes of feminine independence and strength are common in country music as a subtle push against the historically gendered country girl.

Example 2.6 The Character Daisy Duke, from “The Dukes of Hazzard”



On the other end of the spectrum, some women in country music have leaned into traditional values that seem to be in direct opposition to the feminist movement. Because nostalgia runs deep in country music, it's not uncommon for country women to choose traditional lyrical topics, such as embracing the joy of motherhood in a nuclear family. For example, Carrie Underwood's 2007 #1 hit "All-American Girl" celebrates the experience of having a daughter, even when one might have wanted a son. And Gabby Barrett's 2024 hit "Growin' Up Raising You" describes the pride and joy of being a mother, joining the recent "tradwife" movement.¹⁶ Songs like these show that feminism in country music is not one-size-fits-all, and that some country women experience empowerment in ways vastly different from mainstream feminist thought. From early considerations on a woman's place in the family as homemaker to more modern statements on revenge and cheating husbands, country women have found the space in music to explore difficult themes, from abortion and motherhood to domestic abuse.

¹⁶ The tradwife movement is associated with a desire to return to the ways of women in the 1950s, including prioritizing childbearing and child rearing, wifely duties, and a politically and religiously conservative outlook on life.

But why is the feminine country voice important? It's not just because of the way women sing or the lyrical topics they sing about, it's also that female country singers represent the working-class wives and blue-collar women in America. These women are not only marginalized by the mainstream media but are often criticized for their choices. Despite attempts to foster inclusivity for all women, Soken-Huberty recognizes that the complexity of the feminist movement means that some ideas clash with each other and calls this tension "unavoidable" (2021). For example, when #tradwife started trending in 2024 with Hannah Neelman's picturesque Instagram account @ballerinafarm, many women, especially those with more traditional values who desire a rural life, saw Neelman as an inspiration. In an interview with *Parents*, Meg Tibyan said that "tradwives often promote a return to what they see as more 'natural' gender roles, which can sometimes be viewed as regressive or contrary to modern feminist ideals" (West-Rosenthal 2024). To those who buy in, the #tradwife lifestyle is perceived as fulfilling and meaningful. But Tibyan asserts that "detractors view it as an attempt to restrict women's rights and limit their potential" (2024). The tension here is evident: women who choose to live their life according to their personal values and beliefs—particularly if those beliefs don't line up with more progressive feminist ideas—are seen as reversing the advances of the feminist movement's latter waves.

Country music, and specifically women in country music, give a voice to these women. Singers often use communal voice, which Lori Burns describes as "the voice of a single individual who is manifestly authorized by a community" (2010, 163). The authority of a communal voice is "invested in a definable community and is textually inscribed" (2010, 163). Thus, the communal voice functions as representative for a

specific group of people in a certain cultural context. When women in country music sing about life, they represent the unheard masses of rural white women who have experienced or can relate to the narrative topics at hand.

Dolly Parton

Dolly Parton, shown in Example 2.7, was born in Tennessee as the fourth of twelve children. She grew up in poverty, but this would become an important factor in her success as a country singer, because growing up in a poor, working-class family means that listeners grant her authenticity. But her persona onstage was anything but poor. Country scholar Leigh Edwards notes that “Parton is instantly recognizable for her big blonde wigs, elaborate makeup that she claims to never remove, five-inch high heels, long fake nails, plastic surgery breast implants, and custom-made campy outfits” (2018, 1–2). Parton’s “exaggerated performance of country womanhood” has made her a

Example 2.7 Dolly Parton



“highly gendered popular music icon” (2018, 2). Parton’s signature blonde look helped cement the blonde stereotype that pervades country music, even today. But, according to Edwards, “Parton’s star image and oeuvre intervene in the country genre’s authenticity debates through her ‘fake and real’ rhetoric in her authenticity narrative, combining her knowingly artificial image with sincerity in her personality, life story, and lyrics” (2023, 140). Parton’s high-glam performance persona “critiques stereotypical ideas of femininity in country music” (2018, 3). Edwards describes Parton’s gendered performance persona thus:

Parton’s implicit model of gender performance is to combine a more traditional version of gender with some subversive elements. Parton does so in a way that is deeply contextual, meaning she takes familiar media images from country music performance history and patches them together. Parton seizes a particular kind of cultural power when she merges her specific image of the “pure” mountain girl, which is a culturally privileged version of femininity, with her subversive image of a “poor white trash hillbilly hooker.” In so doing, Parton claims the power of dominant cultural narratives of feminine purity and innocence. But she also challenges how the stereotypical “poor white trash” “fallen woman” has been put down or stigmatized. Parton incorporates elements of the oversexed female hillbilly in an exaggerated way that draws attention to how it is a problematic stereotype; her parody of the tramp creates ironic distance from that stereotype. By bringing the two gendered images together, she critiques the stereotypical ideal of feminine “purity” by combining it with its opposite, the “fallen” woman. She shows both to be mere stereotypes, and she condemns the way those images have been limiting for women. (Edwards 2018, 4–5)

By foregrounding gender in her performance persona, Parton questions the gendered expectations and restrictions in the music industry, especially in country music. In an interview, Parton said, “I really feel I can live my femininity and actually show that you can be a woman and you can still do whatever you want to do” (quoted in Moss 2022, 63). Her smash hit “9 to 5” (1980) comments on the life and woes of a working woman, and she is one of the most outspoken country artists to support the LGBTQ+ community. Edwards notes that Parton’s “oeuvre lifts stereotypes for women

as well as for the genre itself, suggesting that neither women nor the country music genre needs to conform to limiting notions of purity or corruption” (2018, 9). Many country artists list Parton as a major influence on their own music, and her philanthropic efforts have helped make her a household name.

Dolly Parton’s performance persona has immense impact, but her vocal delivery is just as unique. Specifically, her high soprano voice is unique from other country singers, who historically have sung primarily in chest voice. Kate Heidemann describes Parton’s “baby” voice, noting that its production requires a closed and constricted larynx (2016 [3.16]). But Parton’s wide range of lyrical characters calls for a variety of vocal delivery techniques. At times she pleads and murmurs, occasionally she yodels, but her default vocal delivery is a relaxed head voice with notable vibrato. She doesn’t typically belt higher pitches, and the softness of her head register contributes to the “pure mountain girl” aspect of her persona.

“Jolene” (1973)

One of Dolly Parton’s best-known hits, “Jolene” (1973) is a statement on gender roles and responsibilities. The unnamed speaker begs a woman, Jolene, not to take her man. This position of power deferment has been read as upholding traditional gender roles and family values, because the narrator effectively holds the mistress responsible for the man’s infidelity (Edwards 2018). Other scholars have interpreted the song to have a “queer aura” (Hubbs 2015, 73) both because of the narrator’s obsessive and adoring lyrics regarding Jolene’s physical appearance and because the lyrics seem to lack the common anger and animosity towards the “other woman” (as in, for instance, Loretta

Lynn's "You Ain't Woman Enough to Take My Man" [1966] and Carrie Underwood's "Before He Cheats" [2005]). This posture highlights the sadness that Jolene feels and draws attention to the fact that not all women process trauma—in this case, possible infidelity—the same way.

Not only has the song itself been massively influential, but the character Jolene has permeated country music and culture. For example, Miranda Lambert released the song "Geraldene" on her 2022 album *Palomino*. "Geraldene" is not a cover of "Jolene," but it does reference Parton's original song and Jolene's character. The end of the first verse is an explicit reference to Parton's original with the lyric, "You're trailer park pretty but you're never gonna be Jolene." The chorus also nods to Parton's version with the repetition of the name "Geraldene," but the chorus's final line shows that the message is quite different from the original. Lambert sings "But you can't take a man from me, Geraldene." Rather than a pleading approach, Lambert takes a confident stance: she knows that Geraldene could *never* take her man. Vocally, Lambert draws on the associations of female rockers, referencing the Runaways' "Cherry Bomb" (1976) by repeating the first phoneme of the name Geraldene ("G-G-G-G-Geraldene"). Both "Cherry Bomb" and "Jolene" were released within a few years of each other, but they show contrasting expressions of femininity. By combining aspects of both songs, Lambert communicates information about her performance persona and personal expression of femininity. She is well-versed in the classics of both country and rock'n'roll, but knows how to keep things modern for her listeners.

Covers of "Jolene" abound, both within country music and beyond. While some stay true to the song's original lyrics and sound, others make drastic changes to

comment on modern times. In 2024, pop superstar Beyoncé released a cover of “Jolene.” This cover was commercially successful, hitting the top ten on both Billboard’s Hot 100 and Hot Country Songs charts, but critical reviews were mixed.¹⁷ While Beyoncé retains the original melodic and harmonic structure, she alters the lyrics and adds a new bridge section. In the opening chorus, for example, Beyoncé sings “Jolene, I’m warnin’ you, don’t come for my man. Jolene, don’t take the chance because you think you can.” These altered lyrics are threatening, a contrast from Parton’s pleading attitude. Beyoncé’s vocal delivery is also starkly different from Parton’s. Beyoncé’s full and resonant voice conveys confidence where Parton’s high and child-like timbre communicates a fragile and pleading attitude (Heidemann 2016). In the verses that follow, Beyoncé’s confidence comes through lyrically as well. Example 2.8 shows the lyrics to both versions, and while the opening line of the verse is essentially the same, the remaining lyrics tell very different stories. Parton’s pleading attitude is matched by lyrics that describe Jolene’s beauty and recognize Parton’s own perceived shortcomings. She sings “I cannot compete with you” and seems reliant and hopeful that Jolene has a prevailing moral compass that will keep her from stealing Parton’s man. The lyric “eyes of emerald green” likely refers to more than her physical appearance. Green is often associated with envy, so by invoking that color here, Parton could be suggesting that this woman is motivated by envy and power, rather than love.

¹⁷ While many praised the feminine strength and confidence Beyoncé brought to this song by modernizing the lyrics, many were upset at the major changes. Chris Willman, writing for *Variety*, said, “Taking out all the vulnerability lessens the tune a little” (2024).

Example 2.8 Lyric Comparison of “Jolene” (Cycle 1)

“Jolene” (1973) by Dolly Parton

Your beauty is beyond compare
With flaming locks of auburn hair
With ivory skin and eyes of emerald green
Your smile is like a breath of spring
Your voice is soft like summer rain
And I cannot compete with you, Jolene

He talks about you in his sleep
And there's nothin' I can do to keep
From cryin' when he calls your name,
Jolene
And I can easily understand
How you could easily take my man
But you don't know what he means to me,
Jolene

“Jolene” (2024) by Beyoncé

You're beautiful, beyond compare
Takes more than beauty and seductive stares
To come between a family and a happy man
Jolene, I'm a woman too
The games you play are nothing new
So you don't want no heat with me, Jolene

We've been deep in love for twenty years
I raised that man, I raised his kids
I know my man better than he knows
himself (Yeah, what?)
I can easily understand
Why you're attracted to my man
But you don't want this smoke, so shoot
your shot with someone else (You heard me)

Beyoncé's lyrics tend to focus on herself more, rather than the character of Jolene. She downplays the importance of good looks and highlights that shared history and deep intimacy with someone ought to be strong enough to keep a man from straying. It seems that Beyoncé is doing everything she can to convince Jolene that not only is it not worth her time to even try to steal her man, but the warnings in the choruses also serve to scare Jolene off. This ominous confidence is quite different from Parton's original version, and is likely representative of the fifty-year difference between the two. Parton's version was released in the midst of feminism's second wave, and women were concerned with their roles in society (Soken-Huberty 2021). By contrast, Beyoncé's version was created and released during feminism's fourth wave, which foregrounds the intersectionality of race and gender. In “Jolene,” Beyoncé engages with the “strong Black woman” trope, highlighting the fact that while white femininity is often fragile, Black femininity is dangerous. Thus, Beyoncé communicates to the “other

woman” from a stance of power and confidence. In the case of this cover of “Jolene,” Beyoncé finds strength in her marriage. In a nod to modern equality—even in more traditional marriages—male voices sing “I’ma stand by her, she gon’ stand by me” at the end of the song. To Beyoncé, then, it’s the duty of both partners to stay faithful. Together, they share the burden of a potentially jealous woman and possible infidelity.¹⁸

Perhaps the reason that “Jolene” has been so powerful in popular music culture of the last half-century is that listeners can easily imagine themselves in the shoes of each character. In Parton’s original, we can sympathize with the narrator and connect with our vulnerability in the face of adultery. Or perhaps we connect with Jolene, and imagine ourselves as the beautiful woman with the power to have any man, regardless of his relationship status. Finally, it’s not far-fetched to imagine oneself as the man in the story, basking in the adoration from two different women and taking pleasure in watching them fight for him. In the Lambert tribute and the Beyoncé cover, a listener could quickly identify with the anger of the narrators, imagining themselves as a woman so confident in herself and her man that she threatens the other woman. Perhaps we might identify with Geraldene in a similar manner as Parton’s narrator, recognizing our perceived shortcomings. Lastly, it’s feasible to imagine a listener identifying with Beyoncé’s man, proud of his woman for standing up for their relationship, but ready to stand by her side in case of an assault on it.

“Jolene” and all of its successive interpretations have continued to keep Dolly Parton relevant in the new millennium, and new country artists continue to reference

¹⁸ This is likely also a reference to Beyoncé’s husband, Jay-Z, who has notoriously been unfaithful and had his share of scandals throughout their marriage. Beyoncé is effectively arguing that it is the responsibility of both partners in a marriage to stay and stand by each other.

Parton as a major influence.¹⁹ Though she doesn't label herself a feminist, Parton's impact on gendered expectations has been massive. She has also been an outspoken ally to the LGBTQ+ community. This support has helped open the door for queer artists in the country music industry. Her influence reaches far beyond country music, though. Dolly Parton is a household name now, due to her iconic image, lovable personality, and philanthropic ventures (such as the Imagination Library). As writer Anne Helen Petersen says, "No one is going to cancel Dolly Parton. She's too beloved, too careful, too good" (2020). Her fame and legacy have become timeless, and she will stand as an American icon for decades to come.

The Chicks

In 1989, the Dixie Chicks consisted of sisters Martie and Emily Erwin (now Martie McGuire and Emily Strayer), bassist Laura Lynch, and singer Robin Macy. Macy left the group after three years, and after another three years, newcomer Natalie Maines replaced Laura Lynch. Their first commercially successful album, *Wide Open Spaces*, came in 1998 and was certified diamond. Maines, pictured below in Example 2.9, should be credited for most of their commercial success, because, as Andrew Leahey for AllMusic puts it, she brought her "steely defiance and an unorthodox pop/rock sensibility" and a contemporary look to the band (n.d.). Where in their early days they dressed as cowgirls, their modernized look and slightly eclectic sound appealed to a wider audience. Craig Campbell, a marketing team member for their label, described

¹⁹ One example is Lainey Wilson, whom I discuss in Chapter V.

their audience members at one concert as including “little girls who wanted to be Dixie Chicks” as well as “women who identified with the music” and of course the guys who “wanted to be with the Dixie Chicks” (quoted in McCusker 2023, 33). Lead singer Maines was known for her spunk and stubbornness, and her father—a musician and record producer—stated that “the Chicks have always stood up for themselves. They would decide, between the three of them, what they wanted and how they wanted it presented. They would not be swayed by that” (quoted in Moss 2022, 44). Their confidence and ability to stick to their guts made them successful, but it also would become their downfall. In 2001, the group sued their label, Sony, for “systemic thievery,” a move that was viewed as a “significant breach of Nashville etiquette” (McCusker 2023, 37). To air the issues of the country radio industry so publicly was not something artists did, let alone women artists.

Example 2.9 The Dixie Chicks
(from L to R: Emily Strayer, Natalie Maines, Martie McGuire)



Nonetheless, the group experienced massive success with #1 hits such as “Wide Open Spaces” (1998), “Cowboy Take Me Away” (1999), and “Travelin’ Soldier” (2002). But while on tour, lead singer Natalie Maines made a statement that would change the trajectory of the Dixie Chicks and all women in country music. As discussed above,

Maines brought political ideas on stage, stating “We don’t want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas” (quoted in Clarke 2003). Her opinions were not shared by country radio executives. By the end of 2003, the Dixie Chicks were gone from country radio, primarily due to fan requests to “get that off the air” (Pettibone 2024). Kristine McCusker notes that “programmers erased women from country music stages” and consequently returned women to a passive role “as the main consumers of country music [...] where women were cast as desiring sexy male stars and jealous of other women who performed” (2023, 28). Radio programmers function as gatekeepers to country music and have a particular power to preserve older artists and introduce new ones (Weisbard 2017). In the wake of the industry choosing to silence the Dixie Chicks—a move now known as getting “Dixie Chicked” in the industry—country radio shifted to primarily male artists, with a few safe, family-friendly blonde women in the mix as the “tomatoes” of country music’s salad (Hubbs 2022; Hubbs and Royster 2020).

After this shift in the early 2000s, the stereotype of the jealous country woman began to pervade in country music. Cheating has always been a popular narrative topic in country songs, but in a modernizing move, many country women are taking action through their lyric narratives. From Miranda Lambert’s feminine anger setting things on fire after infidelity in “Kerosene” (2005) and admitting that she’s capable of deception too in “White Liar,” (2009) to Carrie Underwood taking a Louisville slugger to a cheating ex in “Before He Cheats,” (2005) country women are embracing their agency in the face of infidelity. And in the wake of Tomato-gate, country women are tackling jealousy from every angle. Megan Moroney’s “I’m Not Pretty” (2023) considers the

perspective of her ex's new girlfriend. Carly Pearce and Ashley McBryde's duet "Never Wanted to be That Girl" (2021) tells a story about infidelity from a homewrecker's perspective. While jealousy was an acceptable emotion for country women in the years after the Chicks' erasure, most emotions that were powerful and strong were kept at bay by women artists, for fear of straying too far and having their career get Dixie Chicked. It would take time, but country would eventually open the doors to women's rage and individuality again, but never with quite as much freedom as the women of the 1990s enjoyed.

"Goodbye Earl" (1999)

At the height of country women's success in the 1990s, the Dixie Chicks released a controversial murder ballad. Though it never reached #1 on the charts, "Goodbye Earl" (1999) was, and still is, one of the Dixie Chicks' most famous and beloved songs. The song's lyric narrative tells the story of a woman, Wanda, who gets married and finds out that her new husband, Earl, is abusive. After trying to involve the law, Wanda ends up in the hospital from her husband's abuse. Her friend, Mary Anne, comes to visit and together they decide that the only way out is to poison Earl. This type of revenge song is not uncommon in country music, but what was so shocking was the explicit nature of the lyrics, shown in Example 2.10. Most murder ballad songs, especially by women, might imply murder, but it was unusual for the lyrics to state "Earl had to die." The song's narrative was highly controversial at the time of its release. Randy Lewis, writing for the Los Angeles Times, notes that the song stirred "the biggest debate in Nashville

Example 2.10 “Goodbye Earl” (1999) Lyrics

[Verse 2]

Well, it wasn't two weeks after she got married
That Wanda started getting abused
She put on dark glasses and long sleeved blouses
And make-up to cover a bruise

Well, she finally got the nerve to file for divorce
She let the law take it from there
But Earl walked right through that restraining order
And put her in intensive care

[Prechorus]

Right away, Mary Anne flew in from Atlanta
On a red eye midnight flight
She held Wanda's hand as they worked out a plan
And it didn't take 'em long to decide

[Chorus]

That Earl had to die (Na-na-na-na-na)
Goodbye, Earl
Those black-eyed peas? (Na-na-na-na-na)
They tasted alright to me, Earl
You're feelin' weak? (Na-na-na-na-na)
Why don't you lay down and sleep, Earl?
Ain't it dark (na-na-na-na-na)
Wrapped up in that tarp, Earl?

since Garth Brooks’s grim ‘The Thunder Rolls,’ another song on the same theme” (2000). Brooks’s song tells the story of a cheating husband coming home late at night, but interestingly Brooks sings from the perspective of the wife. But nothing in “The Thunder Rolls” ever states explicitly that the wife took action against her husband or his infidelity.²⁰ If Brooks’s relatively tame song about a wife’s anger caused controversy, it’s understandable that a song told from a woman’s perspective about a similar topic would

²⁰ Garth Brooks wrote the song, but it was originally recorded by Tanya Tucker with a fourth verse that describes the wife reaching for her pistol and ending her wondering of where the husband had been. This verse was removed when Brooks recorded the song and released it to radio.

have been problematic at the time. Lewis states that “the debate centers on whether the record sheds light on the problem of domestic violence or condones a murder by the abuse victim and her friend” (2000).

Part of what makes “Goodbye Earl” different is its upbeat and playful mood, which draws attention to the song’s seriousness. The use of mandolin and banjo, the extra twangy vocals, and the driving drums create a soundscape that contrasts with the dark lyrical narrative. For listeners, it would be easy to imagine that this song’s narrative is imaginary and told more as a wishful dream. But it could also be interpreted, especially considering the use of past tense throughout the narrative, that Wanda is joyful and carefree after freeing herself from abuse by murdering her husband. This latter interpretation seems more likely, especially when the song’s later verses are considered. Mary Anne and Wanda get away with his murder because, according to the lyrics, “it turns out he was a missing person, who nobody missed at all.” The two friends buy some land and open up a roadside farm store selling “Tennessee ham and strawberry jam” and live out their days peacefully. This would have been a scary thought for Nashville executives, because it encourages feminine agency and even endorses violence (as long as it’s justified). Additionally, the song’s ending allows for a possible queer reading, as the two women ultimately leave men behind to live their lives together. These aspects are likely why radio programmers led the resistance against the song, with only 20 out of 149 stations playing the song (Lewis 2000). But despite the industry’s resistance, “Goodbye Earl” continued to chart well, and eventually country fans’ requests to hear it on air overpowered the programmers’ concerns.

The impact that both the Chicks and “Goodbye Earl” had on country music cannot be understated. The Chicks’ foray into political speech served as a catalyst to effectively remove women from country radio in the early 2000s, and functioned as a warning—for better or for worse. The term “Dixie Chicked” is used in Nashville as a caution to new artists to remind them that the country industry has a breaking point. But “Goodbye Earl” also serves as a reminder to modern country women, because it showed that, like other trailblazing women who came before, the boundaries of country music can be pushed. If the fans like it, they will ultimately overrule the guidelines of radio programming. “Goodbye Earl” was the inspiration for Kelsea Ballerini’s 2022 hit “If You Go Down (I’m Going Down Too),” which draws from Wanda and Mary Anne’s relationship in the Chicks’ song and features a similar instrumentation and vibe. But “Goodbye Earl” is also perhaps why the 2023 duet murder ballad “wait in the truck” by Hardy and Lainey Wilson (which I discuss in detail in Chapter V) was so successful, despite its blatant talk of murder, abuse, and imprisonment. It’s hard to imagine a song like that being played on country radio 20 or 30 years ago, but it is possible today because of the path that the Chicks laid, expanding narrative topics the same way Kitty Wells and Loretta Lynn did before them.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have traced a brief history of women in country music. I have shown how society and culture throughout different eras of country music have influenced and shaped the way the country industry was shaped. The pre-war women present at the dawn of the genre were accompanied by men or sang in sister groups. The post-war

housewife dared to speak up about hypocritical men before country shifted to attract wealthier consumers and embraced the pop crossover. Dolly Parton's blonde and boisterous persona challenged gendered norms and as the feminist movement charged on, country singers broached topics like birth control and sexual agency. By the 1990s, country women were the stars, with artist and fan alike represented musically and onstage. But before women could overtake the industry, the Chicks became a scapegoat for the removal of almost all women in country music for well over a decade. Superstars such as Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, and Taylor Swift did the work to reopen country radio to women. Tomato-gate seemed to be the last bit of dirty laundry that needed to be aired before the industry actually started to treat women as equal consumers and performers. Today, women in country are everywhere—perhaps even more so than in the 1990s—and they are brave and unique in their style, performance, and songs. But it's only with the century of history behind them that the post-millennial country woman has the freedom to sing how she wants about what she wants. By no means do I mean to imply that country as a genre and culture has overcome the many issues related to gender. Indeed, country has a long way to go before women are given true equal treatment on stage and on air, but as radio begins to lose its power to streaming, the industry will likely see large shifts in the decades to come. For now, though, it's worth it to celebrate the strides that country women have taken to achieve the level of artistic freedom they have today. Whether they choose to dial up the twang or keep it muted for a broader audience, women country singers communicate powerful stories and messages through song.

III. THE GOOD CHRISTIAN GIRL: CARRIE UNDERWOOD, BIBLICAL COUNTRY, AND THE NARRATOR'S ROLE

It's a Tuesday night in 2005. The whole family sits down in the living room as dad turns on the TV. That familiar theme music plays and Ryan Seacrest's face appears as he states the importance of this particular episode: tonight, on *American Idol*, Bo Bice and Carrie Underwood will battle it out in the season's final performances. Bice embodies rock 'n' roll with his rendition of "Vehicle" by the Ides of March, and Underwood leans into her Oklahoma country roots with her version of Martina McBride's "Independence Day." As the show comes to a close, millions across America have phones in hand, ready to dial in and vote for their favorite singer, hoping to make it through before the voting window closes. The next night, Seacrest announces the winner: Carrie Underwood, who bursts into tears before breaking into song with her rendition of the *Idol* original²¹ "Inside Your Heaven." With this win, Underwood secured a million-dollar record deal with Sony. She soon released "Inside Your Heaven" as a single in June 2005. The single was an instant hit, and making her not only the only country artist whose single debuted at #1 on the Billboard Hot 100, but also the only solo country artist in the 2000s to have a #1 hit on the Hot 100. Underwood would go on to be the most commercially successful *American Idol* winner, and one of the best-selling female artists in history (Kile 2020).

