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# **The American Sound: Country Music and Political Dialogue in the United States**

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## **Abstract**

Country music is one of the most politicised mediums of music, and yet it permeates living rooms, concert halls, and radios across the United States. It possesses a unique aesthetic, with a rural history and religious legacy that lends itself towards conservatism, especially in the last half century. Though there are many different types of country music, each with incredibly different political backgrounds and communities that follow them, it is undeniable that the aesthetic of country music is a conservative one. As such, it has come to serve as a tool for affective polarisation, not only in its lyrics but in its very sound. That is not to say that there are not liberal country artists, nor that all who listen to country music are subconsciously conservative. Rather, country music is beginning to reach across the ideological aisle; liberal lyrics are being used in this conservative medium as a kind of political bridge. This can be seen in times of American identity crisis, where the music that defines American culture is extended yet further to appeal to as many people as possible. This essay will establish this pattern of country music as a conservative medium both in sound and in its lyrics, whilst providing the caveat that its conservative association has not entirely limited it to conservative artists. I will then establish that there do exist liberal forays into the conservative medium of country music, and conclude with a case study of Johnny Cash as an example of an artist who has managed to walk that fine line that divides the political spectrum.

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## Introduction

The Ryman Auditorium in Nashville has long been perhaps the most iconic venue in country music. Home to shows like the *Grand Ole Opry* and the *Johnny Cash Show*, it helped to popularise and celebrate American country music throughout its history and turn it into the cultural phenomenon that we see today. Converted from a church, and maintained as such, it has become a sanctuary for country music lovers worldwide to pay homage to a unique genre of music that they feel understands them just as well as they understand it.<sup>1</sup>

As such, the Ryman Auditorium serves as a case study of the community that country music provides. It is no surprise that the building itself is inundated with political significance. Not only does its ecclesiastical history juxtapose country music with religion, a theme that is all too common in country music, but since 1897 many of these iconic performances have taken place under a domineering sign reading ‘The Confederate Gallery’.<sup>2</sup> This gallery was constructed with the help of the Confederate Veterans Association and before its recent removal in 2017,<sup>3</sup> and it stared down upon the likes of Martin Luther King Jr, Charley Pride, and countless other African Americans that performed and spoke there.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the Ryman Auditorium, often referred to as the ‘Mother Church of Country Music’, encapsulates the political variety that makes country music so fascinating. From confederates to unionists, republicans to democrats, liberals to conservatives, there is a space in country music where everyone feels they are acknowledged. These spaces may not often overlap, however the Ryman demonstrates that there is room for this political discourse and

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<sup>1</sup> Rempe, Martin. “Entertainment for Everyone: The Nashville Ryman Auditorium before the Advent of Country Music.” *Journal of Urban History* 47, no. 5 (2021): p.1016

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p.1019

<sup>3</sup> Stephen L. Betts, “Nashville’s Ryman Auditorium Permanently Removes ‘Confederate’ Sign,” *Rolling Stone* (Rolling Stone, June 25, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/nashvilles-ryman-auditorium-permanently-removes-confederate-gallery-sign-253390/> .

<sup>4</sup> Josh Ewers, “Ryman Auditorium’s History Is About More than Music,” *Main Street Nashville*, March 15, 2022, [https://www.mainstreet-nashville.com/music/ryman-auditoriums-history-is-about-more-than-music/article\\_5dd96028-98d2-11ec-bcd2-13b27c574593.html](https://www.mainstreet-nashville.com/music/ryman-auditoriums-history-is-about-more-than-music/article_5dd96028-98d2-11ec-bcd2-13b27c574593.html).

variance under the broad umbrella that is country music. Yet the fact that this sign remained well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century marks a defining stereotype in country music: the conservatism that is mixed in with the its religious and patriotic themes.

One does not need to look far past the Ryman’s Confederate Gallery to see that country music has been intertwined with conservative values. Whether it be the responses of country singers to American identity crises like the Vietnam War and 9/11, where there was a pattern of jingoism and military support, or the lyrics outside of times of crisis that align with traditionally conservative structures like Christianity and rurality, it is clear that there is certainly truth to the stereotype. Country music therefore acts as a form of affective polarisation, a social norm that fosters political divisions in its listeners whether consciously or sub-consciously. Music is an intrinsically emotional medium, allowing it to more easily impact people’s subconscious political leanings and the ‘team’ that they identify with.<sup>5</sup> With country’s appeal to the ‘common American’ and forgotten rural communities, this impact will be strongly felt by traditionally conservative groups.<sup>6</sup>

Because of this intense sense of belonging that is inspired by country music, its mere sound, with its adherence to traditional instruments like the banjo or fiddle or the ‘boom-chicka-boom’ of Cash’s band the *Tennessee Three*, those who grew up listening to country immediately feel that at home.<sup>7</sup> This aesthetic sets the parameters for a political community even before a single lyric is written. It is then within these aesthetic borders that lyrics more explicitly shape and speak to the political views of those within, featuring traditional country music themes like rurality, religion, and the appeal to the ‘common man.’ In looking at the lyrics within this aesthetic community, it becomes abundantly clear that country leans to the

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<sup>5</sup> Mason, Lilliana. “‘I Disrespectfully Agree’: The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization.” *American Journal of Political Science*. 59, no. 1 (2015): p.130 <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12089>.