With "Inside Your Heaven" as her first single, Underwood's recording career began with a nod to Christianity.²² She would quickly cement this association with the release of *Some Hearts* in 2006, which not only included "Inside Your Heaven" as a

²¹ "Inside Your Heaven" was written by Andreas Carlsson, Pelle Nylén, Savan Kotecha, and produced by Desmond Child for the finale of *American Idol*.

²² Though "Inside Your Heaven" is technically a love song, the use of "heaven" in the titular lyric evokes religion.

bonus track, but also “Jesus, Take the Wheel.” *Some Hearts* was certified Platinum nine times, earning Underwood a slew of awards, including Album of the Year at the 2006 *Billboard* Music Awards. Underwood had crossover success with a few singles from the album. For example, “Jesus, Take the Wheel” charted well on Billboard’s Hot Christian Songs, Adult Contemporary, and Hot 100 charts, in addition to the Hot Country Songs chart. Her ability to find success in many genres (aimed at differing age groups), and her exposure through *American Idol* made her a family-friendly figure and role model. This, combined with her massive vocal range and refined control in the upper register that evokes the voices of angels, created her image as the Good Christian Girl, which functions as both an individual performance persona, and an archetype that harkens the culturally imaginary. This performance persona was strong enough that when Underwood began to sing about adultery and murder on tracks like “Before He Cheats” (2009) and “Two Black Cadillacs” (2012), she wasn’t seen as rebellious. *Rolling Stone* writers describe this expansion of persona:

Just as the paint was drying on Underwood’s good girl image, she took a Louisville Slugger and smashed it to smithereens — like the headlights on her man’s beloved four-wheel drive after she catches him mackin’ on a barroom floozy. In this rock-inflected gem from 2006, Underwood is deliciously vengeful, strutting and snarling about how she keyed his custom paint job, carved her name into his leather seats and slashed all four tires while he’s “dabbing on three dollars worth of that bathroom Polo.” “Before He Cheats” reached the upper regions of both the country and pop charts and somewhere along the line also morphed into a cautionary public service announcement, encouraging cowboy Casanovas to keep it in their pants. (2015)

Perhaps the reason country listeners accepted her moments of vengeance without negating the Good Christian Girl image is related to the last sentence in the quote above. Rather than encouraging other women to act out in destructive ways after infidelity,

“Before He Cheats” is a message to country men: remain faithful, or your faithful and devout counterparts might lose their tempers.

Thus, the Good Christian Girl is not ignorant of the sin in this world, but instead she calls it out and connects with listeners who desire justice for wrongdoing. Will Hermes for *Rolling Stone* calls Underwood the “archetypal good girl turned avenging honky-tonk angel” (2015). Even in her moments of rage, Underwood is still seen as an angel, because her performance persona as the Good Christian Girl is so deeply engrained in country listeners’ minds. Underwood’s angelic status is connected deeply to societal expectation of Southern women, and women who embody those ideals (e.g. soft femininity, pure and clear vocals, and the stereotypical image of a blonde, white, modestly dressed) are often seen as angelic, because in this cultural context it would be hard to imagine a more perfect woman. Some of these traits are also deeply engrained in Christianity, such as the ideal Proverbs 31 woman.²³ The Bible’s influence on country culture and country music cannot be overstated, and for women, Biblical country and its ideals often impact the performance personas and gendered expectations present in the industry.

In this chapter, I examine Biblical country as a cultural and sonic phenomenon. I analyze two of Underwood’s most successful country Christian songs, “Jesus, Take the Wheel” (2005) and “Something in the Water” (2014) to show how Underwood navigates Biblical country through vocal delivery, lyrics, and persona. In the latter half of the chapter, I investigate the role of the narrator in songs told from the third person to show how Underwood’s performance persona bleeds through the role of omniscient narrator

²³ This chapter is often cited as the image of perfection for a Christian woman. Proverbs 31 describes a Biblical woman’s beauty and wisdom, and functions as a how-to guide to become a “wife of noble character” (Prov. 31:1).

to influence how we understand and relate to the narratives in “Blown Away” (2015) and “Church Bells” (2016).

Biblical Country

Since its inception, country music has been intertwined with religion—American Christianity in particular. Country’s Christian messaging is often implicit, rather than explicit. In this section, though, I focus on country music with an explicitly evangelical message, a subgenre I call “Biblical Country.” In particular, Biblical country refers to those songs that perform well in the commercial country industry but also feature unmistakable reference to features of evangelical Christianity—in contrast to the common hymn albums²⁴ released by country stars that solidify their beliefs and values but are not intended to compete on country charts or awards shows. For example, George Strait’s #1 country hit from 2008, “I Saw God Today,” explicitly talks about attending church, reading “the book” (the Bible), and recognizing the fingerprints of God in everyday life. Dolly Parton and Brad Paisley teamed up for a #1 hit with “When I Get Where I’m Going” (2005), which talks about arriving in heaven after death. Towards the end of the song, the lyrics confirm that the heaven they reference is that of evangelical Christianity: “But when I get where I’m going, and I see my Maker’s face, I’ll stand forever in the Light of His amazing Grace.” More recently, rapper-turned-country-star Jelly Roll found success with his Biblical country hits “Need a Favor” (2022), “Son of a Sinner” (2023), and his 2024 collaboration with Brandon Lake, “Hard Fought

²⁴ Two of the most popular hymn albums of the twenty-first century are Alan Jackson’s *Precious Memories* (2006) and Carrie Underwood’s *My Savior* (2021). Both albums feature simple renditions of Protestant hymns, with Gospel influence but a distinct country sound.

Hallelujah.” These songs performed well on various Billboard charts,²⁵ and all three focus on the shortcomings of humans and the Biblical idea that we are all sinners and need salvation.

Salvation is a common theme in Biblical country, one that Maxine Grossman considers at length (2002). Grossman notes that “the dynamic of salvific love, as expressed in the discourse of contemporary country music is grounded in several basic assumptions,” namely that 1) humans are sinful, so they suffer; 2) personal transformation is the only solution to human suffering, and 3) salvific transformation requires a connection with some element of sacrifice (88). According to Grossman, the sacrificial love of Jesus is attractive in this context because, “Jesus looks with mercy on ‘his children’ because their suffering resembles his own, but the power that he brings is more personal than transcendent” (91). In Biblical country songs, transformation may be explicitly expressed, as in “Something in the Water” analyzed below, or implicit in the song’s narrative. Both methods rely on an understanding that country listeners can fill in any gaps or interpret vague lyrics from a Biblical perspective. Thus, not only are the artists familiar with Christian parlance, but it is expected that country listeners are, too. For example, Randy Travis’s #1 hit “Three Wooden Crosses” (2003) tells the story of a bus that crashed, killing three of four passengers on board. The four passengers include “a farmer and a teacher, a hooker and a preacher,” but which one survives is revealed only in the third verse, when we learn that the dying pastor laid his blood-stained Bible in the hands of the prostitute, who eventually becomes the narrator’s pastor’s mother. This verse does more than simply tell the audience who lives. It implies that the crash

²⁵ “Need a Favor” and “Son of a Sinner” peaked at #1 on the Country Airplay charts, while “Hard Fought Hallelujah” peaked at #1 on the Hot Christian Songs chart and reached the top 15 on the Hot Country Songs chart.

was a transformative moment for the prostitute, who presumably changed her ways and raised a child who feared the Lord enough to become a pastor himself. Transformation in this manner is powerful and creates deep connections between singer and listener. If a song's protagonist has hope of redemption, regardless of how destitute or despicable they might seem, then any country listener can cling to that hope, too.

Some country singers have integrated the ideals of Biblical country into their performance personae to such an extent that they acquire the status of moral authorities in the industry. Some of the most famous such Christian country artists include Randy Travis, Josh Turner, Alabama, Hillary Scott,²⁶ Glen Campbell, Alan Jackson, Dolly Parton and—of course—Carrie Underwood (Farrant 2023). These Christian country artists are also held to higher standards in their own lives and in their secular songs, which in turn gives them an almost prophet-like status. Christian listeners who believe that a singer's persona is authentically Christian are likely to consider (even subconsciously) that what a singer does (lyrically or in real life) is acceptable in a faith-led life. Thus, when Biblical country songs deal with the gray areas in life that often require moral justification that might not align with Biblical truth, these singers are granted the authority to speak to these issues.

But even if, as Grossman notes, “the sensibility of country music is Christian, the fact remains that the industry presents itself as secular [...] reflect[ing] the desire to be ‘universal’ and ‘American,’” (2002, 97). This is partially why commercially successful country artists prioritize traditional values and ethics that appeal to a wide range of listeners, regardless of their beliefs. But these often-nostalgic values remain rooted in

²⁶ Scott is the lead singer of the country music group Lady A (formerly Lady Antebellum).

Biblical traditions. So even in secular songs (e.g. Carrie Underwood's "All-American Girl" [2009]), there is a background of belief that is deeply embedded. And, in some Biblical country songs, artists choose to temper their twang to strengthen the message and reach of the song. For example, in "Jesus Take the Wheel" Carrie Underwood sings with little to any twang for the duration of the song. This makes it more palpable to the American public (because it doesn't instantly sound like twangy country) and helps a listener envision that the salvation described lyrically could be granted to anyone. Additionally, by removing the twang, Underwood refocuses the listener's attention from an individualized, feminine bodily sound to the Biblical message of salvation.

In the analyses that follow, I examine how two of Carrie Underwood's Biblical country hits communicate religiosity and reinforce the idea of a transformative salvific love. Specifically, I explore how these explicitly Christian songs impact her performance persona to solidify her place as a moral authority within commercial country music. Underwood's success may have begun with her *American Idol* win, but her communication of Christianity played a large part in both the longevity of her career and the relationship she has cultivated with her fans.

"Jesus Take the Wheel" (2005)

"Jesus Take the Wheel," the first single released off of *Some Hearts*, "Jesus Take the Wheel" cemented what *American Idol* fans suspected: Carrie Underwood's vocal range and delivery were impressive even without the guidance of *Idol* judges, and she was not shy about her faith. In an interview with *Esquire*, Underwood stated, "After I released 'Jesus, Take the Wheel,' people started saying, Oh, it's kind of risky. You're coming out with a religious song. And I was thinking, Really? I grew up in Oklahoma, I always had a

close relationship with God. I never thought it was risky in the least. If anything, I thought it was the safest thing I could do” (Junod 2009). The “risk” was worth the reward, as the song has been certified Platinum twice and earned Underwood two Grammys in 2006 (one for Best Country Song and one for Best Female Country Vocal Performance). “Jesus Take the Wheel” tells the story of a young mom on her way to visit family on Christmas Eve when she slides on ice while speeding. *Rolling Stone* called the song a “powerful tale of lost faith and 11th hour salvation,” (2015) as the song’s protagonist calls out to Jesus not only to save her (and the baby in the car) by taking the wheel of the car and preventing a crash, but also to take the “wheel” and guide her on the road of life. This narrative of relinquishing control combined with Underwood’s soaring vocals and massive string section communicates a religious experience through song.

In the first cycle of the song (whose lyrics are shown in Example 3.1), Underwood sings with a soft, relaxed vocal timbre in the verses. This not only mimics the quiet of the snow but also creates a sense of intimacy through spatiality. Underwood’s seemingly effortless delivery gives the impression that she (and, through her, the listener as well) is in the car with the protagonist. As things spin out of control lyrically in the second verse, Underwood’s voice builds slowly in intensity until the arrival of the chorus. While Underwood’s volume increases in tandem with an octave jump, she doesn’t belt out these lyrics powerfully. Instead, she moves into head voice as she climbs to the E5 apex on “wheel.” The choice to use head voice here reinforces the religiosity and surrender that is occurring narratively. Rather than belting out these lyrics, which is likely to communicate power, because she uses head voice we can imagine the vulnerability of the protagonist in this moment. The titular lyrics also feature the only phrase that ends

with an ascending motive in the chorus, which might evoke heavenly associations. The chorus lyrics that follow all focus inward, using first-person pronouns (I, my, and me) and also feature phrases that generally end with descending melodic motives (e.g. “on my own” descends A-G#-D). The repetition of descending motion paired with lyrics that reflect humanity and shortcomings might remind the listener of the Biblical sentiment found in Romans 8:28,²⁷ and further reinforce that salvation (physical and spiritual) is only available through Jesus. To drive this point home, the chorus ends with another

Example 3.1 “Jesus Take the Wheel” (2005): Verse 1 and 2, and Chorus Lyrics (0:12–1:33)

[Verse 1]

She was drivin’ last Friday on the way to Cincinnati
On a snow-white Christmas Eve
Goin’ home to see her mama and her daddy
With the baby in the backseat
Fifty miles to go and she was runnin’ low
On faith and gasoline
It’d been a long hard year

[Verse 2]

She had a lot on her mind and she didn’t pay attention
She was goin’ way too fast
Before she knew it she was spinnin’
On a thin black sheet of glass
She saw both their lives flash before their eyes
She didn’t even have time to cry
She was so scared
She threw her hands up in the air

[Chorus]

Jesus take the wheel, take it from my hands
’Cause I can’t do this on my own
I’m letting go, so give me one more chance.
Save me from this road I’m on.
Jesus, take the wheel

²⁷ Romans 8:28 says “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

repetition of the titular lyric, this time sung much at lower pitches (D4-E4).

Underwood's soft vocal delivery gives this iteration a feeling of finality. While still hopeful for rescue, it's as if the protagonist is out of energy, or as if she's let her hands fall as she utters a final prayer.

The religiosity of "Jesus Take the Wheel" is apparent in the formal structure as well. The song follows a straightforward verse–chorus form. The verses feature Underwood as an omniscient third-person narrator, but with the arrival of the chorus comes a change to first-person (or perhaps third-person address with implied quotes). This type of move toward intimacy (especially in tandem with a change in formal structure, intensity, and texture) is common among many genres of music, as Matt BaileyShea notes in his 2021 book, *Lines and Lyrics*. There is a specific word that BaileyShea employs when discussing paths toward intimacy that is particularly relevant to this song: "confession" (2021, 109). From a religious standpoint, confession is a highly intimate and vulnerable experience. Most readers likely envision the Catholic confessional box, with a screen separating the sinner from the priest. Confession in the Catholic church is one of the most important sacraments as confessing to God results in the forgiveness of sin, while confessing to another person (like a priest or pastor) results in healing. In Protestant traditions (including the popularized evangelical traditions), confession most commonly happens during reflective personal prayer where the sinner asks for forgiveness for their sins.²⁸ Carrie Underwood was raised Protestant (specifically Free Baptist), so the confession we hear in the lyrics of the third verse (shown in Example 3.2) is an intimate conversation with God. There is no one else in the

²⁸ Protestant traditions generally do not emphasize confession to another person for healing in the same way as Catholics.

protagonist's car with her, except for her baby, asleep in the back seat. When the chorus returns, there is no question that these lyrics are a continuation of the prayer confessional that began in the second verse.

Example 3.2 “Jesus Take the Wheel” (2005): Verse 3 and Chorus Lyrics (1:40–2:49)

[Verse 3]

It was still getting' colder when she made it the shoulder
And the car came to a stop
She cried when she saw that baby in the backseat
Sleepin' like a rock
She bowed her head to pray
She said, “I’m sorry for the way
I’ve been livin’ my life.
I know I’ve got to change,
So from now on tonight

[Chorus]

“Jesus take the wheel, take it from my hands
'Cause I can't do this on my own
I'm letting go, so give me one more chance.
Save me from this road I'm on.
Jesus, take the wheel.”

The song's three-verse structure, commonplace in country music (and other popular genres), creates a designated space for a religious transformation (Grossman 2002, 93). The protagonist of the song sacrifices control of her vehicle and her life, and the transformation is completed at the end of the third verse. After crying out for help in the preceding chorus, the third verse ends with the confession (“I’m sorry for the way...”) and transformative prayer (“So from now on tonight”) that leads into the next iteration of the chorus. As the song winds to a close with a repetition of the chorus, there are two repeated phrases that drive the point home: “Save me from this road I’m on” and “Take it, take it from me.” These reference more than the literal road and wheel of the car. From a Biblical perspective, the “road” she’s on is the path of her life. By

repeating “take it” without re-specifying that “it” means the wheel, it would not be a stretch for a Christian listener to imagine this as a cry to take away sin, a key component of Biblical salvation. Thus, the song’s narrative structure and repetitive phrases guide the listener to equate salvation from black ice with salvation from spiritual death.

For Carrie Underwood’s performance persona, this song helped cement her image as the Good Christian Girl while simultaneously ensuring relatability to her listeners. By telling a story where things spin out of control, Underwood is identifying herself as a sinner capable of making mistakes, rather than a beacon of perfect morality. Though this song is told from the third person, the move towards intimacy in the chorus means that listeners are likely to equate the narrator (Underwood’s song persona) with Underwood’s performance persona. The song’s clear salvific message is relatable to her country listeners, because if someone like Carrie Underwood can get off track and bogged down in life, but still have the chance at redemption through salvation, then any Christian country music listener has that chance, too. And country audiences are no strangers to messing up: songs about broken hearts, broken trucks, and broken pride abound in the genre. Thus, it’s not surprising that a hopeful song about redemption was so successful.

“Something in the Water” (2014)

In 2014, Carrie Underwood released another crossover hit, “Something in the Water.” The song reached #1 on Billboard’s Hot Country Songs and Hot Christian Songs charts and earned Underwood a Grammy for Best Country Solo Performance. Deemed a “religious anthem” and a “spiritual heartstring-tugger” by the press, the song has a clear message of salvation (Dunkerley 2014). In “Something in the Water,” whose lyrics are

given in Example 3.3, the song persona first recounts a man giving his testimony (or how he found God), before describing her own salvation story. This is a clear example of Jesus's salvific love in action (Grossman 2002). The second cycle's lyrics describe a cry for rescue followed by a transformative experience through baptism into Jesus. An upbeat bridge that celebrates the newfound redemption leads into a final chorus backed by Underwood singing "Amazing Grace," offering a soundscape of salvation.

Example 3.3 "Something in the Water" (2014): Lyrics

[Verse 1]

He said, "I've been where you've been before
Down every hallway's a slammin' door
No way out, no one to come save me
Wastin' the life that the good Lord gave me

[Prechorus 1]

"Then somebody said what I'm sayin' to you
Opened my eyes and told me the truth
He said, 'Just a little faith, it'll all get better'
So I followed that preacher man down to the river

[Chorus]

And now I'm changed
And now I'm stronger
There must be somethin' in the water
Oh, there must be somethin' in the water

[Verse 2]

And well I heard what he said, and I went on my way
Didn't think about it for a couple of days
Then it hit me like a lightnin' late one night
I was all out of hope, and all out of fight

[Prechorus 2]

Couldn't fight back the tears, so I fell on my knees
Sayin', "God if you're there come and rescue me"
Felt love pourin' down from above
Got washed in the water, washed in the blood

[Chorus]

[Bridge]

And now I'm singing along to Amazing Grace
Can't nobody wipe this smile off my face
Got joy in my heart, angels on my side
Thank God almighty, I saw the light
Gonna look ahead, no turning back
Live every day, give it all that I have
Trust in someone bigger than me
Ever since the day that I believed

[Chorus]

I am changed
And now I'm stronger
There must be something in the water
(*Amazing Grace*)
Oh there must be something in the water
(*How sweet the sound*)
Oh there must be something in the water
(*That saved a wretch*)
Oh there must be something in the water
(*Like me*)
I am stronger (*I once was lost*)
Stronger (*But now am found*)
(*Was blind, but now I see*)

The transformative experience described throughout the lyrics is also present in the vocal delivery. In the verses, Underwood sings with a clear, pressed phonation using her chest voice. Her range here is the lowest (G3–D4), which seems to parallel the narrative (as both verses talk about life before transformative salvation). As the lyrical narrative moves toward the chorus’s transformative event by way of the prechorus, the vocal melody rises in pitch and back-up singers are added to increase the texture and intensity. The buildup to the chorus’s teleological arrival is denied through a soft, clear, head voice vocality with sparse piano accompaniment for the first four bars. The latter half of the chorus regains energy with the titular lyric. Each cycle repeats this pattern until the bridge, where Underwood’s quick-paced and almost breathless delivery finally leads us to a change in vocal delivery with the final chorus.

It is in this atmosphere that we learn how one can be changed. Both prechoruses²⁹ mimic the oft-taught ABC’s of salvation: first, Accept that you are a sinner, second, *Believe* that Jesus is God’s Son and died for your sins, and finally, Confess your belief (publicly, often through baptism).³⁰ The first prechorus fulfills the “Admit” part of the ABCs in the lyrics “opened my eyes and told me the truth.” The man’s eyes are opened to his own sin and by acknowledging the “truth”—that we are all sinners—and following the preacher, he is *admitting* and beginning his spiritual transformation. The “river” of this prechorus indicates that the man followed through with the remainder of the ABCs, leading to his own change (in the chorus).

²⁹ These sections could also be read as continuations of the verses, but the increasing intensity and textural density seem to give it a build-up function to the chorus, which is typical in prechoruses of this time period.

³⁰ These ABCs are taught in children’s church services and to new Christians across Protestant America. “Admit” is based on Romans 8:28, “Believe” is based on John 3:16, and “Confess” is based on Romans 10:9.

The narrator's own transformation occurs in the second cycle, whose lyrics are shown in Example 3.3. In this prechorus, the "Admit" portion is combined with the "Believe" portion. Because the narrator chooses to cry out to God for rescue, she is admitting that she needs rescue (from her suffering caused by sin) and that she believes that God is capable of this rescue. While the previous prechorus implied baptism, this chorus is explicit in fulfilling that final "Confess" step. The lyrics "washed in the water" are a direct reference to baptism by water, while "washed in the blood" references Jesus' blood spilled on the cross.³¹ As if to drive the public confession home, the chorus declares her belief in God. And any Christian country listener would know that the "something" in the water Underwood references here is salvation through Jesus.

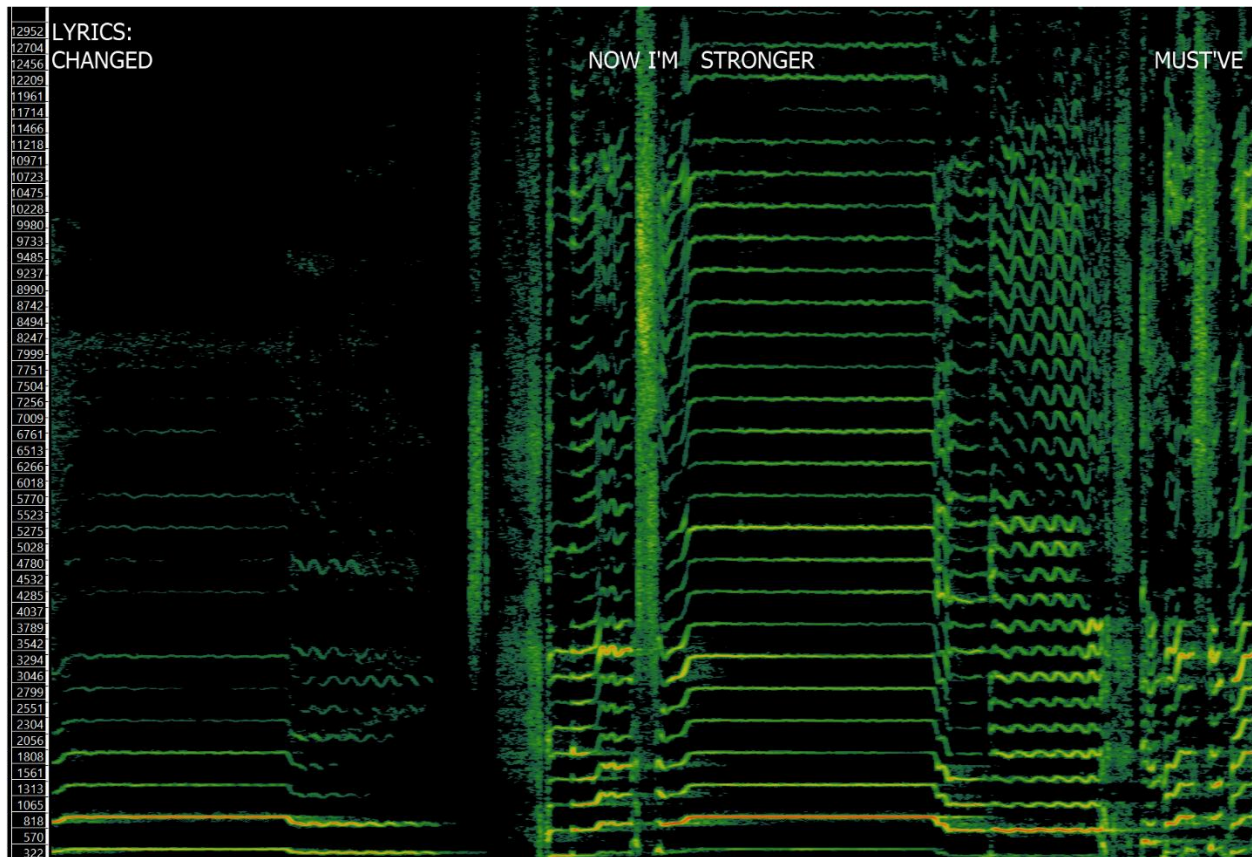
Carrie Underwood proclaims this transformation with a vocality that demonstrates her newfound strength in God. Though both "changed" and "stronger" begin on a B4, her delivery of these words is vastly different (see Example 3.4). When Underwood sings "changed" she uses a clear and soft head voice. This choice is surprising after the buildup of the preceding prechorus. After the increasing density in the texture and verbal space (by the more rapid vocal delivery) and higher melodic line, we expect the chorus to provide the teleological arrival through a climactic, high energy chorus. Instead, Underwood begins the chorus softly. Her timbre is rich, but as she continues to "stronger" it is as if her voice explodes with strength. There is perhaps a parallel to the act of immersive baptism through this vocal delivery: as she goes under the water to create the change, things are quiet.³² But when she rises from the water,

³¹ This is also likely a reference to Ephesians 5:26, which states "that He might sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing of water with the Word." The water is baptism, and the Word is Jesus (see John 1:1).

³² There is also a connection to Romans 6:4, which is often recited during the act of baptism in churches. It is common for pastors to say "Buried with Christ through baptism" as they dunk a person, and proclaim "raised to walk in the newness of life" as they raise them up out of the water.

now changed, she does so with the power of God, both spiritually and vocally. This B4 is belted, and her voice is fuller and richer (as seen in the prevalence of overtones that continue up to 12 kHz). The narrator’s spiritual change is manifested sonically. And to drive the point home that this change is due to her salvific transformation, the next lyrics remind us that the water was the catalyst for change.

Example 3.4 “Something in the Water” (2014): Spectrogram: Chorus (0:49)



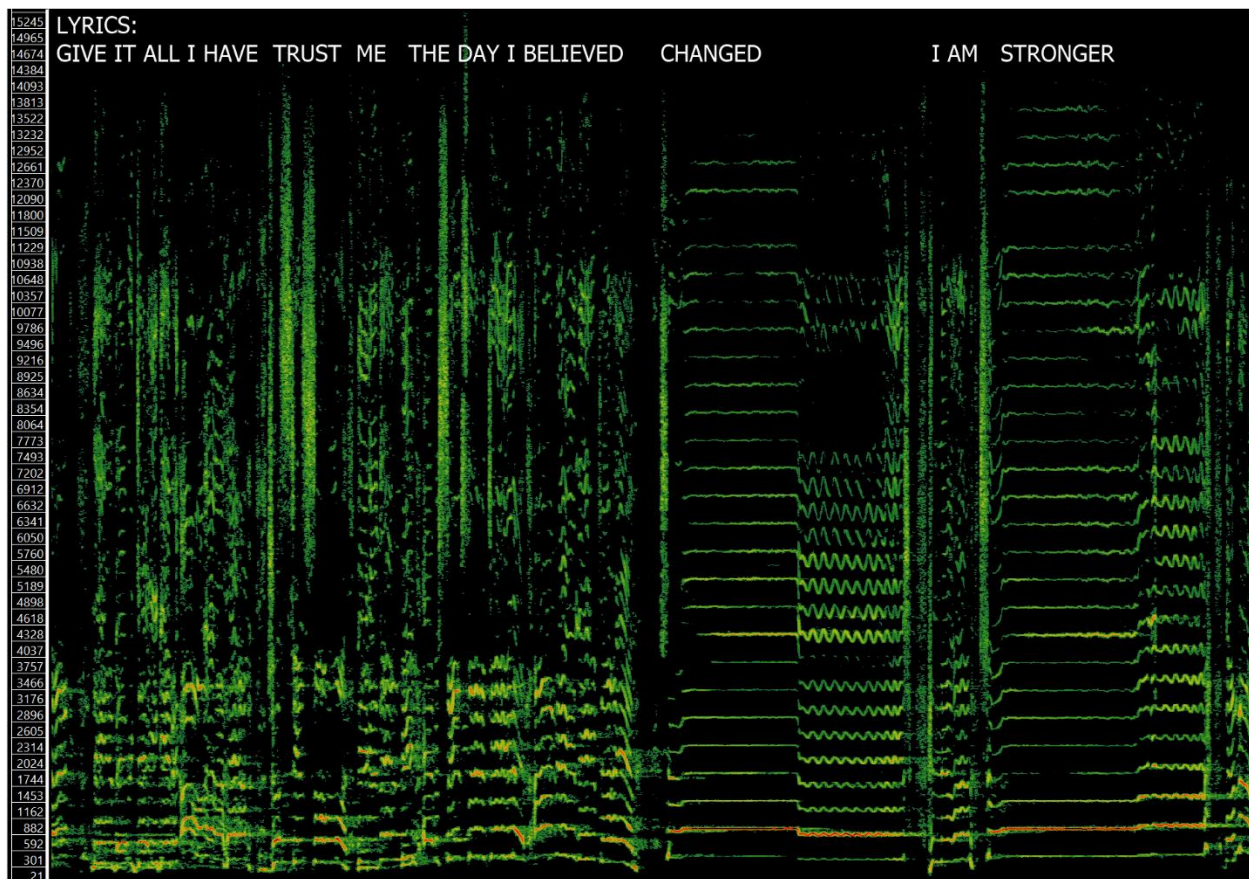
Because the “C” of the ABCs is *Confession*—through immersive baptism as public proclamation—the baptismal water is the final required step to complete the change. For those listeners deeply familiar with scripture, this repeated lyric might also conjure another meaning. In the New Testament, Jesus often references “living water” (e.g., John 4:10–15, John 7:37–39). This “living water” is understood as both the Holy Spirit

and as eternal life through Jesus Christ. Thus, when Underwood sings “There must’ve been something in the water,” she is likely also referencing the “living water” of everlasting life, which is the hope and promise of the Christian faith. These lyrics are explicitly evangelical and therefore understood by any listener, but for those who are deeply familiar with the scriptural references, the song communicates another layer of understanding and meaning.

A result of this spiritual transformation is lifestyle change. Underwood describes this lyrically in the bridge. The joy described in the bridge is present vocally, too. Not only is the rhythm quick and upbeat, but Underwood also sings with a loud chest voice. The accompaniment is texturally dense and she seems to battle for sonic supremacy. It is like she can’t get the words out fast enough or powerfully enough—perhaps because her joy is a heavenly joy but she is bound by the limits of human expression. She is almost breathless as she powers through to the final chorus, but her momentum continues to build anticipation for a climactic arrival. The bridge functions as a catalyst for change. The increasing intensity, brightness, and consistent modal belt of the bridge create anticipation for the arrival of the chorus. Where in the previous two choruses Underwood sang “changed” with a soft, clear head voice, here she belts out the word with as much power as the “stronger” that follows. The accompaniment is still sparse, so it is Underwood’s voice alone that offers the teleological arrival. Example 3.5 shows a spectrogram of the end of the bridge into the final chorus. The abundance of overtones on “changed” are clear, showing the fullness and richness of her voice here. She sings with power that is presumably granted from God. The completion of the transformation happens in the second chorus, and the bridge is a testament to the result of that transformation. As she almost battles the instruments in the bridge to find her footing

as a new Christian, she breaks through vocally in the final chorus with a newfound confidence. The final chorus, then, represents the decision to share her testimony. She is unashamed of her faith and ready to belt it out to anyone who will listen. In this way, she demonstrates qualities that any Good Christian Girl should aspire to (e.g. spiritual joy, trust in Jesus, and confidence to share the Gospel).

Example 3.5 “Something in the Water” (2014): Spectrogram:
Bridge Ending into Final Chorus (2:29)



The bridge enacts lyrical change as well. The opening lyric “And now I’m singing along to Amazing Grace,” foreshadows the final chorus, where Underwood adds her own version of the hymn “Amazing Grace” behind the chorus lyrics. By explicitly describing the act of singing, Underwood effectively invites the listener to join in with her, both on her spiritual journey and in the act of singing itself. Thus, the song has come full circle:

in the first cycle, a man told the narrator of his salvation; in the second, the narrator describes her own; and in the final bridge and chorus, the narrator invites the listener to share in her joy (through an implied invitation to trust Jesus and experience salvific love themselves).

Almost a decade after crying out for rescue in “Jesus, Take the Wheel,” Underwood is reminding her audience that her salvation is real and authentic through “Something in the Water.” Once again, she functions as a moral authority and role model to country listeners, bringing a message of hope while invoking country’s long history with faith. The song’s evangelical message is easily embraced by country and Christian listeners alike, and its massive success is due, at least in part, to the sincerity with which people view Underwood’s persona. By sharing testimony and admitting a need for salvation, Underwood reminds her listeners that she’s a sinner, just like they are. And by showing the joy in her life lyrically and vocally after her salvific transformation, Underwood’s invitation to share in her joy is a powerful statement to her established performance persona.

The Narrator’s Role

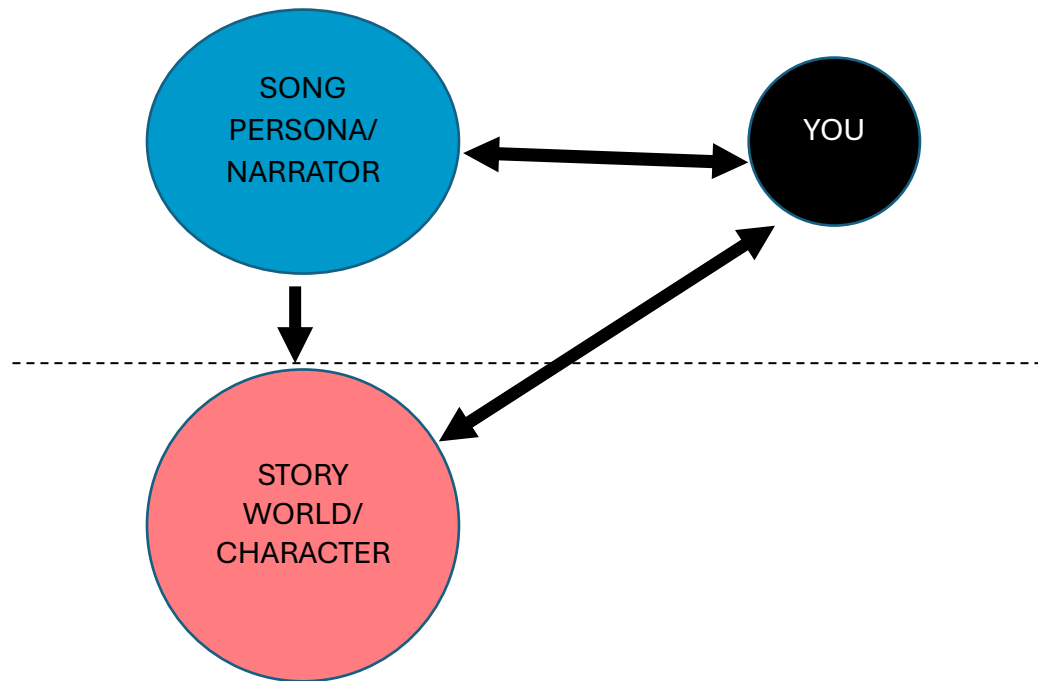
In many songs, especially those told from a first-person perspective, the singular lyrical narrator is equivalent to the song persona. But considering songs that deviate from this model, such as those with separate and multiple narrators, or those told with third-person address, requires more nuance. I will consider the latter in the remainder of this chapter, and the former in the following chapter (see pp. 156–67). Additionally, I consider how the identity of the addressee impacts how listeners relate with the story in the song and the performance persona of the singer. In this section, I argue that while

the majority of the time, the song persona and narrator are the same, especially in first person songs, in third person songs, the lyrical narrator is often distinguished from the song persona. This can have a great influence on how listeners ascribe meaning to that song, and more importantly, can reveal things about both the singer and the intended audience.

In literary stories that feature an omniscient, third-person narrator, there is an obvious divide between the story's world and the narrator's world. Example 3.6 shows this divide, as well as the possible paths of address. The unbiased narrator exists outside of the story world. The characters in the story world cannot hear the narrator, and it is generally understood that the narrator speaks to us, the readers, who inhabit the same world as the narrator. Indeed, though it is possible for a narrator to address a character across this world divide, because the character cannot hear the narrator, this is uncommon in literature. The same goes for the reader if we start to *tell* the characters what to do. We can shout at a book or TV, but the characters in the story world cannot hear us. We can apply this logic to song, but with the addition of the sonic factor (the voice of the narrator), we understand the song persona to be narrating to us. To extend the analogy of watching television, imagine that we (the listener) are not actually watching a show. Rather, we are hearing someone else (the narrator) tell us what is happening on a show that *they* are watching. Regardless of the character's actions, because the narrator is (re)telling the story as it unfolds, the story as we understand it is filtered through the narrator's perspective. The narrator can talk to the characters in the show through private address, but the characters can't hear her. But we listeners *can* hear what the narrator is telling the television. We can also hear anything the narrator

might say directly to us (see the “Church Bells” analysis that follows), because the narrator is employing self-conscious use of the second-person.

Example 3.6 Narrative Worlds and Address



While we (the listeners) can see the narrator and the television she watches, it's as if the image is blurry. This is because we determine if the narrator's retelling of a story seems accurate or believable, based on her perceived authority. The song persona can make an effort to claim narrative authority, but in the end it is only the listeners who can grant such authority.³³ There are two types of authenticity involved here: authenticity of experience and cultural authenticity (Moore 2002). The former comes

³³ For examples of when authority is not granted (or the performance persona is rejected by listeners) see Auslander 2021, pp. 119–123.

into play if we assume the narrator is unbiased, while the latter is present when we trust that the narrator understands the social context and subtext of what they see on the TV. When songs are in the first person, we generally assume that the narrator is telling us of a personal experience (except in cases where it is blatantly fictional). To continue the TV analogy, it is as if the narrator is watching their own memories on screen. But when third person is employed, the narrator creates space between the story on screen and the audience. Burns notes that the “narrator claims broad powers of knowledge and judgement” (2010, 163). The ability to claim these powers comes from the assumption that the narrator’s existence outside of the story world makes them unbiased to the events happening within the narrative.

In the analytical examples that follow, it is clear that Carrie Underwood herself has not experienced the stories she is telling about other people, such as murdering her husband or leaving her father upstairs amid a tornado to die. When her song persona shifts to a private address—speaking to a character in the story—she moves from the unbiased omniscient narrator to one with the authority to advise these protagonists. Because most informed country listeners understand Underwood’s performance persona to embody Christian morality, listeners likely recognize that her authority to advise these protagonists comes not from her own personal experiences of murder or revenge, but rather from knowledge of these experiences. Underwood herself didn’t have to key an ex’s car herself to be granted the authority in “Before He Cheats”—she just needed to communicate that these actions *could* be justified from a moral standpoint. Whether it’s infidelity, murder, or abuse, Underwood’s presentation of these situations as morally complex leads the listener to sympathize with the protagonist and

simultaneously recognize Underwood’s powerful position as a voice of morality and representative for the kind of country girl who might experience these stories.

“Blown Away” (2012)

“Blown Away,” from Underwood’s 2012 album of the same name, not only topped Billboard’s Country Airplay charts but also earned Underwood two Grammy’s (one for Best Country Song, one for Best Country Solo Performance). The song’s lyric narrative describes a daughter’s experience in a tornado in Oklahoma. At the end of the first verse (see Example 3.7a), there are two religious references: the protagonist’s mother is described as an angel, and the use of the word “prayed.” These opening references set the stage for the rest of the story—by placing the protagonist in a religious household, the listener is likely to make judgements about her actions through the lens of Biblical country. In the second verse (Example 3.7b), while the daughter locks herself away safely in the cellar, she leaves her drunk father on the couch to fend for himself. The chorus expands on the prayer uttered in Verse 1, revealing that the protagonist desires that the tornado blow away everything in the house, presumably including her father.

Example 3.7 “Blown Away” (2012): Verse 1 and 2 Lyrics

a) Verse 1 (0:19)

Dry lightning cracks across the sky
Those storm clouds gather in her eyes
Her daddy was a mean old mister
Mama was an angel in the ground
The weatherman called for a twister
She prayed, “Blow it down”

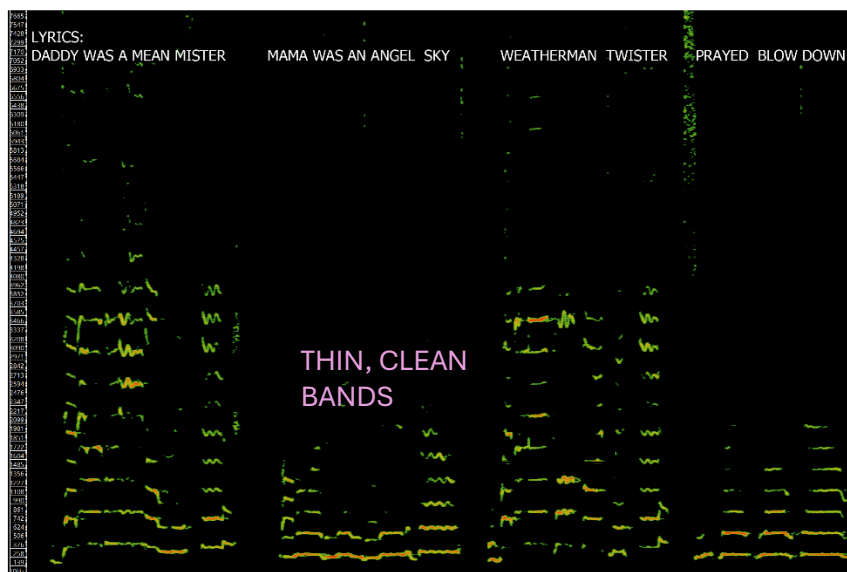
b) Verse 2 (1:36)

She heard those sirens screamin’ out
Her daddy laid there, passed out on the couch
She locked herself in the cellar
Listened to the screamin’ of the wind
Some people call it takin’ shelter
She called it sweet revenge

Each formal section in this song has a distinct vocal delivery, contributing to not only the formal delineation, but also to the changes in addressor/addressee. The verses are the darkest, purest, and most hollow overall,³⁴ as seen in a representative spectrogram of the first verse in Example 3.8a. The bands are thin and relatively clean, indicating purity, and there are missing harmonics that show the hollowness of the sound. The prechorus is fuller (more harmonics present, as seen in Example 3.8b) but still dark, with a spectral centroid only slightly higher than the verse. The chorus is the brightest with the highest spectral centroid, and the spectrogram in Example 3.8c shows the abundance of overtones (fullness) and fuzzy quality (noisiness) of the bands.

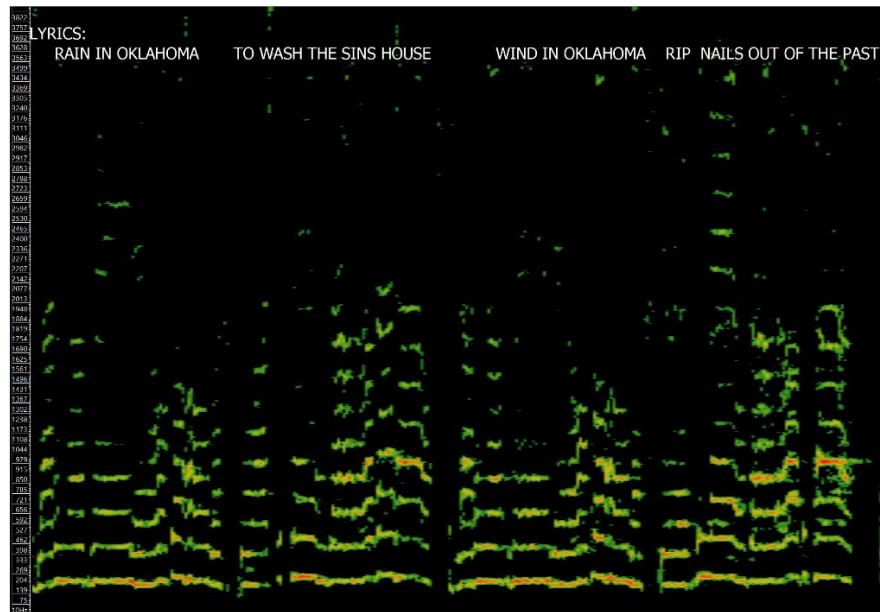
Example 3.8 “Blown Away” (2012): Spectrograms

a) Verse 1: Darkest, Most Hollow, and Most Pure (0:19–0:46)



³⁴ I use these terms comparatively in a given context (such as a song or an album), because “bright” for Carrie Underwood is different from “bright” for Lainey Wilson.

b) Prechorus: Slightly Brighter and Fuller than Verse (0:47–0:53)



c) Chorus: Brightest, Fullest, and Noisiest (1:00–1:15)



The spectral differences in each section are related to the song's narrative. In the verses, the narrator tells a somber story of a girl effectively left alone during a tornado. This is reflected in the darker and hollow vocal delivery. Even the final line of the first

verse (“She prayed blow it down”) pairs an ominous tone with the concept of prayer, indicating the protagonist’s desire to be free from both the storm and her living situation. The vocal delivery remains dark in the prechorus because the lyrics (shown in Example 3.9) are hopeless. This is also the first instance of narrative ambiguity. Because of the notable lack of pronouns in the prechorus, there are a few possible interpretations available to the listener. First, the narrator could be addressing the protagonist (with a private voice) to warn her against being too hopeful. While the storm might tear the house down, her problems (and trauma) will not go away so easily. A second possibility is that the prechorus’s lyrics are protagonist’s inner monologue, voicing her own doubts that she’ll ever escape her situation. The dark but noisy vocal timbre supports this reading, because if the protagonist is speaking, then she’d be speaking to herself in the cellar, where the noise of the storm rages around her. While she could brighten her voice to be heard over the storm, because this is her inner monologue, I imagine she might be muttering these words to herself with a lower pitch and darker sound to reflect her hopelessness.

Example 3.9 “Blown Away” (2012): Prechorus Lyrics (0:47–1:00)

There’s not enough rain in Oklahoma
To wash the sins out of that house
There’s not enough wind in Oklahoma
To rip the nails out of the past

Finally, the chorus’s bright and full vocal delivery also presents several possible readings. Like the prechorus, the chorus lacks pronouns (see Example 3.10). Rather than the expository statements of the verse and prechorus, though, the chorus opens with an imperative command, suggesting both a speaker and a direct addressee. Three interpretations appear possible. My initial reaction is that the protagonist of the song is

speaking, or rather, shouting, *at* the tornado, or nature, or possibly God.³⁵ Underwood’s powerful and emotional belt here seems to fit this reading, and the abundance and prominence of higher frequency overtones in the spectrogram in Example 3.10c shows that her sound is rich, particularly on the word “away.” She sings with a tense (or pressed) phonation, which marks the sound through increases in loudness and brightness (Malawey 2020, 102). It’s as if her voice is matching the power of the storm, reinforcing the possibility that the protagonist addresses the storm, nature, or God. She is both mimicking the storm’s power vocally and expressing her frustration with her situation corporally.

Example 3.10 “Blown Away” (2012): Chorus Lyrics (1:01)

Shatter every window ’til it’s all blown away
Every brick, every board, every slammin’ door blown away
‘Til there’s nothin’ left standin’, nothin’ left of yesterday
Every tear-soaked whiskey memory blown away
Blown away

Underwood’s vocal delivery would also fit a reading that interprets the chorus as the narrator addressing the protagonist, in the same way as the first possible interpretation of prechorus presented above. In this interpretation, the narrator is understood to be more than an unbiased recounter; rather she has a personal understanding of the situation, which is perhaps the reason for the intense vocal delivery here. As someone who speaks from understanding or experience, the narrator possesses the *authority* to speak to the right course of action. If the narrator addresses the protagonist, she is encouraging her to break free from her abusive living situation. If

³⁵ Because there is a religious aspect to this song, it also not unreasonable to consider that God, as creator and controller of nature, is responsible for this storm. The protagonist could be shouting at the tornado caused by God, thus addressing both simultaneously.

the storm is metaphorical, then so is the window, and Underwood could be advising the protagonist to break the window herself and tear down the walls of her past.

Finally, there is also the option of the protagonist's inner monologue. She could be telling herself to scream (or belt, in the case of song) as loud as she can—loud enough to shatter the windows upstairs or the metaphorical windows that trap her in the house with her father. From this perspective, the chorus is self-motivating, putting the agency in the protagonist's hands. She is not pleading with nature or praying to God for her escape, rather, she is telling herself to take charge of her situation—much like when someone hypes themselves up before a challenging action by verbally repeating, "I can do this!" This interpretation is supported by the contrast in vocal delivery between the prechorus and chorus. If they are both the protagonist's inner monologue, then the prechorus expresses her self-doubt, while the chorus breaks free (vocally and lyrically) with confidence and determination.

These various interpretative possibilities reveal how Underwood (and her personae) interact with the listeners. Each listener brings a unique life experience that influences which reading they might identify with, and the use of double address makes these simultaneous interpretations possible. If we identify with the protagonist, then we can imagine ourselves in a similar situation and thus understand the desire for destruction in this song as well as the communication with self or God. But if we identify with the narrator, existing outside the story, we understand the authority Underwood sings with. Because Underwood has earned country listeners' trust as a moral authority, if she sings about escaping abuse through violent means, we understand that the violence is morally justified. In this song, Underwood draws on her established performance persona to connect with listeners regardless of who they relate to in the

song. There is no “wrong” character to identify with, except perhaps the drunken, abusive father—and if we identify with him, then we identify with evil, and that’s something no country listener desires. It is for these reasons that the writers³⁶ of “Blown Away” (who started writing the song with no artist in mind, just focusing on the drums and strings) realized that this song was *made* for Carrie Underwood (Conaway 2012). Her performance persona as a good Christian girl enhances the song’s powerful narrative, and her vocal power matches the intensity of the storm she sings about.

The narrative of overcoming in “Blown Away” is powerful in itself, but it is through Underwood’s voice and performance persona that listeners connect with the song in emotionally powerful ways. Though the lyrics (especially in the verses) present Underwood as an omniscient, uninvolved narrator, her narrative role is different from a literary omniscient narrator, whose voice is transparent and their identity invisible. Because we can *hear* Underwood’s voice, we associate what we know about her (and her performance persona) with the lyrical story. As listeners, we can not only glean information about Underwood, but we also understand the song’s moral dilemma through the lens of her persona.

“Church Bells” (2016)

“Church Bells” is a classic tale of feminine strength in the face of adversity. The song went double platinum and received a Grammy nomination, in addition to topping Billboard’s Country Airplay chart. Underwood described the protagonist of the song, Jenny, as “Fancy’s little sister” (Dukes 2015), referencing the 1969 song “Fancy” written

³⁶ “Blown Away” was written by Chris Tompkins and Josh Kear, who also wrote “Before He Cheats.”

by Bobbie Gentry and modernized by Reba McEntire in 1990.³⁷ Like Fancy, Jenny is a poor girl with beauty. Through marriage to an oil man, Jenny escapes her life of poverty. Jenny quickly learns that her husband is abusive and seeks solace and comfort at the local church. As she hears the church bells throughout the song, their context changes. The first chorus's bells are wedding bells at Jenny's wedding. The second chorus's bells are standard church prayer bells as Jenny suffers from her husband's abuse. Jenny hatches a plan to kill her husband in the third verse, and the final chorus's church bells are funeral bells. Despite the song's deadly outcome, Jenny's tale has a message of redemption. The church is a place of forgiveness, and rather than a feeling of condemnation after murdering her husband, there is hope for Jenny even as she hears the final funeral bells.

Writing for Rolling Stone, Will Hermes describes the song as being “at the tipping point in the most epic domestic-violence-revenge-murder ballad in years, splitting the difference between Martina McBride’s ‘Independence Day’ and the Dixie Chicks’ ‘Goodbye, Earl,’ but without the latter’s safety-valve of humor” (2015). The lack of humor in “Church Bells” is part of why listeners relate so strongly to the song. Jenny claims her story for herself in murdering her husband, freeing her from a lifetime of abuse. Though murdering an abusive husband might seem out of character for Underwood’s “Good Christian Girl” persona, it makes sense when Underwood is considered a moral authority. In an interview about this song, Underwood states that “She ends up killing him. [...] It forces her to be strong,” (Dukes 2015). As in “Blown

³⁷ “Fancy” tells the story of a young woman who grew up in poverty. Her mother was terminally ill and spent the little money they had to buy a beautiful red dress for Fancy, with the expectation that Fancy would be able to seduce a wealthy man and escape poverty. Fancy does indeed find wealth through the seduction of aristocrats and congressmen.

Away,” we understand that this choice can be morally justified. And because it is Carrie Underwood who sings this story, the moral justification for murder seems acceptable, even in a Christian country context.

In the first verse of “Church Bells,” the narrator introduces Jenny and an unnamed oil man. Strict third person is maintained until the final line of the verse (see Example 3.11), where a sudden shift to second person occurs in tandem with the introduction of the word “you.” The use of the word “you” here is important, because it creates an explicit connection between Underwood and the listener. This musical equivalent to “breaking the fourth wall” is related to what Lori Burns describes as self-conscious communication (2010, 164) : Underwood’s song persona explicitly recognizes the interaction between the real world of the listener and the narrative world. This draws upon the narrative paradigm identified by Jocelyn Neal as the implied conversation, which invites the listener to become an active participant in the song (2007, 46). Underwood’s song persona draws upon the assumption that the listener is familiar with the trope of a girl with no money finding a husband solely because of her looks. This direct communication with the listeners also creates connection with Underwood. Through a shared knowledge of tropes and stereotypes, there is a common social circle here and an implication that because of that understanding, the listener is able to “figure out the rest.” Underwood provides some help “figuring out the rest” in the prechorus. This first prechorus confirms that Jenny marries the man (“wearin’ that white gown, takin’ his last name) and reveals a shift in Jenny’s perceived self-image. Her identity is intertwined with her husband’s and she seems to gladly anticipate the luxuries afforded her as his wife.

Example 3.11 “Church Bells” (2016): Verse 1 and Prechorus 1 Lyrics (0:10–0:43)

[Verse 1]

Jenny grew up wild like a black-foot daisy
Out in the shack with a blue tick hound
Broke as hell, but blessed with beauty
The kind that a rich man can’t turn down
She caught the eye of an oil man dancin’
One summer night in a dime-store dress
She had the looks, **he** had the mansion
And **you** can figure out the rest

[Prechorus]

It was all roses,
drippin’ in diamonds
Sippin’ on champagne
She was all uptown
wearin’ that white gown
Takin’ **his** last name

The first church bells appear (lyrically and sonically) in the chorus (whose lyrics are given in Example 3.12), which begins with the same third-person narration from the verse, signaled by the pronoun “she.” But two lines later, in tandem with a shift upward in pitch and brightness, a change to an imperative statement occurs: “fold your hands and close your eyes.” Unlike the verse’s brief second-person excursion, however, these lines do not seem to represent Underwood’s narrator addressing the listeners. Three readings seem plausible. First, the choir (who was introduced in the previous line), could be singing to Jenny, offering her advice (to pray and lean on God) as she sits in the church. Second, we could be hearing Jenny’s inner monologue as she stands on the altar, reassuring herself that “it’s all gonna be alright.” Finally, the narrator could be addressing Jenny directly through private address, offering comfort because, as an omniscient narrator, she knows the ending to Jenny’s story, and that everything really will be alright for her.

Example 3.12 “Church Bells” (2016): Chorus Lyrics (0:44)

She could hear those church bells ringing, ringing
And up in the loft, that whole choir singing, singing
Fold **your** hands and close **your** eyes
Yeah, it's all gonna be alright
And just listen to the church bells ringing, ringing
Yeah, they're ringing

The story told in “Church Bells” relies on a few formal techniques that are common in country music. First, there is a small-scale Time-Shift narrative, where “each subsequent verse’s distinct [narrative] episode follows the previous one chronologically,” (Neal 2007, 46). The Time-Shift narrative in “Church Bells” doesn’t cross generations, but it does feature sequential and chronological narrative events. Second is the use of shifting lyrics in the prechorus. Each prechorus sets up the following chorus by situating the church bells in the context of the preceding verse. The lyrics to the second verse and prechorus are given in Example 3.13. Though most of the song’s narrative action occurs in the verses and prechoruses, the reinterpretation of the chorus’s lyrics not only gives the actual church bells different meanings throughout the song, but also plays an important role in the overall story and emotional impact. As Jenny’s life progresses through a rollercoaster of love, abuse, and murder, one thing stays constant: the church bells. The bells themselves are likely representative of various aspects of Christianity. From a communal perspective, the bells are always accompanied by people, whether they be the choir members, the wedding attendees, or simply members of the congregation when Jenny is praying. This related to the evangelical idea that the church is not a place, it is the people, and in this case, the underlying message could be that relying on one’s church congregation is pivotal in getting through hard

Example 3.13 “Church Bells” (2016): Verse 2 and Prechorus 2 Lyrics (1:12–1:45)

[Verse 2]

Jenny was hosting Junior League parties
And havin’ dinner at the country club
Everyone thought they were **Ken** and **Barbie**
But **Ken** was always gettin’ way too drunk
Saturday night after a few too many
He came home, ready to fight
And all **his** money could never save **Jenny**
From the devil livin’ in **his** eyes

[Prechorus]

It was all bruises,
Covered in make-up
Dark sunglasses
And that next mornin’
Sittin’ in the back pew
Prayin’ with the Baptists

times. But at a deeper level, it’s not just the people that help Jenny. In truth, the symbolism of the bells, the church, and the congregation all point to the ultimate truth, which is that God is always with you. From this perspective, then, a final interpretation of the chorus’ lyrics seems plausible. As Jenny hears the bells, she could be hearing God speaking to her, telling her to pray and endure. The reassurance in this interpretation is comforting to those listeners who might feel like they have no control in their life, because if Underwood’s narrator is speaking on behalf of God, she is reminding the devout listener to pray and trust that it’s “all gonna be alright.”

The song’s final cycle reminds the listener that even with devout prayer, sometimes action is required. For Jenny, untraceable poison is the option she chooses, and the listener must infer that the final bells are funeral bells in the context of the preceding verse’s lyrics (shown in Example 3.14). Despite the funeral bells of the final chorus, Underwood’s delivery is hopeful and bright, highlighting the joy that Jenny likely feels because she is free from a life of abuse. Additionally, there is the implication

that Jenny likely inherited his riches, meaning that in the wake of this whirlwind romance, Jenny has not only escaped the violence, but she's also escaped the poverty she grew up in. This song functions as a message of hope to women who feel stuck in bad situations. Underwood is not condoning murder in "Church Bells." Rather, she seems to be recognizing that the church is a place of refuge for those in need. At the same time, Underwood also seems to endorse the idea that "God helps those who help themselves"—Jenny had to take action herself to rid herself of her husband. Though that action is arguably not a moral one, it is justifiable and consequently, easily forgiven, both socially and spiritually. Most people would likely sympathize with an abused wife finding her escape through his death, and this sympathy would result in social forgiveness. And on the spiritual side, no sin is too great for forgiveness, even murder. This is where hope comes in: if there's hope for Jenny after she murders her husband, then there's hope for any sinner (including country women) who finds their home and comfort in God (or the church).

Example 3.14 "Church Bells" (2016): Verse 3 Lyrics (2:30)

Jenny slipped somethin' in **his** Tennessee whiskey
No law man was ever gonna find
And how **he** died is still a mystery
But **he** hit a woman for the very last time

Conclusion

My analysis of these songs demonstrates how Carrie Underwood crafts and presents her Good Christian Girl performance persona. Understanding her persona mandates a deeper consideration of how she navigates tropes and stereotypes. The idea of a "good girl," especially a Christian one, typically implies submission and even passivity.

Underwood's early-career hits based in Biblical country helped her craft the persona of

an established moral authority in the country music industry. As a moral authority, Underwood possesses a right to judgement and dominance that might seem at odds with the submission of a typical “good girl” image. But, from a Christian perspective, these two attitudes are easily reconciled through an understanding of the Proverbs 31 woman. The “wife of noble character” is the ultimate goal for Christian women, and the Proverbs 31 woman is described as strong and wise.³⁸ She runs her household well, which includes raising and disciplining children. Thus, authority and judgement are inherent in the image of a Good Christian Girl.

Carrie Underwood’s persona informs our understanding of songs she tells with third-person address, because the seemingly unbiased narrator carries the authority not only to tell these stories, but also to advise these characters and the country listeners who relate to them. In this chapter, I demonstrated how Underwood invokes evangelical Christian traditions lyrically, sonically, and vocally to communicate hope through salvific love. At times, she employs a soft, clear head voice in her upper range to communicate human fragility. Other times, she belts out lyrics to demonstrate strength (human and/or divine) and powerful emotions. In her discussion of gospel vocality, Barb Jungr notes that “*Belt* is a full-throttle sound and is very evident when singers seem on the edge of their voice and emotion: one can almost hear the physical effort employed to make the sound” (2002, 107). When we hear Underwood belt out evangelical lyrics, we can hear and feel the intensity in her voice embodied through deep connection with powerful and spiritual emotions. Belt occurs with higher pitches, and in tandem with religious lyrics, belt seems to lead upwards to the heavens. Underwood’s

³⁸ See Proverbs 31:17, 25–27.

belted public proclamations of faith invite us to join her, giving everything we have vocally, bodily, and spiritually in pursuit of faith.

The lyrics in Carrie Underwood's Biblical country songs connect with listeners of both religious and non-religious backgrounds by reminding us that it's ok to be imperfect, because not only is that the human experience—we all make mistakes—but it is also the nature of mankind, who is sinful and separated from God. As an established moral authority, Underwood speaks to situations that appear in a morally gray area, providing advice and, most of all, hope, even in the face of traumatic events. When country women hear Underwood's voice, they can relate not only to the imperfection of life that she describes, but also to the idea that if you have faith, everything will be alright in the end.

IV. THE RELATABLE REBEL: MIRANDA LAMBERT, VOCAL REBELLION, AND GENDERED ‘CRAZY’

Hailing from Texas, Miranda Lambert first found success in 2003 with a third-place finish on *Nashville Star*, a television singing competition for country singers. Marissa Moss (2022) describes why Lambert was relieved at her loss:

“Losing meant that Miranda didn’t have to be beholden to the record label that came with the top slot, or the requirements to work with a certain producer, a certain mixer, a certain engineer. It meant that no one owned her choices but her gut, and that she could mold her career exactly how she wanted to.” (57)

Lambert had little desire to be a high-profile singer, but she did want a record deal (Moss 2022; Jess 2022). Her previous attempts in Nashville hadn’t succeeded in launching her career, but the publicity from the show would land her a deal with Epic Records. Her debut album *Kerosene*, released in 2004, went platinum. Now, Lambert is the most awarded artist in the history of the Academy of Country Music Awards and with “Entertainer of the Year” awarded in 2021, she was presented with the Triple-Crown Award³⁹ (Academy of Country Music, n.d.).

A country artist through-and-through, Lambert has made songs about scorned womanhood her signature,⁴⁰ especially those in which the woman gets her revenge in a way that might not be considered socially acceptable. Lambert’s rebel image began with her debut album *Kerosene* (2004), whose titular song includes lyrics such as, “Forget your high society, I’m soakin’ it in kerosene” and “Ain’t a rule that ain’t worth breaking.” She’s been called an “angel-faced rebel gal” (Maerz 2011). In her first Nashville negotiations, Lambert stated that if she couldn’t make a record on her own terms, “I’d rather not make a record at all” (Moss 2022, 59).

³⁹ The Triple Crown Award has only been awarded nine times in ACMA history. The coveted award requires achieving Top New Male/Female Vocalist, Top Male/Female Vocalist, and Entertainer of the Year. Lambert was the third woman to earn it.

⁴⁰ Lambert’s parents both worked as private investigators when she was growing up, specializing in “tracking down cheating spouses.” Her parents sheltered an abused woman and her daughter when Lambert was 15, and the woman’s story influenced one of Lambert’s biggest hits, “Gunpowder and Lead” (2008), (Maerz 2011).

Though risky, this confidence and brazenness matched her image of a rebel. Writing for the *New York Times*, Lindy West said, “I struggle to think of women who lost their tempers in public and didn’t face ridicule or temporary ruin, or both” (2017). In the wake of the political statements by the Chicks, women in country were few and far between. Marissa Moss explains that in the early 2000s, the two accepted paths were modeled by Carrie Underwood and Taylor Swift. At that point, no one was worried about political statements or wardrobe malfunctions (2022, 92). But, according to Moss, “Miranda seemed dangerously close to the promise of the Chicks—fearless, stubborn, adhering to her vision like a gnat on flypaper” (2022, 83). So, when “Kerosene” was released, she established herself as a woman who would not hide her rage. Rather, Lambert embraced the things a polite woman *shouldn’t* do, like being loud, brash, or angry, and put it in song (2022, 62). It wasn’t long until the Nashville media branded both Lambert and her music as that which, “encourage[s] indulging with a side of cleansing anger,” a sentiment that would only grow with her future songs (Moss 2022, 62).

Lambert’s willingness to rebel, especially in a time that was, according to Melissa Maerz, “dominated by middle-aged men in cowboy hats and girlish waifs with role-model-worthy messages” was embraced by “full-grown women” (2011). From her narrative topics to the rage and revenge that comes through her vocal delivery, Lambert’s songs are embraced by women who need to hear a message of empowerment, and Moss describes her music as, “meticulously crafted and steeped in country music tradition, and a hungry, encyclopedic knowledge of both new artists and underappreciated ones” (2022, 62). She relates to her listeners through truth. Lambert stated that she “lay[s] it all out and [hopes] maybe people will like it. And people do. They feel like it’s not a fantasy world” (Moss 2022, 178). This attitude, paired with a twangy vocality, catchy country sound, and lyrics that speak to real women’s issues comes together to form her “Relatable Rebel” persona and unique musical signature that country listeners love.

Country music's especially restrictive nature means that Lambert's seemingly minor social transgressions (in comparison to popular music generally) appear rebellious to country's sensitive listenership. By pushing the line of what is acceptable for country women to do, look like, or sound like, Lambert creates a rebellious persona that country listeners are quickly able to identify as butting up against traditional gender norms. The antebellum-era expectations of ladyhood that still persist in the industry today make Lambert's gun-slinging, vengeful outlaw persona all the more rebellious. Though her actions might appear tame compared to other female pop stars, in the context of country culture, Lambert portrays the rebel woman authentically by living within the guidelines of acceptable, but toeing the line whenever possible.

In this chapter, I consider what vocal rebellion looks like and how the concept of "gendered crazy" is understood within the context of country culture. I offer close analytical readings of two Lambert songs, "Mama's Broken Heart" (2013) and "If I Was a Cowboy" (2021) to establish how Lambert communicates her persona musically. Additionally, I consider how Lambert's established "Relatable Rebel" persona interacts with other country artists' personae in "Hell on Heels" (2011) by Lambert's all-female country trio the Pistol Annies, and Lambert's duet with Carrie Underwood, "Somethin' Bad" (2014). Through these analyses, I show how the sound of the voice directly impacts the expression of feminine performance persona and how listeners understand and relate to these songs.

Vocal Rebellion

When we hear a sound, we make instant judgements on that sound: where it comes from, what its quality is, and if we like it (Eidsheim 2019; Malawey 2020; Wallmark 2022a). In the case of the acousmatic (or unseen) voice, considering where a voice comes from means questioning *who* is this? Nina Sun Eidsheim considers this the acousmatic question, and states:

Through attentive and informed listening, I should be able to know a lot about the vocalizer, and possibly about his or her identity. If I do not already know the person, I should still be able to glean general information about him or her — from broader identity markers to fine-grained assessments regarding health, mood, or emotional state — and discern the speaker’s attempts to falsely communicate emotions or truth statements, or even to speak as another through imitation or impersonation. (2019, 2)

Thus, when we hear a voice, those instant judgements we make relate directly to our expectations of who made that sound. Victoria Malawey expands upon this idea by noting the inherent cycle that exists:

These judgments are continually reinscribed through correlating aspects of identity with specific aspects of vocal quality. As a cycle, we enter a sonic situation with certain preconceived notions and expectations that we have learned through our cultural and social experiences; we then make often subconscious assessments of a singer’s identity (race, gender, socioeconomic standing, geographic location, nationality, age, and so forth) and correlate certain vocal characteristics with these aspects of identity. Then, the next time we hear someone sing in a similar way, we assume they share a similar background or identity to the persons we have heard before. (2020, 96–97)

In the context of a specific genre and culture, then, we have certain expectations for the identities that belong to specific sounds. Malawey notes that “gendered bodies and the voices they inhabit are socially constructed and culturally mediated” (2020, 28–29). For example, operatic voices have long carried associations with specific characters. A lower female voice can signify “earthiness and sensuality” while a lyric soprano (high, fluid female voice) is often associated with “virginal, pretty young things” (Malawey 2020, 31). Similarly, Patrick Dailly notes that in some popular music, “we hear the head-voice [of the upper register] as unthreatening and contemplative (coming from a gentrified or Christian tradition) and we hear the chest-voice [of the lower register] as assertive, brash, and potentially threatening (coming from a vernacular tradition)” (quoted in Fournier 2015, 49). In the context of country music’s southern, rural, Christian traditions, female singers present their personae and tailor their vocal delivery to communicate specific social status.

Modern country women have over a century of associations to draw upon. They can choose to emphasize the women of the Wild West, the nostalgic early 1900s, or the feminist counter-current of the late 1900s. And regardless of their choice, the chosen association is still

seen as authentic because at some point in country music's history, it *was* authentic. The associations available have created multiple models of culturally authentic femininity in country. A vocalist's authentic expression is often correlated with the unmediated: the natural voice expresses personal thoughts and experiences that are authentic (Nobile 2022, [2.1]; Moore 2002, 213). Because voice seems to represent the self, listeners assume that, for the most part, how one sings is how one acts, and vice versa (Frith 1996, 185–86). The submissive, docile woman is expected to sing sweetly, often in head voice, and with uncontroversial lyrics. When Carrie Underwood sings those crystal-clear high notes while singing about Jesus, she is perceived as authentically embodying the “Good Christian Girl,” as I discuss in Chapter III. When Miranda Lambert embraces anger and revenge paired with a relaxed and twangy vocal delivery, that's considered authentic, too (because she is drawing on a different period in country's history, namely the Wild West).

A primary difference between these ascriptions of authenticity is whether they conform or rebel against the genre's ideal model of country womanhood. Carrie Underwood's performance persona, vocal delivery, and lyrics typically align with this idealized model: she sings in a higher register with a touch of twang, without much rasp or growl, and her family-friendly lyrics solidify her place as an artist whose vocality matches the image of a “Good Christian Girl.” Both Underwood and Lambert fit the bill of a blonde-haired white woman, but Lambert refuses to be considered an “ideal model.” Where the desires of industry executives might require a tame tongue, less twang, and PG lyrics, Lambert defies these, thus rebelling against an idealized modern expression of femininity. Rather, by drawing on the Wild West (and sometimes the feminist counter current that began in the late twentieth century), she invokes the outlaw women visually and vocally. Lambert often sings in a lower register with lots of twang. The range she primarily sings with is close to her speaking voice and her lyric narratives of rebellion are matched in her vocal delivery. While popular singers today commonly belt choruses, Lambert typically does not. Even when the melody rises in the chorus (like in “The

House That Built Me” [2010]), she stays in a relaxed head voice, which seems like a subtle way to rebel against vocal norms. More obviously, she often sings lyrics with a contrasting vocal delivery; she pairs lyrics about screaming and raging with a soft and breathy timbre, and she pairs sweeter lyrics with a low and powerful chest voice.

Gendered Crazy

According to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, the adjective “crazy” has many definitions: 1) not mentally sound, impractical, unusual, and 2) obsessed, infatuated. Similar words include mad, unreasonable, and insane. These words hold no explicit references to gender, but modern society has come to associate them with the feminine. Women with uncontrolled or excessive emotions have been diagnosed as “hysterical” or “neurotic” since the eighteenth century (Ussher 2011, 1). The word hysteria—which comes from the Greek word for uterus, *hystera*—is not only gendered, but also deeply tied to the history of women’s medical treatment and the formation of how gendered crazy is understood today. Of the variety of emotions that humans experience, anger is one of the most powerful, and arguably the most gendered. The archetype of the “mad woman” in opera—such as the lead character in Gaetano Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*—capitalizes on the strong emotions, outbursts, and actions that women experience when antagonized or provoked. Karen Fournier notes that “the angry woman is pathologized, sanctioned, isolated, and silenced,” (2015, 1). Fournier focuses on the branding of Alanis Morissette as an “angry white woman” whose rage set both her and her music apart. In more recent work, Emily Milius discusses the universality of anger communication through the spoken voice (2024, 109). The voice’s ability to communicate powerful emotions like anger is important to a consideration of “crazy” in country music.

The popularization of the crazy country girl can be attributed to the aesthetic code of “irony, defiance, and individuality” that was sweeping country radio in the late 1940s (Neal

2018, 53). Singers dared to sing not only about defiant topics (such as infidelity, divorce, and alcohol), but also to sing in ways that stood out (leading to the twang-filled rockabilly style that dominated the early 1950s). The combination of extra twangy vocals with previously taboo topics helped popularize the country woman's powerful voice. But the Nashville style that followed quickly quashed the twang, but kept the "crazy."

Patsy Cline, one of the most well-known country singers of the 1960s, did not shy away from the term "crazy." Her smash hit "Crazy" (1961) was written by Willie Nelson and contains cowboy tropes of "loving and leaving." But when sung by a woman, the term "crazy" has a different feel. Rather than being diagnosed as crazy by a man, Cline chooses to label herself crazy because of her unwavering love and hope. The song's lyrics describe why she is crazy: for her feelings ("Crazy for feeling so lonely/blue), for her love ("Crazy for loving you"), and for her actions ("Crazy for trying and crazy for crying"). Thus, though the term crazy could be interpreted differently because of the various definitions of the word, it seems that the consistent use of "for..." suggests that perhaps the narrator has been labeled "crazy" and these are the reasons why. The popularization of "Crazy" paved the way for future country women to claim the term—or related traits and actions that might warrant labeling one as "crazy"—and to sing in ways that might be a little crazy, too.

Even though songs about infidelity, motherhood, sexuality, and craziness have been sung by country women for well over a century, for a long time the emotions present in the lyrics were absent in the singing voice. Women still sang in a way that represented polite femininity: soft, sweet, often head voice, rarely a belt. If they didn't sing like that, there was historical precedent that they could be cut from country radio. For example, Ruth Etting, famed for hits like "Ten Cents a Dance" (1930), had a sultry singing style that was "too sexy for our [WLS] station," according to the music directors (Bufwack and Oermann 2003, 81). If a woman could be ostracized for her singing style, even in songs whose lyrics weren't all that provocative, then

women tended to keep their singing voices polite (though there is a wider range today for a woman's polite vocality). Many women focused on lyrics as a way to express ideas that pushed against the pure mountain housewife trope. For example, Patsy Montana's 1949 hit "I Didn't Know the Gun was Loaded" is about a woman (Miss Effie) who, according to the lyrics would "shoot most any guy" and then claim she didn't know the gun was loaded as her alibi. The song's first stanza notes that "she drove the men insane." Later in the song, Miss Effie accidentally shoots the sheriff and is acquitted by a jury, but the sheriff's jealous wife shoots Miss Effie and claims the same alibi for herself. Montana sings these lyrics about murder and jealousy with a relaxed, soft head voice. But not every song with a "polite" vocality and impolite lyrics was accepted by country radio. For example, Dolly Parton's 1972 hit "Touch Your Woman"—which peaked at number six on the US Country Singles Chart—was effectively banned from country radio for being too sexually suggestive (Parton and Oermann 2020, 170). In the post-millennial country industry, bans happen for many reasons, but for women the risk seems to be higher with songs that push the boundaries of industry standards for country womanhood.

Modern country still holds on to some of these traditions. As a woman in country music, if you say the wrong thing, sing the wrong way, or encourage the wrong actions, country radio (which still dominates the industry even in today's streaming era) will be harsh in its judgement. There is a relationship here between persona and songs. Listeners assume that anything a song's narrator would do, the artist (or at least their performance persona) could do—or at least realistically imagine doing—as well. So, if a song is about something "crazy" or improper in polite society, then the artist must also be crazy. Miranda Lambert tends to focus on the lyrical crazy, and draws on the assumed equivalence with her performance persona to give her "relatable rebel" persona credit. For example, in "It All Comes Out in the Wash" (2019), intimacy—or relatability in this case—is created through the lyrics (Example 4.1). Lambert sings about the social faux pas that regular people make, such as spilling ketchup on a white shirt. By discussing the messy side of life, Lambert creates a connection with the listeners through her

performance persona. She might be a superstar, but she's still a woman who can get a little crazy sometimes. And in a comforting way, Lambert reminds country women that nothing in life is worth sweating over, because "it all comes out in the wash." Using laundry as a metaphor here is fitting, as it has historically been considered women's work. Thus, both the crazy and the fix for crazy are gendered feminine. In a similar example, "We Should Be Friends" (2016), Lambert

Example 4.1. "It All Comes Out in the Wash" (2019): Cycle 1 Lyrics (0:12–1:01)

If **you** wear a white shirt to a crawfish boil
Stonewashed jeans while **you're** changing the oil
When **you** find yourself dating the bridesmaid's ex
You accidentally bring him to the wedding, whoops
If **you** pour **yourself** a Merlot to go
You dip **your** fries in **your** ketchup on a bumpy road
You spill the beans to **your** mama, sister got knocked up
In a truck at the 7-Eleven, don't sweat it

'Cause it'll all come out, all come out in the wash
It'll all come out, all come out in the wash
Every little stain, every little heartbreak
No matter how messy it got
You take the sin and the men and **you** throw 'em all in
And **you** put that sucker on spin

Example 4.2. "We Should Be Friends" (2016): Cycle 1 Lyrics (0:12–1:01)

If your mind's as cluttered as your kitchen sink
If your heart's as empty as your diesel tank
If all your white T-shirts have stains
If you've got some goods and got some ink
Well then, we should be friends

If you borrow dresses like you borrow time
If you dream all day and drink all night
If you're looking for love but willing to fight
Over men and mamas and Miller Lites
Well then, we should be friends

I don't know you well but I know that look
And I can judge the cover 'cause I wrote the book
On losing sleep and gaining weight
On pain and shame and crazy trains

once again describes things that are likely deemed “crazy” by society, as shown in Example 4.2. However, in this song Lambert uses the plural “we”, directly inserting herself into this song. Again, she invites the listener to connect through the shared experience of social imperfection.

In much pop music, the use of “you” typically indicates a specific character in the song’s narrative (like a lover, ex, or best friend). In such cases, we can perceive what BaileyShea calls “double address”: we’re hearing a singer address both a specific character within the song, *and* us, the real listeners (2014, [22]). What is unusual, though, is that in these songs, the “you” seems to be the listeners—no double address needed. These songs invite the listener into relationship with Lambert by drawing on human nature of imperfection, and in “We Should Be Friends” that invitation is explicit through the titular lyric’s use of the “we.” While one could imagine a person in the story world that Lambert is conversing with, it seems more likely that a listener (especially through the act of singing along) will imagine themselves in conversation with Lambert’s persona. Lambert’s level of “crazy” is dialed down in these examples, but in the analyses that follow, I show how her feminized crazy is not only rebellious, but also relatable to women within the confines of the country music industry.

Analyses

“Mama’s Broken Heart” (2013)

Rising to #2 on both Billboard’s Country Airplay and Billboard’s Hot Country Songs charts in 2013, “Mama’s Broken Heart” is one of Lambert’s few songs that she did not write herself. In choosing outside tracks, “she was careful and specific [and ...] that sense would eventually lead her to Kacey Musgraves’ ‘Mama’s Broken Heart,’” (Moss 2022, 83). The song’s lyrics, shown partially in Example 4.3, describe how a young, modern woman responds to heartbreak, and compares the protagonist’s actions with the expectations of her mother’s older generation. The parental expectations of perfection on display here are unquestionably gendered. Drew Nobile,

discussing Alanis Morissette's "Perfect," notes "parents' roles in perpetuating problematic gender roles across society" and more specifically asserts that "girls are scolded for 'screwing it up' and told to 'keep quiet,'" (2022, [4.2]). Keeping quiet can mean more than silencing the voice; it can also mean hiding displays of negative emotions. In the first line of the song, Lambert sings "I cut my bangs with some rusty kitchen scissors, I screamed his name till the neighbors called the cops." The mother's expectations of the daughter to 'keep quiet' are confirmed at the end of the verse and in the chorus with the lyrics, "Don't matter how you feel it only matters how you look, Go and fix your make-up...Run and hide your crazy and start actin' like a lady." These statements refer to both the physical actions of the daughter (cutting off her hair) and the expected silencing of her voice (disapproving of the daughter screaming his name).

Screaming the ex's name is a strong physical and emotional action, one that would often be associated with a matching vocal timbre—such as a powerful belt, yell, or scream (Malawey 2020, Wallmark 2022). Emily Milius describes how noisy voices (including loud or rageful sounds) can "activate listeners' nervous system and bring them into a higher state of arousal" (2024, 111). Thus, Lambert could have chosen to draw her listeners in by singing in the expected manner and highlight her anger vocally. Thwarting those expectations just as she thwarts the societal expectation to 'keep quiet', Lambert delivers these lyrics (and the rest of the daughter's lyrics) with a relaxed, softer vocal quality. This can be seen in a spectrogram (shown in Example 4.4), where the sound is relaxed and sparse, with more overtones only on nasally vowels (such as "bangs" and "name"). In contrast, the mother's lyrics, which are typically imperative statements, are sung with a richer and brighter timbre, evoking the aural association of power in tandem with her desire for the daughter's emotional suppression. Both vocally and lyrically, the song is structured as a conversation between the mother and daughter. By considering the vocal timbre employed in the song, Lambert adds another layer of meaning to the lyrical narrative.

Example 4.3. “Mama’s Broken Heart” (2013): Cycle 1 Lyrics (0:09–1:04)

I cut my bangs with some rusty kitchen scissors
I screamed his name ‘til the neighbors called the cops
I numbed the pain at the expense of my liver
Don’t know what I did next all I know I couldn’t stop

Word got around to the barflies and the Baptists
My mama’s phone started ringing off the hook
I can hear her now saying she ain’t gonna have it
Don’t matter how you feel, it only matters how you look

Go and fix your makeup
Girl it’s just a break up
Run an’ hide your crazy
And start actin’ like a lady
‘cause I raised you better
Gotta keep it together
Even when you fall apart

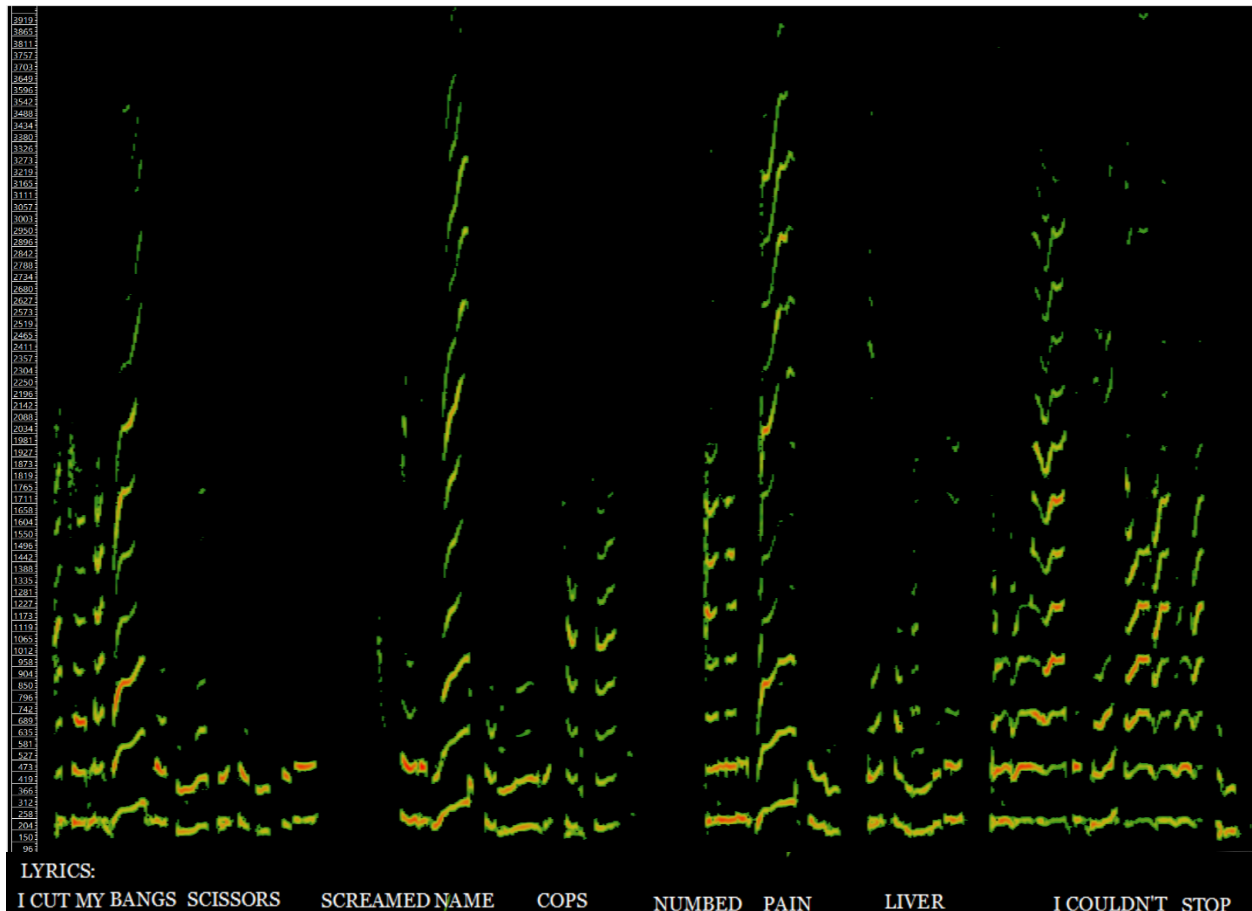
But this ain’t my mama’s broken heart

Legend:

Daughter

Mother

Example 4.4. “Mama’s Broken Heart” (2013): Spectrogram: Verse 1 (0:09):
Daughter (relaxed, sparse, and nasally)



There is a tension in this song between rebelliousness and repression. The daughter's lyrics are rebellious: she sings of her inability to keep her cool and her desire for revenge. Verse 3 (shown in Example 4.5) references Jackie Kennedy's composure after the assassination of her husband in 1963 as a model of both perfection and weakness. While the former first lady's composure was admirable in the face of loss and grief, the lyrics effectively lump her and the mother's character together as part of the "softer generation." From the daughter's perspective, then, to "bite your lip" and "keep a spotless reputation" is not a sign of the virtue of self-control, but rather signals the inability to express oneself. For Lambert, then, having the courage to do all "of the don'ts—losing your temper, getting angry, saying things a little too loud or a little too brash" is a sign of strength (Moss 2022, 62). But once again, she sings these vengeful lyrics with a contradictory timbre—one that is breathier and relaxed, and paired with back-up vocals singing "Ah" with a soft head voice to emphasize the disconnect between the lyrics and vocality.

Example 4.5. "Mama's Broken Heart" (2013): Verses 3 and 4 Lyrics (1:07–1:40)

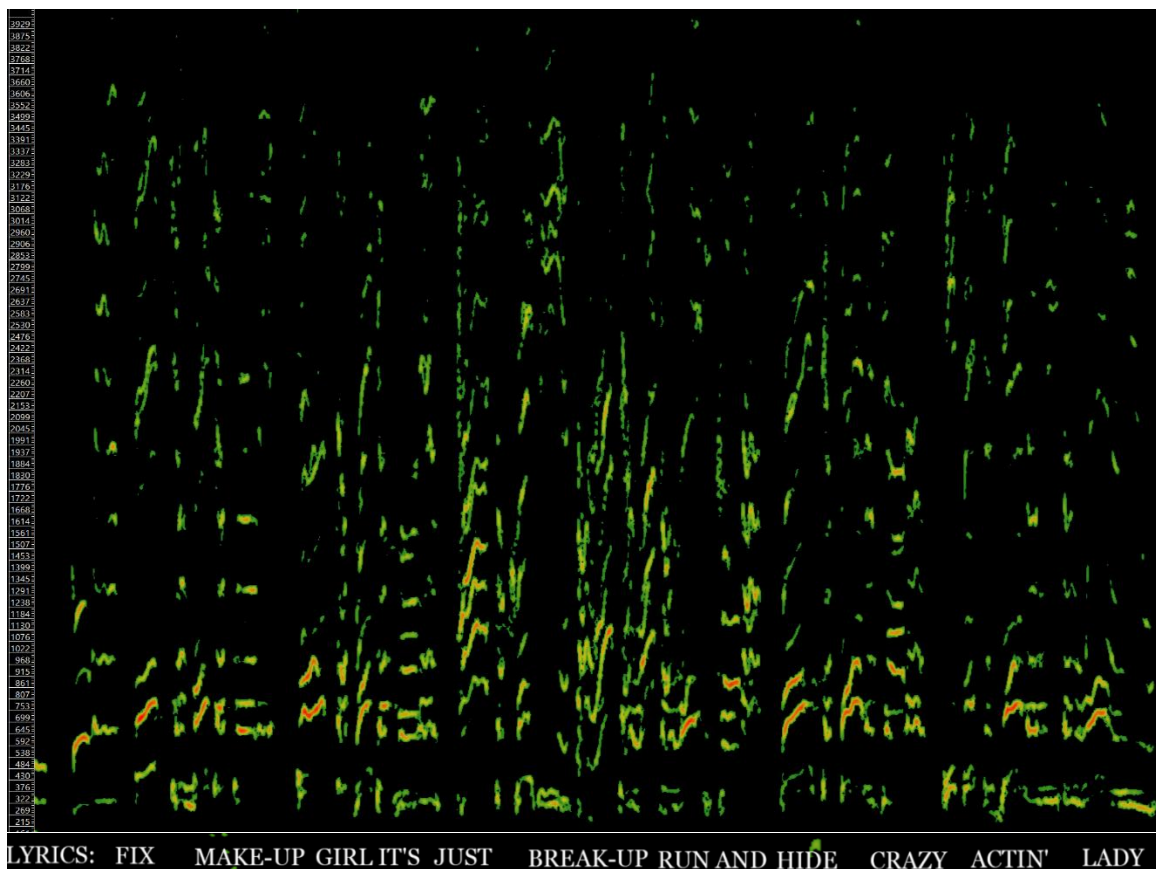
I wish I could be just a little less dramatic
 Like a Kennedy when Camelot went down in flames
 Leave it to me to be holding the matches
 When the fire trucks show up and there's nobody else to blame

 Can't get revenge and keep a spotless reputation (Ah)
 Sometimes revenge's just a choice you gotta make (Ah)
 My mama came from a softer generation
 Where you get a grip and bite your lip just to save a little face

When Lambert sings as the mother, she belts the lyrics—her resonance is placed forward in the mask, and this combined with Lambert's natural nasality provides bright and rich sound and a stark contrast to the lyrical ideas presented (see Example 4.6). Her sound is more forced, especially in comparison to the natural (or less tense) vocal delivery of the daughter's lyrics. This contrast between natural and forced vocality is at odds with the lyrical opposition of rebellion and repression. The daughter's rebellious actions are paired with a conflicting subdued vocality, yet while the mother's actions are repressed, her vocality is not. The mother's words consist

mostly of commands, such as “Fix your make-up” and “Keep it together.” These imperative statements, when uttered by a parent, would likely be accompanied by a scolding or commanding voice, and in this way, the voice supports the lyrics. But closer consideration of lyrical meaning reveals yet another contradiction—if one actually obeys these commands, they would be repressing their emotions and natural reactions. Considering that the mother’s generation values self-control, perhaps repeated suppression leads to a default response: to repress. If repression becomes the default, then it doesn’t require as much conscious effort to

Example 4.6. “Mama’s Broken Heart” (2013): Spectrogram: Chorus 1 (0:43):
Mother (rich and bright)



keep those emotions under control. Thus, the strong vocal delivery is at odds with the emotional repression that the lyrics encourage.

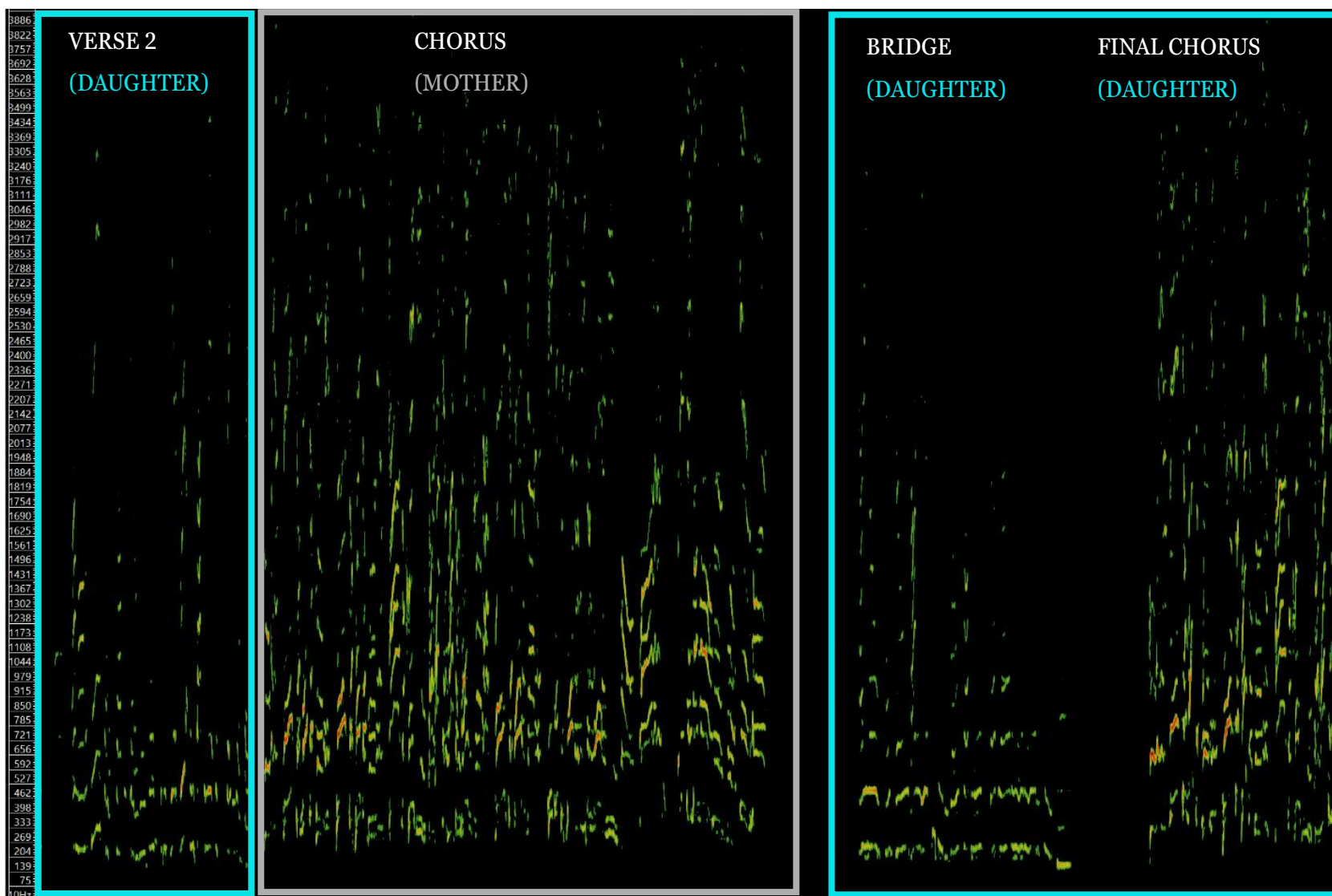
There is a moment of ambiguity in the song's bridge. While it might at first seem like an extension of the mother's lyrics in the chorus, the bridge lyrics (shown in Example 4.7) could also be interpreted as the daughter (or Lambert's performance persona) mocking the mother's words. In this understanding, Lambert could be seen as communicating directly with listeners and inviting them to mock the old, repressive traditions with her. This reading assumes a slightly snarkier vocal delivery and one would expect a spectrogram of the bridge to show similarities to the daughter's other statements. Example 4.8 shows the end of verse two through the beginning of the final chorus, and the overtones and amplitude of the bridge are clearly more similar to the daughter's voice in the verse. Additionally, the vocal delivery in the final chorus is changed because of the bridge. Where Lambert was simply quoting the mother in the first two choruses, in the third chorus there are slight melodic alterations (e.g. on "makeup", "break up", and "like a lady"). The vocal delivery is rougher and has an audible tension. Thus, where the daughter mocked the mother quietly in the bridge, in the final chorus there is a vocal release: she finally sings with the anger that would have been expected in the verses. And after subtly inviting the listener to mock the mother in the bridge, this final chorus is not subtle. Even the lack of melodic precision and changes to the melodic line (see Example 4.9) functions as an invitation to the listener—Lambert is effectively saying that it doesn't matter what you sound like, just let out that anger with her. Most women likely have some resentment towards their own mother, but country women are more likely to share a resentment that revolves around the idealization of romantic-era lady-like qualities. Thus, her rebellious vocality and lyrics are relatable to this intended audience.

Example 4.7. "Mama's Broken Heart" (2013): Bridge Lyrics (2:05–2:15)

Powder your nose, paint your toes
Line your lips and keep 'em closed
Cross your legs, dot your eyes
And never let 'em see you cry

This final chorus presents a power struggle through the song's form. At first, the daughter (whom we associate with Lambert's own performance persona) made space for the mother in the choruses. After the bridge, the daughter has firmly established that she will not listen to the mother and she will not keep quiet. Thus, by the final chorus, the daughter has won (in her eyes, at least). For the daughter, the social damage of her lyric actions in the chorus has been done, and that damage cannot be undone. By embracing her socially unacceptable actions, Lambert shows that rebelliousness wins out in the end.

Example 4.8. “Mama’s Broken Heart” (2013): Spectrogram (1:07–2:36): Timbral Similarities Between Bridge and Verses



Example 4.9. “Mama’s Broken Heart” (2013): Transcriptions: Choruses

a) Chorus 1 and 2 (0:43 and 1:41)

Chorus 1 and 2 musical notation. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The melody is written on a single staff. Chords are indicated above the staff: Em and B7. The lyrics are: Go and fix you make-up girl it's just a break-up Run and hide your cra - zy and start act - in' like a la - dy 'cause I raised you bet - ter got - ta keep it to - ge - ther e - ven - when you fall a part but this ain't my ma - ma's bro - ken heart.

b) Final Chorus (2:17)

Final Chorus musical notation. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The melody is written on a single staff. Chords are indicated above the staff: Em and B7. The lyrics are: Go and fix your make-up girl it's just a break-up run and hide your cra - zy and start act - in' like a la - dy 'cause I raised you bet - ter got - ta keep it to - ge - ther e - ven when you fall a - part but this ain't my ma - ma's bro - ken heart.

“If I Was a Cowboy” (2021)

In 2021, Lambert released her first single in over two years, “If I Was a Cowboy.” A song that glorifies the Wild West, the certified gold record broke into top ten on Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart. Upon first listening, one might be reminded of Beyoncé’s 2008 hit “If I Were a Boy,” and with good reason. Both songs feature lyrics that imagine how the life of a woman might be different if she were a man (see Example 4.10). In addition to the gender reversal lyrics, Lambert ends the chorus with an intriguing lyric: “If I was a cowboy, I’d be the queen.” This brings gender to the forefront in a new way—by stating “I’d be the queen” Lambert questions the gendered norms of cowboy life and indicates that she would be more than just another cowboy; she would reign over the cowboys.

This lyric (“I’d be the queen”) seems to indicate that Lambert sings as a female character, but in an interview regarding the song, she states, “I sing as a male character in ‘If I Was a Cowboy’” (Murphy 2022). Lambert credits singer EmmyLou Harris as her inspiration for this choice, noting that she “would never change the genders” (Murphy 2022). Thus, the chorus’s final lyric should be considered from the perspective of a male character—and envisioning a male cowboy singing “I’d be the queen” introduces an aspect of queerness. Though Lambert was not as outspoken of a queer ally (compared to more overtly progressive singers like Maren Morris and Kasey Musgraves), she has been described as a “subtle breed of ally” (Moss 2022, 173). In 2011, Lambert’s single “All Kinds of Kinds” was received as a statement of allyship to the LGBTQ+ community. Over a decade later when Lambert sings “If I was a cowboy, I’d be the queen,” one can understand the multiplicity of interpretations in this load-bearing lyric. However, it seems unlikely that listeners would imagine the song persona as *actually* masculine. Rather, the more straightforward interpretation is that the feminine song persona is imagining what cowboy life would be like, and that feminine persona sees herself as in charge (as the

queen). The song's verses describe stereotypical masculine cowboy activities, but the use of the word "queen" and Lambert's vocal delivery remind the listener that this is a woman's song.

Example 4.10. Lyric Comparison

"If I Was a Cowboy" (2021)
by Miranda Lambert

Ridin' off in the sunset, blue eyes under my
Stetson
A little lady on the front porch, wishin' my
heart would start settlin'
Big iron hips with the holsters,
I'd be lookin' mighty fine on a poster
Wanted by the law but the laws don't apply to
me

If I was a cowboy, I'd be wild and free
Rolling around these towns like tumbleweeds
I'd be a legend at lovin' and leavin'
Nippin' on a whiskey and numbin' up my
feelings
You thought the west was wild but you ain't
saddled up with me
If I was a cowboy, I'd be the queen

"If I Were a Boy" (2008)
by Beyoncé

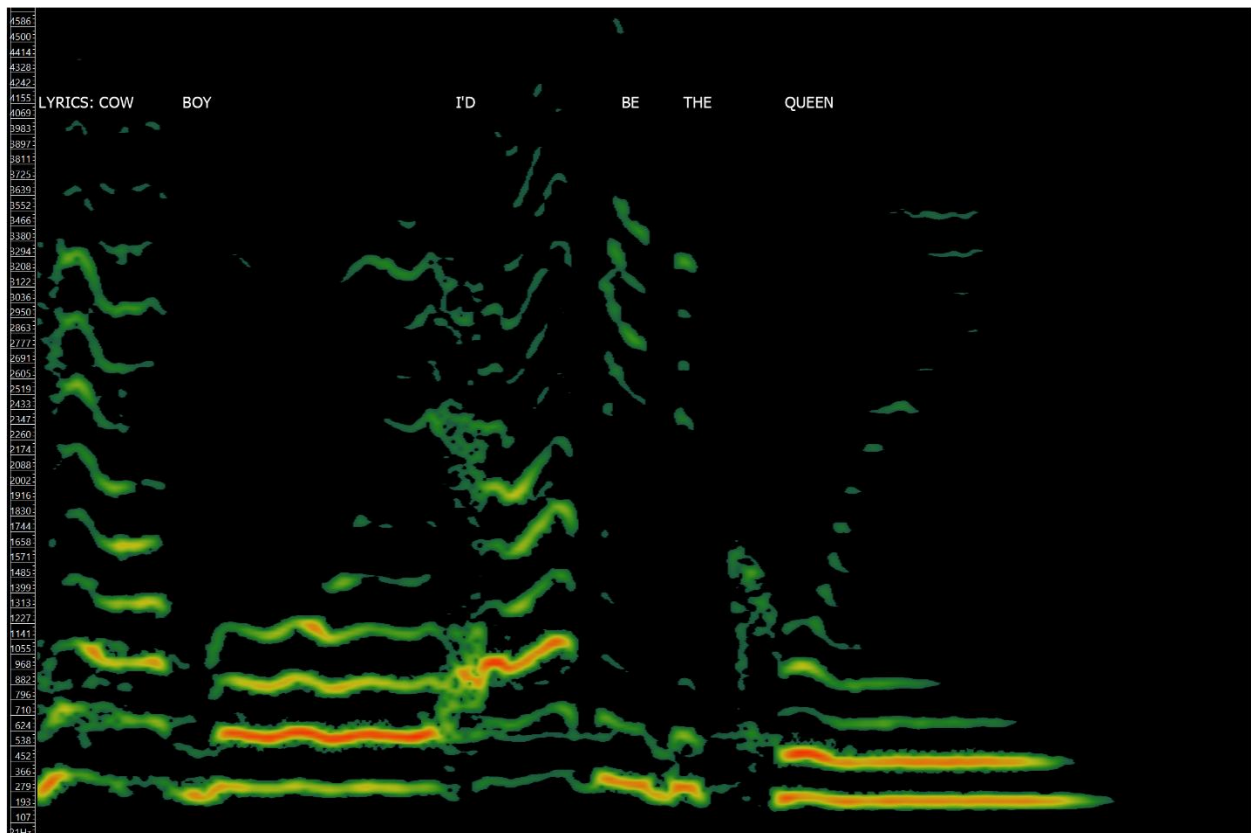
If I were a boy, even just for a day
I'd roll out of bed in the morning,
And throw on what I wanted then go
Drink beer with the guys
And chase after girls
I'd kick it with who I wanted
And I'd never get confronted for it
'Cause they'd stick up for me

If I were a boy
I think I could understand
How it feels to love a girl
I swear I'd be a better man
I'd listen to her
'Cause I know how it hurts
When you lose the one you wanted
'Cause he's taken you for granted
And everything you had got destroyed

Even as Lambert presents a rough, masculine character through the lyrics, her vocal timbre remains soft and feminine. Lambert sings mostly in head voice, a marked characteristic which can signify femininity or even weakness (Malawey 2020; Nobile 2022). Where Beyoncé opens "If I Were a Boy" with a low chest voice that spans a sixth (F#3–D#4) before an octave jump in the belted chorus, the first vocable (ooh) heard in Lambert's sings "If I Was a Cowboy" solidly in head voice. This breathy, feminine sound is rather nasally and the higher range (A3–A4) of the verses is maintained through the chorus (C#4–A4) until the final word, "queen." Sung on an A3—the lowest pitch of the chorus—this word draws attention musically as well as lyrically. Lambert sings this word in chest voice with less vibrato and a darker sound than the

previous lyrics, providing a stark contrast sonically. The spectrogram of this phrase shown in Example 4.11 displays the absence of stronger upper partials on the word “queen” and the steadiness of her voice as she sings with more straight tone. Where a more feminine interpretation might expect “queen” and the chorus to end on a higher pitch, by dropping into the next octave, Lambert once again nods to the importance of gender and their stereotypes. Cowboy imagery tends to be associated with roughness and masculinity, so by employing a more masculine vocal timbre on the word “queen”, the juxtaposition of lyrics and vocal delivery is foregrounded.

Example 4.11. “If I Was a Cowboy” (2021): Spectrogram: Chorus Ending: Timbral Difference on “queen” (0:59)



The focus on rough cowboy stereotypes goes beyond the titular lyric through the invocation of two outlaw legends: Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. Marissa Moss discusses these legends and the “degree to which they pissed people off, broke laws, and then turned

around and floored everyone with music that reminded people of the sheer humanity within us all” (2022, 74). Lambert references these men in her bridge lyrics for good reason. Lambert had been branded as a rebel who burns things down and tears things up, and Moss notes that “all the stuff that made Waylon Jennings and the Outlaws idols, but Miranda a liability, as if engaging with her too much might make your actual house catch fire” (2022, 83). Where Nelson and Jennings had the freedom to be rulebreakers without concern for repercussions, the women in country are not afforded that luxury, especially in the wake of the Chicks. So, Lambert comments on the double standard by referencing Nelson and Jennings’s 1978 hit “Mammas, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys.”⁴¹ Lambert alters the titular lyric slightly, but retains many musical elements, as shown in Example 4.12. Both songs are in the key of D Major, and Lambert preserves the syllabic emphasis on “Mama” and keeps the word “up” on the

Example 4.12. Similarities in the Bridge

a) “If I Was a Cowboy” (2021) by Miranda Lambert (2:05)

So ma-mas if your dau-ghters grow up to be cow-boys, so ____ what?

Same Key Second Syllable Emphasized Strong Beat Text Setting Top of Melodic Range

b) “Mammas, Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys” (1978) recorded by Waylon Jennings & Willie Nelson (0:36)

Ma - mas don't let your ba - bies grow up to be cow - boys

⁴¹ Miranda Lambert covered this song in 2023 at the Hollywood Bowl and called her performance “cheers to our cowboy Willie Nelson” (Young 2023).

downbeat of the measure. Additionally, the contour and range are both similar: the highest pitch is B (“**ba**-bies” and “cow-**boys**”) and the first syllable of “cowboys” is at the edge of the range in each example. She alters the titular lyric to “Mamas, if your daughters grow up to be cowboys, so what?” Once again, Lambert foregrounds gender by swapping “babies” with “daughters.” The final “so what?” of the bridge indicates that the cowboy life is not only acceptable, but that the life of an outlaw is open to women as well.

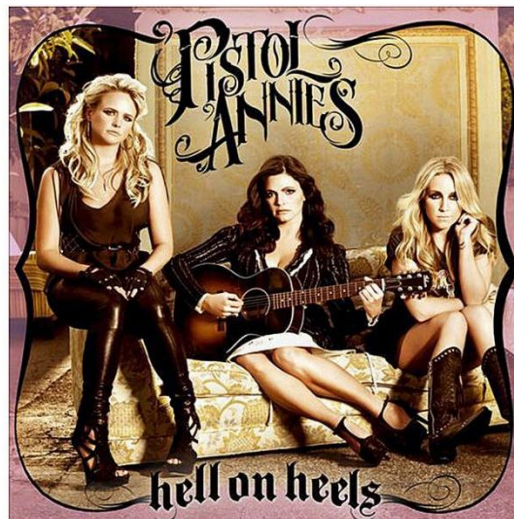
Artists have questioned whether children should be raised in the cowboy life and considered the effects of these child-rearing practices on country men. For example, in 1997, pop singer Paula Cole released the hit single “Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?,” which laments the lack of men who desire to work hard and come home to a homemaker. More recently, Jason Aldean released “Let Your Boys Be Country” in 2023, which features a subtle tribute to Nelson and Jennings through the lyrics and syncopated rhythmic motive on “Mamas.” Lyrically, where Nelson and Jennings cautioned mothers against raising cowboys, Lambert questions if a child, specifically a daughter, growing up to be a cowboy is such a bad thing. For Lambert, then, the freedom from the expectations of being a country lady is in line with the more modern concept that women are capable of doing anything a man can do. The combination of masculine references with Lambert’s feminine delivery and lyrical changes together communicate an important aspect of her persona: at the same time that she portrays femininity vocally, she is also rebelling against gendered expectations in her actions. She knows that the cowboy life is associated with masculinity, but still claims it for herself and every other girl that shares her desire for freedom.

“Hell on Heels” (2011)

Miranda Lambert’s rebellious persona extends beyond her singles and albums and into her collaborative work as a member of the Pistol Annies. In this country trio, Lambert sings as

“Lonestar Annie,” alongside Ashley Monroe (“Hippie Annie”) and Angaleena Presley (“Holler Annie”). According to Lambert, who had the idea to create the group, the Pistol Annies are “so important to me and for female music and perspective” (Houghton 2022). The titular song from their first studio album *Hell on Heels* (2011), which debuted at number one on Billboard’s Country Albums chart, established that this all-female group was just as rebellious as Lambert herself. In an interview with *The Boot*, Lambert describes the trio as a “girl project” but notes that “it’s not your typical girl trio. We [the Annies] definitely have an edge,” which has been described as “fiery” (Hughes 2011). Lambert has noted that their freedom to speak hard truths comes from power in numbers, stating “when there’s three of us, we can say whatever we want,” (Murtaugh 2018). Their debut album cover, shown in Example 4.13, adds a pink border around the sepia shading characteristic of photos from the Old West, and with each of the Annies wearing all black. This imagery evokes rebellion and country outlaw history, hinting at the nature of the trio’s songs.

Example 4.13. Pistol Annies
(from Left to Right: Miranda Lambert, Angaleena Presley, Ashley Monroe)



“Hell on Heels” is a play on the phrase “hell on wheels,” which refers to the makeshift towns that would be constructed for short periods of time during the building of the first

transcontinental American railroad in the 1860s. These “bustling, brawling boomtowns” consisted of the important things for rough, rowdy, rail workers: a brothel, a bar/saloon, a dance hall, and a gambling house (Klein 2006, 100–101). But these settlements were not officially associated with Union Pacific, and Samuel Bowles describes the people that built and worked these makeshift towns as “the hangers-on around the disbursements of such a gigantic work, catching the drippings from the feast in any and every from that it was possible to reach them. Restaurant and saloon keepers, gamblers, desperadoes of every grade, *the vilest of men and women* made up this ‘Hell on Wheels,’ as it was aptly termed” (1869, 56, emphasis mine). Thus, by invoking the term, the Pistol Annie is aligning themselves with the image of sinful indulgence and utmost rebellion. The lawlessness of the Wild West is a perfect match for deals with the devil and cunning trickery towards men. The slight alteration from “wheels” to “heels” invokes the feminine, reinforcing that the Pistol Annie is identifying with the working ladies who were happy to take all they could from their customers.

The song follows a strophic form based on the 12-bar blues progression, and the opening refrain lyrics are sung in a tight three-part harmony, mentioning a deal with the devil and thus drawing attention to religious rebellion. The Annie is also introduced as distinct voices through solo lines in the strophe (Example 4.14). Angaleena Presley sings “He made me pretty,” Miranda Lambert sings “He made me smart,” and Ashley Monroe sings “And I’m gonna break me a million hearts.” The singers reconnect for the chorus’ final lyrics. Three verses follow this first chorus, and each is sung by a different member of the trio. Following the same order as the chorus, Presley takes verse one, Lambert takes verse two, and Monroe takes verse three. Retaining the same order from the chorus highlights that each voice represents a distinct character with a different devilish deal.

Example 4.14. “Hell on Heels” (2011): Lyrics

[Refrain]
I'm hell on heels, say what you will
I done made the devil a deal
He made me pretty, he made me smart
And I'm gonna break me a million hearts
I'm hell on heels
Baby, I'm comin' for you

[Verse 1]
This diamond ring on my hand's
The only good thing that came from that man
Got a GTO from one named Joe
And a big piece of land down in Mexico
I'm hell on heels
Baby, I'm comin' for you

[Verse 2]
I got a pink guitar, a Lincoln town car
From ol' what's-his-name I met at a bar
Got a high-rise flat in Hollywood
From a married man wasn't up to no good
I'm hell on heels
Baby, I'm comin' for you

[Verse 3]
Then there's Jim, I almost forgot
I ran him off, but I took the yacht
Poor ol' Billy, bless his heart
I'm still usin' his credit card
I'm hell on heels
Sugar daddy, I'm comin' for you

[Refrain x2]

Angaleena Presley Miranda Lambert Ashley Monroe

The song's narrative seems to reclaim the cowboy traits of the Old West and feminize the trope of “loving and leaving.”⁴² Though women sang about revenge, prostitution, and murder, it was often retelling events or cautioning others about the cowboy ways. For example, outlaw queen Belle Starr's 1878 famous western song, “Bucking Bronco (My Love is a Rider)” tells a cautionary tale about loving a cowboy. In the final strophe of the song, Starr sings “He'll love you

⁴² Though the trope of cowboys riding away (typically in spring with the cattle) has been around for centuries, songs like “Lovin' and Leavin'” (1989) by Judy Collins and have popularized the idea through the phrase

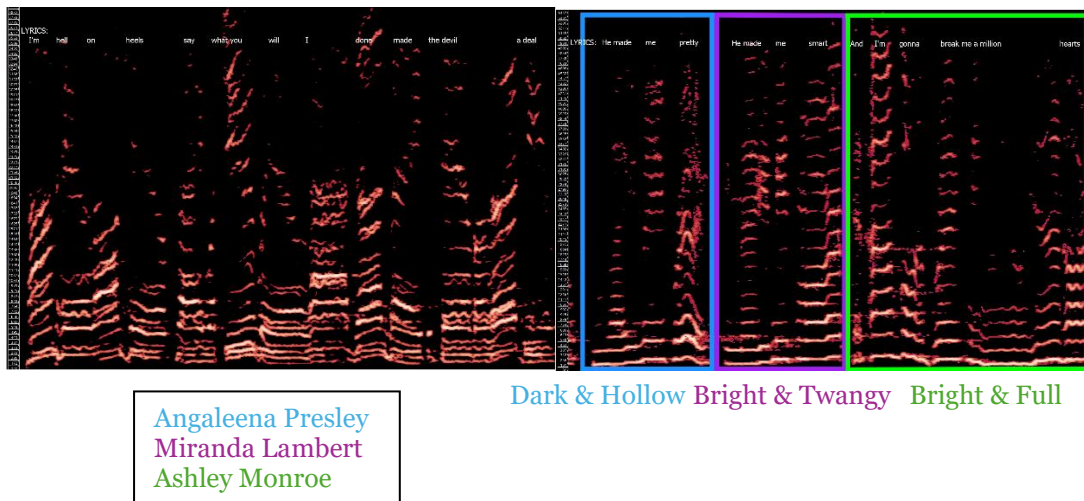
and lay you and leave you to go, in the spring up the trail on his bucking bronco” highlighting not only that cowboys were known for taking advantage of women for sex, but also that they were prone to leaving after the fact (Bufwack and Oerman 2003, 15). Another more famous example is “Rising Sun Blues,” a “woman’s song [...] sung from the point of view of the rueful prostitute” (Bufwack and Oerman 2003, 15–16). This song gained commercial success after its release as “The House of the Rising Sun” by the Animals in 1964, but the earliest recording of the tune was sung by Georgia Turner (and transcribed by Ruth Crawford Seeger) in 1937 (Sixstrstories 2017). Her version offers a woman-to-woman warning: “Go tell my baby sister, never do as I have done, tell her shun that house in New Orleans, they call the Rising Sun.” In contrast to these songs, “Hell on Heels” gives the women agency to take advantage of more than a man’s body.

The Annies in “Hell on Heels” update the classic Old West narrative by using men to get the wealth and material things they desire—and then leaving them. From boats and cars to land and guitars, these three characters embrace the nature of gold-digging. They are not ashamed and in fact seem proud of their cunning skills. But these talents seem to be unnatural: each singer needed to make a deal with the devil to gain the ability needed to trick men into buying things for them. Presley is pretty, Lambert is smart, and Monroe is a heartbreaker. These attributes make sense in the context of each “Annie.” Presley is the “Holler Annie” (her performance persona) because she (the performer) grew up in the hollows (hollers) of Kentucky with a third-generation coal miner as a father. So, for her character, being pretty matters. Loretta Lynn’s description of life as a coal miner’s daughter highlights the hardship of woman’s work in a poor family, so for “Holler Annie” being pretty could be seen as an escape route from that future. After all, historically the way to escape poverty for a pretty mountain girl was to snag a good husband (see Chapter III, “Church Bells”). Lambert’s “Lonestar Annie” character comes from her east Texas roots, so making her smart draws on the assumption that rednecks and hicks are dumb and ignorant. Monroe is “Hippie Annie” because she’s all about love and being a

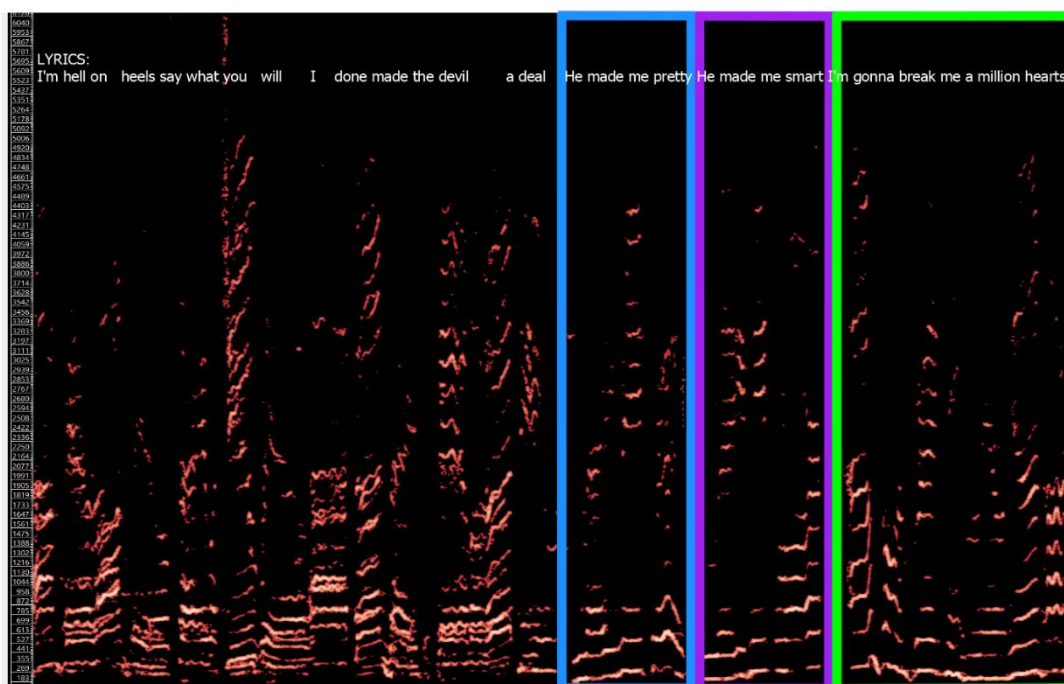
peacemaker (Furdyck 2022). Thus, breaking hearts is unnatural, yet a requirement to seduce and screw over men.

The song's strophic form is not only narratively driven, but the lyrical form is also matched by the vocal timbre. It's worth noting that what happens between verses (or characters) is typically the focus in strophic forms. The opening refrain introduces the Annies alongside their unique deals with the devil and distinguishes them sonically. Example 4.15 shows the sonic signature for each singer, as well as a foreshadow of the timbral trajectory from dark to bright. Presley's voice is dark and hollow, Lambert's is brighter and twangier, and Monroe's is the brightest and fullest, as shown in the increasing amplitude in the high-frequency partials in Example 4.15. The verses mimic this trajectory, and Monroe's verse even features melodic alterations to higher pitches (which will naturally sound brighter). When the refrain returns (2:40), the vocal blend changes: the sound overall is darker and less resonant, and each solo line is hollower as well (Example 4.16). The result is a *timbral* form that colors the lyrical form.

Example 4.15. “Hell on Heels” (2011): Spectrogram: Opening Refrain (0:29)



Example 4.16. “Hell on Heels” (2011): Spectrogram: Second Refrain (1:56)



Darker and More Hollow Overall,
Less High-Frequency Partials

This formal trajectory towards brighter vocal timbres is supported by the instrumentation. The songs opening refrain features the three Annies accompanied by a fingerpicked guitar and pedal steel playing soft, open chords and a simple melody with a somber tone. As the song progresses, the texture becomes denser, particularly with the addition of drums. After the short instrumental break (2:18) that features an electric guitar solo, the final refrain is accompanied by claps and unpitched percussion until the final word when a single guitar punctuates the song. This switch in accompaniment for the final refrain seems to change the song's mood: where the opening was serious and dark, the end of the song is more energetic despite the thinner texture and darker vocal timbre. The rhythmic claps and hollow vocal delivery seem to suggest that the narrators have no regrets about the devil's deal they accepted. Thus, the texture and timbral form complements the narrative. The trajectory towards brightness is mirrored by the path to feminist reclamation of the characters' actions.

“Hell on Heels” pairs a simple instrumentation that evokes the Old West through the use of dobro and a plethora of open chords with the three Annies, who are distinguished through form, lyrics, and vocal delivery. Combined with a narrative theme that embraces the socially unacceptable, Miranda Lambert’s voice and persona fit perfectly in the trio’s sound. Her rebelliousness is on full display here, even in the context of collaborative singing. It could even be argued that Lambert’s rebellious performance persona is why listeners grant the Pistol Annies the narrative authority to sing about taking advantage of men and making devilish deals. Because listeners know the performance personae of stars like Lambert, they likely ascribe aspects of her persona onto the character she sings. In “Hell on Heels” the timbral differences of each voice are contrasted against—and influenced by—Lambert’s well-known twang.

“Somethin’ Bad” (2014)

Miranda Lambert and Carrie Underwood spent nearly the first decade of their own respective careers trying to find a time to sing together (Watts 2014). Lambert made it happen for the first time in 2014 with the duet “Somethin’ Bad.” The song was originally intended as a male/female duet, but with some minor tweaks Lambert said the song “was perfect for their collaboration [and] just sounds like fun” (Watts 2014). “Somethin’ Bad” reached #1 on Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart and was the first female duet to top the chart in over two decades (Trust 2014). The song was further popularized by Sunday Night Football: Underwood reworked the song into “Oh Sunday Night” for the NFL’s opening show from 2016–2018. The allure of “Somethin’ Bad” comes from the combination of Lambert and Underwood’s powerful vocals to create a country girl’s “powerhouse anthem” (TOCS 2014). In “Somethin’ Bad” two women meet—after one ran away from the altar—and commence road trip to New Orleans where they intend to stir up trouble. The song’s narrative relies on the performance personae and feminine expression of both country superstars, but the lawbreaking that ensues is driven by Lambert’s

character, Belle Boyd, who drives the story lyrically and vocally. Carrie Underwood's character, Priscilla Parker, is a willing accomplice to the mayhem. The two characters stir up trouble together and, as writers for *Taste of Country* note, "it's obvious when they say something bad is about to happen, the dynamic duo really means something devilishly *good*" (2014).

A month after the song's release, the music video was released. Framed as a film trailer, the music video sheds light on the song's story. The opening lines are sung in unison and the video shows the two singers having mugshots taken, like the single's cover art, shown in Example 4.17. From the beginning of the song, then, we understand that the song's narrative events happened in the past. The smirks on their faces suggest that both women are not ashamed of their actions; rather, they seem to be reveling in the fun of their illegal endeavors. The next scene shows the first of many disguises the two characters don through the song. Here, they pull off a jewel heist by ditching their trademark blonde hair: Lambert opts for a black bob wig and Underwood appears as a redhead (shown in Example 4.18). The verse begins with Belle

Example 4.17. Miranda Lambert (left) and Carrie Underwood (right)



Example 4.18. Lambert (left) and Underwood (right) in Disguise



Boyd (Lambert) describing how she left her man at the altar, grabbed the cash stashed in her mattress, and was headed to the bar. Priscilla Parker (Underwood) happens upon Boyd in her wedding dress and offers her a ride. It is apparent that the two intend to cause trouble anywhere along the ride to their destination, New Orleans. The music video shows the pair infiltrating a gambling ring, riding motorcycles, and leaving in a helicopter. Most of these events are not

Example 4.19. “Somethin’ Bad” (2014): Lyrics

Stand on the bar, stomp your feet, start clapping
Got a real good feeling somethin' bad about to happen

[Verse 1]

Pulled up to the church but I got so nervous
Had to back it on up, couldn't make it to the service
Grabbed all the cash underneath my mattress
Got a real good feeling somethin' bad about to happen

[Verse 2]

Ran into a girl in a pretty white dress
Rolled down a window
Where you headed to next?
Said I'm heading to the bar with my money out of the mattress
Got a real good feeling somethin' bad about to happen

Miranda Lambert Carrie Underwood

[Chorus]

Stand on the bar, stomp your feet, start clapping
Got a real good feeling somethin' bad about to happen
Drinks keep coming, throw my head back laughing
Wake up in the morning, don't know what happened
Whoa... somethin' bad
Whoa... somethin' bad

[Verse 3]

Now me and that girl that I met on the street
We're rollin' down the road, down to New Orleans
Got a full tank of gas and the money out of the mattress
Got a real good feeling somethin' bad about to happen

[Verse 4]

Bout to tear it up down in New Orleans
Just like a real-life Thelma and Louise
If the cops catch up, they're gonna call it kidnappin'
Got a real good feelin' somethin' bad about to happen

[Chorus x2]

explicitly described in the song's lyrics (see Example 4.19), but the lyrical reference to *Thelma and Louise* (1991)⁴³ in verse four indicates that any of these actions would fit the duo's itinerary.

The duo seems to be driven by Lambert, both vocally and narratively. She sings with her typical twang and Underwood dials up her twang a bit to match. More noticeably, Underwood's diction and intonation are colored with more scoops and slides than are typical for her (e.g. "clappin'" and "happen" in the chorus). Narratively, it is Lambert's character (Belle Boyd) who drives the story forward. Boyd is the one with a hankering to cause trouble at a bar, and Priscilla Parker (Underwood) seems to be along for the ride. In Underwood's verses, her character only offers a ride to Boyd and states the destination. By contrast, it is in Lambert's verses that narrative action occurs: leaving the fiancé, grabbing the cash, plans to tear it up and break the law. This is further supported by the lyric "If the cops catch up they're gonna call it kidnappin'" in verse 4, which reinforces the idea that she is the driving force and Parker is following (willingly or not).

The power balance between the two singers can also be heard in the sonic placement. Lambert's voice is consistently more prominent in the mix, even when the two women sing in unison. The song's opening lines feature Lambert and Underwood singing in unison, but Lambert's voice is much farther forward in the mix (Example 4.20a). This reflects that it is Lambert's character (and thus, her voice) that is in control of this story. In the first cycle, Lambert's voice is flatter with minimal layering, while Underwood's is more reverberant and slightly more layered. Together, these aspects give the impression that Lambert's character is confident and in charge, whereas Underwood's character is more spread (and thus possibly more hesitant). Once again, this reinforces that Lambert's character and vocal delivery are dominant in this song. In the choruses that follow, their voices are separated melodically and

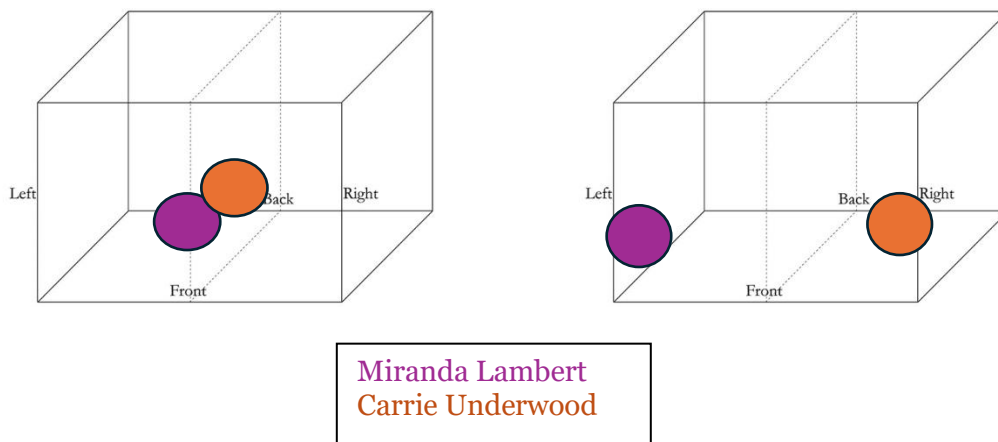
⁴³ The 1991 film *Thelma and Louise* tells the story of two women on a road trip together who become fugitives after murdering a man outside of a bar.

sonically. Lambert’s voice is still more prominent in the mix, but consistently on the left side of the sound box, with Underwood on the right (Example 4.20b). This sonic separation also suggests that though the two characters share their story in the lyrics, they never seem to speak to each other. Even when the two sing together in the chorus, the pronouns are first-person singular “I” and “my,” suggesting that the two narrators are each telling their own version of the story.

Example 4.20. Sonic Placement of Vocals in “Somethin’ Bad” (2014)

a) Opening Lines (0:00)

b) First Chorus (0:49)



Because listeners know the performance personae of stars like Lambert and Underwood, they likely ascribe characteristics of the artist on to each character. In “Somethin’ Bad” the narrative authority comes from Lambert’s rebellious persona. Because Underwood’s performance persona had already established a possibility of rage (from songs like “Before He Cheats”), and because of her association with Lambert in this song, Underwood’s character is understood as a bonafide bad girl. Thus, Lambert’s dominant performance persona influences every aspect of this song, from Belle Boyd’s actions to Carrie Underwood’s vocal delivery. In sum, this song demonstrates how multiple personae interact and relate to vocality and feminine expression.

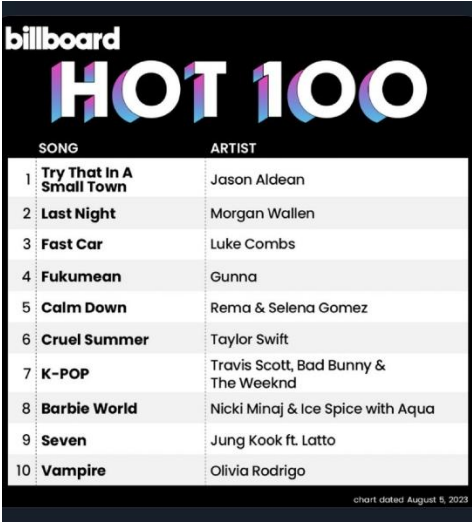
Conclusion

Through these analyses, I have shown how Miranda Lambert communicates her “Relatable Rebel” persona musically. From the way she sings and how she embraces what society deems crazy, Lambert’s established performance persona has a direct impact on how we understand a specific song persona and narrative. In this chapter, I demonstrated how generational differences interact with her persona and how her invocation of the past adds to her outlaw credibility. Lambert’s femininity is expressed through her vocal delivery: at times she sings with a lighter, breathier voice, suggesting a more fragile femininity. Other times, she sings with a powerful belt that expresses feminine strength. The stories Lambert tells in song interrogate gendered expectation in country songs, pushing against the ‘ideal’ of a country girl. Lambert is not submissive or docile; she does not do what a man tells her. Rather, she sings the way she wants to. This sound of rebellion paired with a raw truth approach to the messy parts of life make her relatable. By drawing on the past, Lambert acknowledges those who came before her, but questions the older ideals. Through the persona of the relatable rebel, Lambert expresses that her femininity is multi-faceted. She understands heartbreak, societal pressures, and freedom that is not restricted by gendered expectations. When country women see (and hear) that Lambert seems to portray an authentic version of womanhood that is unfiltered and relatable, they can identify with her and appreciate her songs.

V. THE HILLBILLIE HIPPIE: LAINEY WILSON, AUDIENCE VARIETY, AND THE UNTRAINED VOICE

In the summer of 2023, the Billboard Hot 100 song chart had, for the first time in its history, three country songs in the top three spots (see Example 5.1). The number one hit by Jason Aldean, “Try That in a Small Town” is a controversial song (due to both the lyrics and music video⁴⁴), and its success on both the Hot 100 and Country Hot 100 charts sheds light on how divided country listeners in the USA today are (Trust 2023).

Example 5.1. Billboard Hot 100 Chart, August 5th, 2023: Country Songs in Top 3 Spots



	SONG	ARTIST
1	Try That in A Small Town	Jason Aldean
2	Last Night	Morgan Wallen
3	Fast Car	Luke Combs
4	Fukumean	Gunna
5	Calm Down	Rema & Selena Gomez
6	Cruel Summer	Taylor Swift
7	K-POP	Travis Scott, Bad Bunny & The Weeknd
8	Barbie World	Nicki Minaj & Ice Spice with Aqua
9	Seven	Jung Kook ft. Latto
10	Vampire	Olivia Rodrigo

Remarking on the relationship between politics and music, Kenneth Meier states, “All art and music is political, even if it seeks to avoid politics,” (2019). Country music is arguably the most overtly politicized genre in American culture. Country has special expectations and associations that convey authenticity and create a sense of community, and these expectations are policed by listeners and artists alike. While many assume that country singers and listeners tend to fall squarely on the conservative side across

⁴⁴ See Sisario 2023 for more details on the song.

the board, this perception is a bit too simplistic (Taylor 2017).⁴⁵ Cody Kommers argues that “conservatives represent a more tightly knit community than do liberals. When you have a community of people who share similar values, they can more easily agree on concrete symbols of their experience,” including country’s favorites: trucks, beer, and family (2018). In recent years, there has been one large issue that has divided not only the USA at large, but also the subculture of country: LGBTQ+ rights. Writing for the Los Angeles Times, Mikael Wood describes “a kind of culture war [in Nashville] between young liberal acts such as Maren Morris and slightly older conservative stars like Jason Aldean. Last month, Morris [...] told the [LA] Times that perhaps country music had split into two factions and that she might be fine with that.” (2022). Morris made her more progressive views and support for the LGBTQ+ community known through a feud with Jason Aldean over transgender youth, which created a splash on social media.⁴⁶

Controversies like these show that country music listeners are divided. In the midst of this moment in country, a new artist, Lainey Wilson, has navigated political issues musically to appeal to these multiple audiences. In this chapter I raise the following questions: 1) What does it mean to be a woman in country under these circumstances? 2) What type of femininity does Lainey Wilson express through her songs and carefully crafted performance persona? 3) How does understanding her presented identity influence the way listeners understand the meaning in her songs? To

⁴⁵ Through quantitative analysis, Carson Taylor observes that “country listeners are quite a bit more likely to live in conservative states than liberal ones, and that states further to the right *generally* have a higher proportion of country listeners, to a point” (2017).

⁴⁶ Aldean’s wife, Brittany, commented that she was glad her parents didn’t transition her during her tomboy phase as a girl. Morris’s twitter reply called Brittany a “scumbag human” and nicknamed her “Insurrection Barbie.” In the wake of this spat, Aldean’s fans made it known at a concert that they supported both him and his wife and booed when Morris’s name was mentioned (Ryan 2022).

address these questions, I consider audience variety and the untrained voice in country before providing close readings of Wilson's songs.

Audience Variety

Jason Aldean's hit 2023 song "Try That in a Small Town" is an explicit political statement about the differences between rural and urban life. This chart-topper caused a wave of discord after its release. Specifically, the music video, which was filmed at the site of a lynching, originally contained footage from the 2020 riots and protests (Olson 2023). The lyrics have been criticized by some for the promotion of gun violence, but Aldean stated that the video only includes real footage. Aldean also invoked the Las Vegas shooting of 2017 in his defense, stating, "NO ONE, including me, wants to continue to see senseless headlines or families ripped apart," (Tinoco 2023). A surprising reaction to the song and video came from Country Music Television (CMT), who pulled the video from the air after a few days. This failed to squash the popularity of the song, and in the wake of the controversy one Aldean fan released another song that directly addresses the CMT controversy, as well as other popular boycotts.⁴⁷

An example of the bifurcation of country culture, the Bud Light boycott that began in spring of 2023 was a result of the company's choice to endorse a transwoman influencer, Dylan Mulvaney, pictured in Example 5.2 (Selyukh 2023). Because country fans have historically also been Bud Light fans, and because country typically

⁴⁷ A TikTok fan under the user @JokesOnWokes released an unfiltered tribute in a response song called "Go Woke, Go Broke." The song calls out brands who have supported the LGBTQ+ community, such as Disney, Target, and Bud Light, and many misattributed the song to Aldean.

Example 5.2. Dylan Mulvaney with Bud Light Beer



disapproves of the transgender rights movement, when Bud Light associated with a transwoman, country fans and artists balked. Feeling as if Bud Light no longer represented the same ideas that country does, many called for a boycott of the beer and its parent company Anheuser Busch. However, the boycott itself became a divisive issue in the world of country. Country superstar Garth Brooks opted to continue serving the beer at his Nashville Honky Tonk. In response, some country fans on Twitter threatened to boycott Brooks (Ryan 2023). In contrast, singers like Kid Rock and John Rich showed their disdain for Bud Light by taking shots at cases of the beer and publicly stating that Bud Light would not be served in their establishments (Daw 2023; Nicholson 2023). Others have altered lyrics to songs in concerts, such as Riley Green changing the lyric in a 2019 song from “And coolers never run out cold Bud Light” to “And coolers never run out of cold Coors Light.” Many country singers and fans have switched to Miller Lite or Coors Light in the midst of the boycott.⁴⁸

In a culture where nearly everything is viewed politically, is it possible to be *apolitical*? Despite the vocal artists and fans who encourage or disavow these boycotts, there is a third group that attempts to remain neutral. For example, though Lainey

⁴⁸ Both brands have seen increases in sales as large as 18% (Jamse 2023)

Wilson has not made any public statements regarding Bud Light, she chose to forfeit alliteration in her verse on “Thicc as Thieves” (2023) by Lauren Alaina. Rather than capitalize on the *b* sound (like she did in her 2021 song “Straight Up Sideways” with the lyric: “’bout as buzzed as Bud Light,”) Wilson referenced Pabst Blue Ribbon (PBR) instead. Though one might at first overlook this inclusion of PBR, the lyric here “buzzin’ more than Pabst Blue Ribbon” reveals insight into where she stands amid this political scandal. Despite an attempt to remain politically neutral, this change away from Bud Light in the lyrics she sings likely speaks to those listeners in favor of the boycott. Conversely, her lack of statement on the issue at large appears to communicate with those fans who oppose the boycotts.

Attempting to remain apolitical in a genre that is plagued by stereotypes and tropes that are inherently political is not possible. But for those singers, like Wilson, who tread these waters, it becomes apparent that the political views of their performance persona are revealed through song. Wilson has commented on her awareness of the divide in country, stating, “But if there are two sides, I feel love from both and I love both” (Wood 2022). This acknowledgement of sides paired with the avoidance of agreeing with one side or the other may show her attempt to stay politically neutral—an attempt that is doomed to fail from the start. However, it might also convey the importance of unity despite differences. As the political divide grows stronger in America, each side becomes more hostile to the other, to the point of mutual exclusivity. Moderation is not an option in this view, but songs like Wilson’s “LA” lean into the fact that though there is a divide, our differences should not tear us apart.

An important consideration in this discussion of the Bud Light boycott is the reason for the boycotts. The fact that a transwoman caused this much uproar matters because it speaks to country's understanding and acceptance regarding what it means to be a woman. In commercial country culture that typically rejects LGBTQ+ people, especially in the context of transwomen, an artist's apparent political standing relates directly to their understanding of what a woman is.

Lainey Wilson

This chapter will consider what white country femininity looks like today and how Lainey Wilson navigates the crisis of gender in modern country music. Her lyrical content often concerns themes that align with country's feminist countercurrent, such as independence and the ability to fend for oneself, which are exemplified in "Heart Like a Truck" and "Things a Man Oughta Know." Wilson's attempted political neutrality positions her to exist in between the mainstream and country cultures. Though she is not the only artist to appeal to differing audiences, she is notable because the saturation of twang in her voice is something that would typically suffice by itself to convey the negative connotations of country (such as stupidity, homophobia, or racism) which would generally turn away more progressive audiences (Hubbs 2014, 3; see also Neal 2018). In spite of these common associations of vocal twang with the working-class redneck, Wilson embraces her drawl and connects with a wide listenership.

Born in the small farm town of Baskin, Louisiana, Lainey Wilson (pictured in Example 5.3) lived and breathed the country lifestyle. Growing up in the Deep South, Wilson said, "I didn't realize that country music was a genre. In that area [...] it was just

a way of life,” (Wood 2022). She moved to Nashville in 2011 after graduating high school, where she worked as a performing musician. After signing with her current label, Broken Bow Records (BBR), she released her breakthrough single “Things a Man Oughta Know” in 2020, which won Song of the Year at the Academy of Country Music Awards (ACMA). Wilson included this hit on her album released the following year, *Sayin’ What I’m Thinkin’*. In 2022, her album *Bell Bottom Country*, featuring her hit single “Heart Like a Truck” won Album of the Year at the ACMAs. The Country Music Association (CMA) awarded Wilson both New Artist of the Year and Female Vocalist of the Year in 2022. Wilson also joined the cast of Paramount Plus hit show *Yellowstone*, playing a singer named Abby and performing her own songs on the show, such as “Smell Like Smoke.” Wilson’s success has been seemingly overnight, and a likely contributor is her label, BBR, who also represent Jason Aldean and Dustin Lynch. But the image of Lainey Wilson as a star, or her performance persona, has been carefully crafted through her songs, including lyric choices, vocality, and branding.

Example 5.3. Lainey Wilson, 2020



Lainey Wilson is a woman who expresses her femininity in a unique way, but draws upon her idol, Dolly Parton, who was known for being able to reach a wide variety of listeners. In the twenty-first century, the rural woman’s identity can be complex in

her ability to be a loyal housewife (akin to the pure mountain girl) and simultaneously be independent and in control of her own actions, sexual or not (akin to the oversexed hillbilly). In Lainey Wilson's blending of these two contrasting identities, there is no caricature or mockery as Dolly Parton's often was perceived as. Rather, today it is understood among the rural community that a woman can be both of these things at the same time.

She speaks to a wide listenership, but the messages she conveys are subtle, which allows her to appear more authentic to both sides as well. A tribute to Dolly Parton, Wilson's song "WWDD," sung as "dub-ya dub-ya double d," on her 2021 album *Sayin' What I'm Thinkin'* shows the depth of Parton's influence. The verse's lyrics hint at who the song is about: "Big heart, big smile, big voice on the radio dial/Like a country music modern day apostle, yeah I leaned in like it was gospel," but the 'double d' is not confirmed until the end of the chorus: "What would Dolly do?" Wilson, who has stated in interviews that Parton is one of her biggest influences, shows how just how much impact Dolly Parton has had on her career. This song is not as much about the sound of Parton's voice as it is the way Parton presents her performance persona. Playing off of the Christian saying "What would Jesus do?," often abbreviated WWJD, this song makes it clear that Wilson views Parton as a role model, or someone she would not be ashamed to be compared to. The chorus of "WWDD" refers to Parton as Wilson's "go-to compass and my golden rule," while the second verse describes her character as perceived by Wilson: "In them heels, in that dress, wouldn't put up with no BS. She'd kill you with some kindness, take the high road, turn a little rain into a rainbow." Wilson

clearly admires these traits in Parton's performance persona, but Wilson also likely admires Parton's navigation of the two opposing audience crowds.

Like Dolly Parton, Lainey Wilson has been able to reach the conservative and progressive audiences simultaneously through careful construction of her performance persona. In an interview, Wilson said, "But if there are two sides, I feel love from both and I love both," (Wood 2022). Perhaps this is because Wilson views country music and culture as something that is "kind of becoming cool again," and states, "For a minute there, I don't know if it was cool. But now you see all these kids on TikTok acting like cowboys when they ain't never rode a horse in their life" (Wood 2022). Wilson's lyrics often juxtapose these different audiences through mentions of place or different cultural norms, such as in "4x4xU" (2024) and "LA" (2021). Unlike some of the more vocal conservative country singers, Wilson seems to advocate for a peaceful existence alongside those with different beliefs and life experiences.

The Untrained Voice

Lainey Wilson's voice, which Mikael Wood described as having an "emotional range [...] from a pleading murmur to a full-throated yowl," plays a part in the construction of her performance persona (2022). Not only is *she* strong, but her *voice* is strong as well. Where Parton uses "baby voice" to convey a childlike innocence (like in "Jolene"), Wilson's selective use of belting and dynamically intense singing may lead a listener to ascribe dominance and power as meaning in her voice. Both Parton and Wilson have a notable amount of raspiness in their voices, and their twangy vowels not only signify country, but also a lack of training. In classical voice training, the goal is pure Latin

vowels (such as [a], [e], [i], [o], and [u]) and avoidance of regional inflections.⁴⁹ To distance themselves from this classical sound, country vocalists lean in to the “improper” pronunciations that result from using a drawl. Jocelyn Neal notes that “drawl contributes to the perception of twang because the resultant vowels are spoken and sung very brightly, positioned in the front of the mouth with nasal resonance even while flattening the vowels themselves” (2018, 50). The amount of twang a singer employs relies in part on their distinct regional accent, and in Lainey Wilson’s case, she leans into the dialect of northern Louisiana.⁵⁰ Neal notes that certain accents, such as Southern or Midwestern, convey pride in “a rural space, a regional home, and differentiation from a conformist mainstream” (50).

Beyond distinguishing itself from classical vocal sounds, country also distances itself from the mainstream pop voice. It is common for singers to change genre, and when they do they change the way they sing. For example, when Taylor Swift left country for pop, one of the first things to be trained out of her voice was twang. And in a reverse example, when Post Malone recently went country (with his 2024 album *F-1 Trillion*), his raspy vocality became colored with vibrato and full of added diphthongs. The goal of the country voice is to sound untrained, even if that sound is meticulously crafted and altered. This is accomplished through diphthongization, dropped ending consonants that often appear with the use of drawl, twang, and natural (often slow) vibrato. All of these aspects of vocality together give the impression that a singer sings

⁴⁹ For example, Midwesterners pronouncing “bag” as [bæg] or southerners adding diphthongs and extra vowels (such as “hell” becoming “hay-yell”).

⁵⁰ Though there is a distinct southern accent in Louisiana, the historical prevalence of French and Creole languages provides slight variation. For example, while most of the south pronounces “pecan” as “pee-KAHN”, Louisiana favors “puh-KAHN” (see Joshua Katz’s dialect heat maps for more on this).

naturally, and thus, authentically. But in reality, there is often a lot of attention and practice to sound untrained, a contradiction that has been explored in other scholarly work (see Neal 2018).

If the singing voice is perceived as authentic because it sounds untrained, then it follows that the topics sung about are also authentic. The everyday country listener can identify with a voice that isn't perfect and sings about life's imperfections. Furthermore, when country singers pair lyric narratives with a variety of vocal timbres, such as soft and breathy, raspy and twangy, or powerful and bright, listeners may experience an increase in the feeling of emotional intensity (Malawey 2020, 124; see also van Leeuwen 1999; and Burns and Watson 2013).

Analyses

In the fall of 2022, country singer Hardy released a powerful murder ballad, "wait in the truck." The first two verses give the impression that Hardy will simply be narrating his heroism as he avenges an abused woman, but the chorus brings the introduction of a female voice. While one might expect this voice to be a softer, stereotypically feminine voice to match that of a victimized character, the listener is instead offered the voice of Lainey Wilson, whose powerful vocal delivery is raspy and twangy. Thus, from the moment Wilson's voice enters, the woman in the story is no longer portrayed as a victim, but rather a survivor. How is the narrative of this story so deeply impacted by the quality of Lainey Wilson's voice? What is it about her voice that makes this story that much more powerful? In this section, I analyze a selection of Lainey Wilson's songs to show that she has carefully crafted a performance persona that

country listeners relate to, regardless of their political opinions, geographical location, or individual appearances. Wilson’s performance persona, combined with her vocal delivery and song narratives, work cohesively to accomplish what only few others have done before—connect with a divided listenership in spite of her unapologetically country persona. In the analyses that follow, I consider how her vocal delivery interacts with narrative lyric themes and contemplate how her sound contributes to the construction of her performance persona, including ascribed authenticity and identity as a modern female country singer. Each takes a slightly different methodological approach and highlights different aspects of Wilson’s performance persona. I examine four of Wilson’s original songs, as well as a cover song included on her album and a song she is featured on.

“LA” (2021)

In her 2021 song “LA,” Wilson draws on the understood differences between the intended country audience and the mainstream in tandem with the use of narrative images that evoke the rural *other*. Though she begins with a first-person address that seems to simply solidify Wilson’s performance persona’s authenticity, her shift in pronoun usage invites the listener in to create a communal identity through which not only is Wilson put in contrast to the mainstream, but the invited listener is also now a rebel to the mainstream world.

The use of first-person pronouns in the first verse is starkly contrasted by the first line of the chorus (Example 5.6), which introduces the word *you*: “When you say LA, I think Louisiana.” This *you* is the collective, plural you, meaning *anyone*, but perhaps

particularly anyone who doesn't understand LA the same way she does. This contrasts the *I* that follows, which reaffirms Wilson's established authenticity from the first verse with two alternative understandings of LA that are *not* Los Angeles: Louisiana, abbreviated LA, and Lower Alabama. As if to confirm the distance from Los Angeles and the mainstream, Wilson continues on to state that she "ain't been to California." However, the concluding line of the chorus reveals something about Wilson's performance persona that pushes against the norms of country's identity. Rather than closing with an affirmation that she will *never* visit Los Angeles, she states that she *might*, indicating that perhaps the cultural divide is not as deep as it once was.

Example 5.6. "LA" (2021): Cycle 1 Lyrics (0:07–0:43)

[Verse 1]
My name ain't on every list
But they say I'm where the party is
I drive a Beamer through the mud
Well, I'm kind of redneck Hollywood

[Chorus]
When you say LA, I think Louisiana
Lower Alabama, stars up in the sky
And I ain't been to California
Way too far from Georgia
But one day I might

Example 5.7. "LA" (2021): Verse 2 Lyrics (0:49)

Bet there's more of us around
From a different name, same small town
Gucci lace can dress it up
But country is as country does

In the second verse (Example 5.7), there are not only fewer pronouns than the first, but the only pronoun is *us*, which invites the listener into the culture of being a

“kind of redneck Hollywood,” and suggests that the listener is *not* part of the “you” in the chorus. To confirm that country culture is distanced from the urban, she concludes with the communal statement “Country is as country does.” In light of the chorus that preceded and the potential to visit California, perhaps Wilson is saying that even if she did visit California, she (and the country listener) would not fit in, even if dressed up in Gucci lace, because actions will betray an identity even through nice clothes.

After implying that perhaps country doesn’t belong in California, the bridge lyrics—which are completely devoid of pronouns—suggest that perhaps the country folk can bring some California (or class) into their life. From recognizing that Dixie cups can hold not only sweet tea but also champagne to acknowledging the current state of hot country as a result of rock and country blending together (Example 5.8), Wilson’s lack of pronouns almost acts as an invite to any and all to join the country culture, whether one was raised and steeped in it or not. here seems to be an aspect of the Hegelian dialectic here as well, with, for example, the Dom Pérignon as thesis, the Dixie cups as antithesis, and the joining of the two as synthesis.⁵¹ The outro of “LA” combines both chorus and bridge material (which again lacks pronouns), perhaps questioning the reality of the divide between American subcultures that exist today. Viewing the song in its entirety, there seems to be a push for portraying country authenticity in spite of seemingly commercial or mainstream sounds and themes. In Wilson’s communication with her audience, she appears to be reassuring them that even if looks like she is selling out, she isn’t, rather, she is remaining true to her roots.

⁵¹ This juxtaposition of lifestyles and cultures is present in Wilson’s other songs, such as “Straight Up Sideways.” Verse 2’s lyrics are: “You can do it in the sticks in Mississippi, or on a rooftop, New York City. From the Carolina Coast to a California beach, y’all raise one up with me.”

Example 5.8. “LA” (2021): Bridge Lyrics (1:41)

Dom Pérignon in Dixie cups
Kind of redneck Hollywood
Joplin meets Naomi Judd
Kind of redneck
Dom Pérignon in Dixie cups
Kind of redneck Hollywood
Joplin meets Naomi Judd
Kind of redneck

“Heart Like a Truck” (2022)

Wilson’s second album, *Bell Bottom Country*, features songs about family, religion, love, and wanderlust. Writing for the LA Times, Mikael Wood describes the country-rock songs’ blend of “crusty guitars, juicy bass lines and funky, hard-hitting drums,” that simultaneously “showcase the emotional range of the singer’s voice” (2022). “Heart Like a Truck” emphasizes strength in her performance persona. The full timbral range employed showcases her vocal prowess, while the lyrical content emphasizes her ability to persevere in the face of adversity. The song draws on the stereotypes of country, and Wilson has stated, “You hear the title and you think, OK, here we go, another truck song” (Wood 2022). But this song is *not* just another song about a truck, even though by evoking this idea she is emphasizing the traditions of the rural South. Rather, in Wilson’s words, “It’s about finding freedom and strength and not being ashamed of the scratches and dents you get along the way” (Wood 2022). Wilson focuses on the titular word “heart” rather than “truck,” emphasizing it in different ways throughout the song.

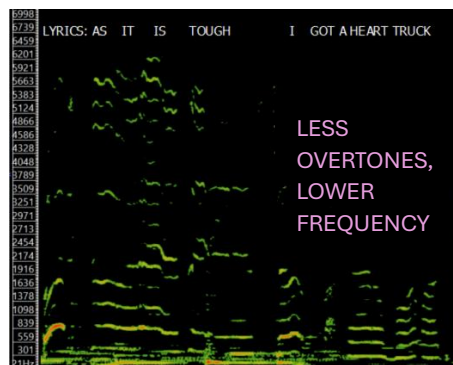
In each of the three choruses, the final iteration of the word “heart” is sung quite differently. The last chorus lyric is “As good as it is tough, I got a heart like a

truck.” In the first cycle, the word “heart” is short in duration and low in pitch. The word sounds dark and sparse, particularly since the preceding few words were so much brighter and richer. The spectrogram in Example 5.9a shows these sonic attributes, particularly the difference in partials present between the phrases “it is tough” and “heart like a truck.” Through the word “tough” partials are present into the 3600 Hz range, while “I got a heart” features partials under 2000 Hz and “truck” finishes the chorus out with partials resonating at slightly above 1000 Hz.

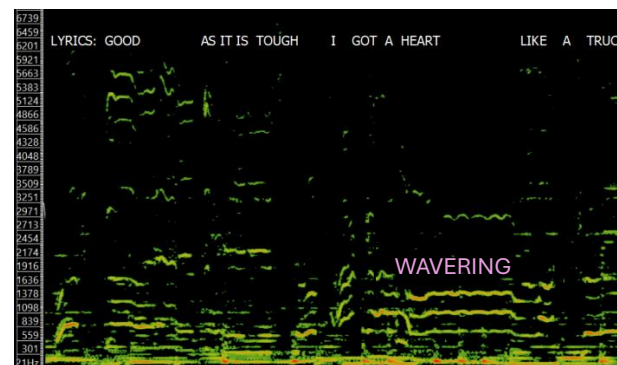
By contrast, the second cycle ends with Wilson opening up her “heart.” Here, she holds out “heart” for a much longer duration, but the word itself is still sparse without many partials present (Example 5.9b). The increased volume likely comes a higher pitch (F#4) and from the change in resonance placement. Rather than oral resonance as in the first chorus, in this chorus Wilson maintains the frontal placement in the mask from “good as it is tough” through the end of the phrase, giving the word “heart” more nasal resonance and a slightly brighter sound. Another notable quality of Wilson’s vocal timbre here is how wavering it is. The brevity of the word “heart” in the first chorus didn’t lend itself to much opportunity for vibrato, but the extended time spent on the word here allows the listener to recognize the natural (or rather, untrained) sound of her vibrato that many may equate with authenticity in this genre. The wavering quality on “heart” is further contrasted by the steady quality on “truck,” as if to say that her heart is a natural, fluctuating thing, while the truck she compares it to is mechanical. Perhaps the representation of the machine here is the straight tone with which Wilson sings.

Example 5.9. “Heart Like a Truck” (2021): Spectrograms: Increasing brightness and power on “heart”

a) First Chorus (0:58)



b) Second Chorus (1:43)



c) Final Chorus (2:37)



The final chorus is arguably also the climax of the song and features an impressively long declamation of the word “heart,” (Example 5.9c). Wilson’s tone is bright, in part due to the pitch (C#5), but also due to the fact that she is belting the word with a similar placement as the F#4 “heart” from the end of the second chorus. This iteration of “heart” has a rich quality to it. The partials are prominent up to about 6000 Hz, where they begin to taper off. In contrast to the sparse quality of the first two iterations of “heart,” the richness of Wilson’s voice makes this moment all the more powerful, particularly when combined with the fact that this is the longest sung note in the whole song. Looking at the spectrogram in Example 9c, another quality of Wilson’s voice in this moment is also apparent: her tone is quite steady.

In this exclamation, perhaps she is employing straight tone to indicate that it is ok to have some aspects that are more mechanical (like a truck) than vulnerable (like human emotions). This could also reasonably be a marker of genre. Controlled vibrato can be considered a mark of a trained singer, and country often desires the voice to emulate that of the untrained. Thus, the held out straight tone paired with the scooped pitch onset and tapered termination all signal to the listener sonic attributes that mean *this is country music*.

Functioning as a statement about the strength and independence of a woman’s heart, this song reaches those listeners who desire something more than another “bro country” song about a truck. Rather, it speaks to the ability of women to persevere through both heartbreak and love. This more sentimental meaning partnered with the powerful vocals and strong rock influence fit in with the more sensitive side of modern

country. At the same time, the reference to trucks likely connects with those listeners who enjoy beer and trucks with their country music.

“Smell Like Smoke” (2022)

Though country music was at one time known as hillbilly music, the genre has since shed that name in some attempt to distance itself from the stereotypes that are associated with the word (Hubbs 2014). However, in a push against the middle class, the working-class country audiences sometimes rush to claim the term hillbilly for themselves (before it can be applied to them in a derogatory way). This pattern of being a self-proclaimed hillbilly (or redneck) pervades today and can be seen in Wilson’s songs. Though Wilson has released a song called “Hillbilly Hippie,” many of her other songs that have less assuming names deal with similar ideas. One example is “Smell Like Smoke” which she debuted on the show *Yellowstone*. Though she never sings the word hillbilly, she does sing of actions and beliefs commonly held by the self-proclaimed hillbilly and calls herself a redneck. Again, like the avoidance of the word hillbilly in this song, she avoids the word redneck. Rather, in the chorus (see Example 5.10), she sings “If my neck’s a little red it’ cause I am one.” This association with the white-working class is reinforced again in the second verse, where she references Marlboro cigarettes (see Example 5.11) as “Cowboy Killers.” This particular lyric hints at the idea of the “virile female, [...] a familiar species of gender-crossed working-class female [...] named and classified,” (Hubbs 2014, 122). These self-proclaimed identity as a Marlboro-smoking redneck who might be a little drunk shows a specific type of femininity. In

addition to being strong and independent, Wilson has now added a facet of masculinity into her performance persona by including these references.

Example 5.10. “Smell Like Smoke” (2022): Chorus Lyrics (0:37)

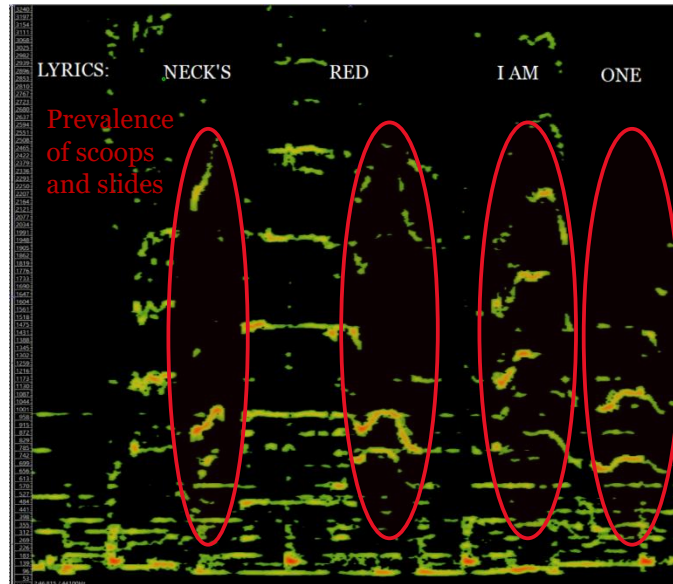
If I look a little drunk it’s cause I drank some
If my neck’s a little red it’s cause I am one
Heaven’s where I’m gonna go, the Bible says so on my shelf
If I smell like smoke it’s only cause I’ve been through hell

Example 5.11. “Smell Like Smoke” (2022): Verse 2 Lyrics (1:03)

I let a blue-eyed two-timin’ devil kiss me on the mouth
Had me on a homegrown high ‘fore it all went south
It burned me like a mess of cornbread in a skillet
Left me with a heartbreak I don’t wanna feel it
Can I bum another one of those **cowboy killers**
Hit me with the good stuff now

This song focuses on accepting every aspect of oneself, from the more masculine aspects to the acknowledgement that imperfections, mistakes, and forgiveness are also a part of personal identity. When it comes to communicating effectively with listeners, this portrayal of self-confidence in the midst of imperfection fits well in the modern culture of body positivity and acceptance. Vocally, Wilson’s voice is saturated with twang to an extent that might seem inauthentic if it weren’t for all that twang fitting her performance persona. Her diction is typically filled with dropped ending consonants and scooped onsets, but in comparison to other songs (for example, see “Heart Like a Truck” in Example 9a-c), this one has more (see Example 5.12). This over-exaggeration seems to support the idea of claiming one’s imperfections, whether they be socially perceived (as a redneck, virile woman), or vocally construed (scoops typically signal a lack of training). It’s as if she is singing *like* a redneck while singing about *being* a redneck..

Example 5.12. “Smell Like Smoke” (2022): Spectrogram: Chorus (0:43)



“What’s Up (What’s Going On)?” (2022)

A cover of the 4 Non Blondes song “What’s Up” was included as the penultimate track on *Bell Bottom Country*. As the only cover song on the album, it is worth considering the original alongside Wilson’s version. 4 Non Blondes was a band in the 1990s who consisted originally of four women, as the name suggests, who were not blondes.⁵² The band struggled with publicity due to their queerness (see Example 5.13). Not only was their label unsure how to promote them without them appearing “too gay,” but lead singer Linda Perry’s public image was far from a heterosexual blonde woman (Chun 2012). In a recent interview, Perry stated “I don’t even have a gender in my mind. I’m

⁵² Two of the band’s original members, Wanda Day and Christa Hillhouse, were replaced by Dawn Richardson and Roger Rocha (Chun 2012).

Example 5.13. 4 Non Blondes (Lead Singer Lydia Perry on Far Left)



Example 5.14. “What’s Up” (1993): Verse 1 and Prechorus Lyrics (0:29–1:23)

25 years of my life and still
Tryin’ to get up that great big hill of hope
For a destination
I realized quickly when I knew I should
That the world was made up of this brotherhood of man
For whatever that means

And I try, oh my God do I try
I try all the time in this institution
And I pray, oh my God do I pray
I pray every single day for a revolution

not man; I’m not woman; I’m not rock; I’m not folk. I don’t know what the hell I am, but all I know is, I can be everything” (Chun 2012). By existing outside of a heteronormative culture, Perry and the band’s difference is marked and communicated through their music. The lyrics of “What’s Up?” deal with existing in a man’s world and feeling frustration and self-acceptance for individual differences from the mainstream (see Example 5.14). Considering this through the lens of the queer community raises questions about Lainey Wilson’s cover. Though Wilson is not the only one to cover

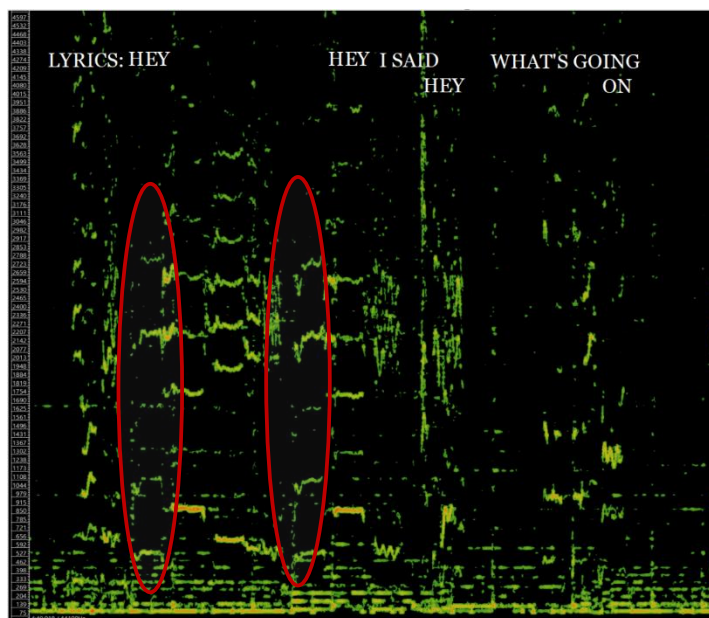
“What’s Up?,”⁵³ by bringing this song into the genre of country, Wilson, a heterosexual blonde woman, claims individuality and difference from the mainstream despite perhaps appearing to fit in.

Lainey Wilson’s version features an alteration to the title, adding “What’s Going On” in parentheses. The instrumentation and tempo are brighter and more upbeat than the 4 Non Blondes version. Wilson’s voice is characteristically full of twang, but she adjusts her use of register when singing higher pitches. Where Perry floats the onset of “Hey” at the end of the chorus, Wilson sings it full voiced. This can be seen on the spectrograms in Example 5.15. Perry’s voice is purer and sparser, represented by the lack of partials and thinner bands. In comparison, Wilson’s voice is richer and noisier. These differences, along with the prevalence of scoops and slides in Wilson’s delivery contribute to a slightly different meaning in her cover. Where perhaps Perry’s delivery could be read as containing restraint due to the societal context it was recorded in, Wilson’s seems freer and more confident. The thirty-year span between these two recordings included movements like third wave feminism and broad acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. Thus, as Wilson sings this song, she draws on her status in the modern world as a confident, independent woman, albeit one who might feel like the “brotherhood of man” still exists today, but she has a place within that context, rather than outside of it.

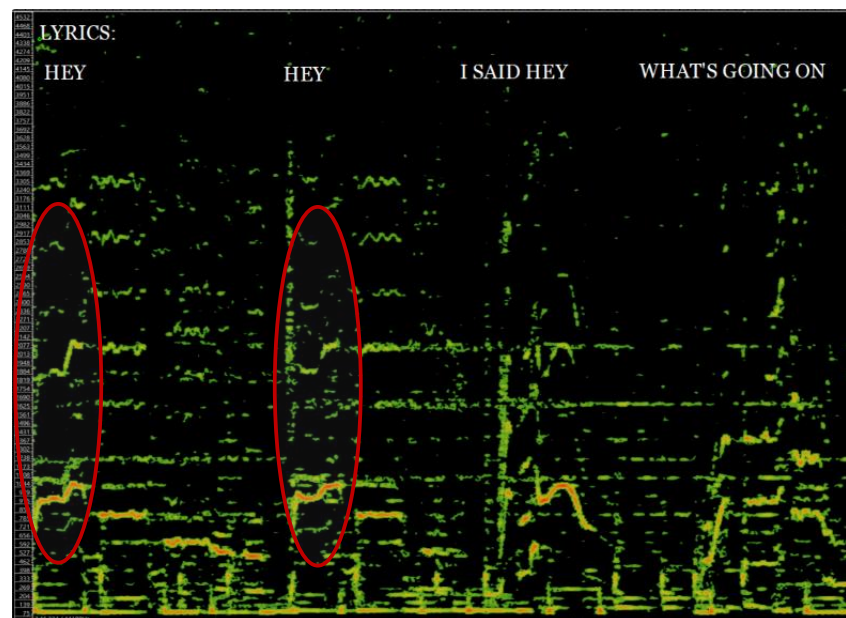
⁵³ The song was also covered by both DJ Miko and Minnesota in 1993.

Example 5.15. Spectrographic Comparison of “What’s Up?” Choruses

a) 4 Non Blondes (1:25)



b) Lainey Wilson (1:05)



“wait in the truck” (2022)

To conclude the analysis section, I return to “wait in the truck” by Hardy ft. Lainey Wilson. The song won ACMA awards for both Musical Event of the Year and Visual Event of the Year in 2022. Though many listeners loved the modern-day murder ballad upon an initial hearing, a small group on Reddit labeled the song “toxic,” due to the violent reaction of the male protagonist (Lane 2023). As established earlier, Wilson’s character is not the victim of this narrative. Rather, the man that abused Wilson’s character is revealed to be the victim after the male protagonist murders him in his own home. The song’s concluding verse reveals that the protagonist has been in prison without regrets since the shooting, and causes the listener to ponder not only the question “Was it worth it?” but also, “Is the protagonist a hero?”

This song has sparked discussion among the country community over its authenticity, moral dilemma, vocals, and presentation via mainstream radio. However, my interest lies with the choice to have Wilson sing on this track. When one thinks of a damsel in distress, one might picture a petite woman who *needs* a man to rescue her. Lainey Wilson’s large personality and can-do attitude seem at first to be contrary to the role that her character takes in the song. However, by digging a little deeper, it could be read as both fulfilment of traditional gender roles and a commentary on victimhood and abuse. Rather than choose a woman who expresses her femininity as delicate through lots of head voice and breathy vocals, by incorporating Wilson in the song it seems to state that even those women who are strong and independent can become victims of abuse.

The question of *how* Wilson's character is rescued arises in the chorus, when she sings, "I never thought my day of justice would come from a judge under the seat." These lyrics reveal a subtle political stance on gun violence. Here, the word "judge" likely refers to the Taurus Judge Revolver. It would have been just as easy to say "gun under the seat," but by using the word judge another layer of interpretation is added. It is common among conservatives to hear the phrase "Guns don't kill people, people do." This perspective puts the responsibility on the person wielding the gun, while a more progressive anti-gun stance deflects responsibility from the person to the instrument of harm itself (in this case, the "judge under the seat"). By attributing her justice to the gun, rather than the male protagonist, Lainey is communicating to her more progressive listeners. However, at the same time, her character is framed as a damsel in distress who needs saving and is happy to be saved (see the fourth verse's lyrics in Example 5.16). The idea of a white knight arriving in a truck is a traditional country feminine dream. Once again, Wilson is communicating to listeners with different political opinions.

Example 5.16. "wait in the truck" (2022): Chorus Lyrics (1:14)

I don't know if he's an angel, 'cause angels don't do what he done
He wall hell bent to find the man behind all the whiskey scars I hid
I never thought my day of justice would come from a judge under the seat
But I knew right then I'd never get hit again when he said to me
"Wait in the truck, just wait in the truck."

Between the lyrics' political ambiguity and Wilson's rough and throaty vocals, in this song she claims a stance of survivorship rather than victimhood. By doing so, she expresses a femininity of empowerment and strength, as opposed to fragility and dependence. In "wait in the truck" Wilson solidifies her performance persona by embracing a song persona that exudes strength in tandem with femininity.

Conclusion

Lainey Wilson's performance persona is carefully constructed to portray a white Southern woman who is strong and independent, and able to communicate with conservative and progressive audiences. Her vocal delivery and lyrics reinforce her performance persona across her two recent albums, *Sayin' What I'm Thinkin'* and *Bell Bottom Country*. She draws on her idol Dolly Parton as a model for reaching across the aisle and beyond the typical country listeners, even in the midst of a cultural rift in Nashville and across America in general. Wilson expresses a special type of femininity through her songs, one defined by strength and independence yet possessing a heart capable of love. Her expression of femininity through her performance persona exists in a highly political sphere. By nature of her associations and idols, Wilson's version of womanhood is contrasted with Dolly Parton's or Dylan Mulvaney's and has found a place of acceptance within the country community. Through her lyrics and vocal delivery, she communicates things about her persona that reveal her to be less apolitical than she appears to be. Through these analyses, I have shown the importance of performance persona in tandem with lyrics and vocality in understanding not only a singer's communicative power, but also their perceived and gendered authenticity.

The importance of the voice in country music cannot be understated. The quality of the voice is integral to understanding why some voices and songs are considered so powerful. In addition to vocal timbre, other aspects of vocality—such as register, phonation, and resonance—influence how we relate to a singing voice. Many of these aspects also carry gendered associations, especially in country music. In this dissertation, I considered country vocality from an interdisciplinary perspective to

connect aspects of production and perception with socio-political signifiers such as twang, register, and phonation. I posit that country femininity has more than one specific sound, because country women have more than one singular model of femininity. I chose Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, and Lainey Wilson as case studies for this project not only because I enjoy their music, but also because the three women have many similarities (see Example 6.1). Underwood, Lambert, and Wilson are all blonde, white women from the American South (Oklahoma, Texas, and Louisiana, respectively). All three have earned the Academy of Country Music's coveted Triple Crown Award, which requires winning New Male or Female Artist of the Year, Male or Female Artist of the Year, and Entertainer of the Year. Only twelve country artists have ever won this award, and only five of those are women.⁵⁴

Example 5.17 Visual Similarities Among Underwood, Lambert, and Wilson

a) Carrie Underwood (right) & Miranda Lambert (left)



b) Lainey Wilson



⁵⁴ The other two women to earn the Triple Crown Award are Barabara Mandrell and The Chicks.

But despite these similarities Underwood's, Lambert's, and Wilson's performance personas and vocal deliveries are differentiated and individual. Carrie Underwood is the Good Christian Girl because her branding, vocality, and narrative topics are family-friendly and often evangelical. Miranda Lambert's rougher and twangier voice paired with her lyrical narratives of revenge and raw emotion make her the Relatable Rebel. Because Underwood and Lambert rose to fame around the same time, comparing the two was the easy thing to do, but their collaborative work on "Somethin' Bad" (2014) showed how the two singers can mesh their styles. Lainey Wilson's persona as the Hillbilly Hippie functions as a sort of synthesis of Underwood's and Lambert's personas. Wilson has songs that lean into Biblical country (such as "Me, You, and Jesus") and has been called a "beacon of faith in country music" (Staff 2024). But at the same time, Wilson does not present herself as a perfect Christian. Songs like "Smell Like Smoke" and "Watermelon Moonshine" highlight the more sinful side of life in a way that doesn't condemn. Wilson's bare-it-all approach makes her relatable to a wide variety of country listeners.

Beyond the similarities and dissimilarities among Underwood, Lambert, and Wilson, their voices matter because they represent a group of women who are often marginalized and forgotten. Working-class wives and blue-collar women have crafted distinct expressions of femininity that are often overlooked, ignored, or criticized by mainstream feminist thought. But songs *by* country women *for* country women help rectify this problem. More than their performance personae being relatable, these women's success and impact are also due to the narrative topics they sing about. Because Underwood, Lambert, Wilson, and others have tackled hard topics—such as

spousal abuse, infidelity, and murder—other country singers know that they won’t get “Dixie Chicked” for singing about these topics, too. Of course, post-millennial country women are indebted to the country women who came before them. Without groundbreakers like Loretta Lynn and Kitty Wells, it’s likely that modern country would still keep women within the strict confines of traditionalism. And though traditional values are still important today, the boundaries for women—white women, specifically—are moving. Country still has issues with women who are not white, as the controversy with Lil Nas X in 2018 and Beyoncé’s 2024 *Cowboy Carter* album revealed. But there’s hope on that front, too, as country accepts more nonwhite men such as Shaboozey, Kane Brown, and Blanco Brown, each is another step towards more diversity in the genre. And though this dissertation focused on an underrepresented populace of white, rural, American women, it’s not far-fetched to think that future country music could also include and represent people from all backgrounds.

To sum up, this dissertation has examined three country superstars—Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, and Lainey Wilson—to show how country femininity is expressed musically. The historically informed analytical approach allows for hermeneutic readings of song performance and reception and moves toward a framework for interpreting vocal timbre across artist output and genre. By foregrounding music that has often been overlooked by music theoretical work, this dissertation works toward increasing representation for both country music and culture, and recognizes the importance of the feminine country voice.

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