<sup>6</sup> Meier, Kenneth J. “Looking for Meaning in All the Wrong Places: Country Music and the Politics of Identity.” *Social Science Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (2019): 89–108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12556>.

<sup>7</sup> Geary, Daniel. “‘The Way I Would Feel About San Quentin’: Johnny Cash & the Politics of Country Music.” *Daedalus* (Cambridge, Mass.) 142, no. 4 (2013): p.67. [https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED\\_a\\_00234](https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00234).

politically conservative side. Patriotism, rurality, and the fear of everything big, lend itself to this, and create a community that is dominated by conservatives.

However, this is not to say that country music is always conservative. Rather, aforementioned country music values just happen to overlap significantly with conservative ones. Conservatives dominate the medium, but they do not have a monopoly over it. In times of political identity crisis, when values are tested against each other and political tensions ride high, one can see growing political diversity in country music artists as attempts to create dialogue extend past the confines of conservatism become more commonplace. For example, some singers during the Vietnam War spoke to the experience of everyday Americans living in fear of the draft or the Viet Cong, starkly contrasting others who spoke to more ‘patriotic’ values of unconditional support for the American military. These attempts to create a dialogue are evidence that the values of country music are not defined by conservatism but rather exist separately from politics. They prove the relationship between country music and affective polarisation, that those who participate in the country music community form these values prior to political affiliation, and it is these values that inform their political actions. Country songs do not always adhere to conservative values, but they do always stick to the key themes that have persisted in country music from its very inception.

In this thesis, I will theorise that conservatism undoubtedly dominates country music, but that does not eliminate political dialogue and the attempt to create a larger, united community. I will first look to validate the stereotype using the history of country music, and then songs that reinforce the idea that country music is a conservative medium, looking at the sound that creates this innate sense of community and the lyrics that place political messaging within it. This will not only establish that there is a common conservative message in country music, but that it exists alongside a very distinct musical style that aids the affective polarisation that makes country music such a political art form. Then, I shall look to

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the artists that have attempted to create a dialogue and introduce more diverse discourse into country music, such as Glen Campbell and Tyler Childers. Though their songs are not enough to entirely shift the stereotype of country music, they are enough to call into question the monopoly that conservatism has over it. I will then contextualise these songs using Rancière's philosophy and the search for a *sensus communis*, or common sense, between all who participate in the country music community. Finally, I will attempt to explain the current political status of country music and its future using Bordieu's idea of contrasting economic and cultural fields.

Once establishing that there is a distinct country music sound, I have purposefully sampled popular country music songs released during three key times of American identity crisis: the Vietnam War, 9/11, and Trump-era conservatism. With identity crisis comes a questioning of political values, and as a result these values become far clearer in the music that country singers produce. There are clearer attempts to reinforce conservative values, that go alongside clear attempts to create a political dialogue with more liberal music. In short, it will become clear that the values of country music supersede the values prescribed by a political ideology.

## The Truth Behind the Stereotype

Stereotypically, country music is a genre characterised by staunch conservatism, and there is undoubtedly truth to this claim. This is clear when the lyrics of some of country music's biggest stars directly called out the 'hippies' that protested the Vietnam War, or advocated strongly for the war in Iraq following 9/11. Stringing together these messages of jingoism and anti-liberalism, among a myriad of other traditionally conservative values, is a common aesthetic that has persisted throughout the country music's existence. Ken Burns' documentary on the history of country music opens with images of trains, barn dances, river boats, and Sunday mornings at Church.<sup>8</sup> To singer Kathy Mattea, this is exactly what the 'sound of country music' looks like, and one would be hard-pressed to find someone that disagrees with this.<sup>9</sup> In that seemingly off-hand comment, Mattea strikes at something rather important: an aesthetic can create a sense of identity, including a political one, even if there are no words spoken. This is what we see with country music. An aesthetic is created through the images, and most importantly the sounds, that are associated with it, and a community is fostered as a result.

### How History Determines Politics

The question then arises, why is it that this aesthetic is a conservative one? To begin to understand this, one must look to the history of country music as a kind of roadmap that lead to the creation of this conservative trend. The history of country music is one of an amalgamation of different cultures, exemplified by the combination of the fiddle and the banjo. These are two of the most fundamental instruments in traditional country music and

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<sup>8</sup> Burns, Ken, and Peter Coyote. *Ken Burns: Country Music*. San Francisco, California, USA: PBS, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Three Chords and the Truth. *The Economist*, Sep 28, 2019. 78, <http://turing.library.northwestern.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/three-chords-truth/docview/2298756436/se-2> (accessed March 4, 2023).

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yet they come from completely different backgrounds, with the fiddle originating in the British Isles and the banjo in the slaves that were brought from Africa.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, artists like Old Crow Medicine Show founder Ketch Secor argue that jazz, blues, and country all come from the same place, only country music followed the path of these iconic country instruments as opposed to brass instruments or pianos. It is made of songs that rural southerners sang in churches, that they sang in the fields, and the ballads from the British Isles that were passed down to them by their forefathers. It brought a unique style of nostalgic music that featured easily transportable instruments to bring to the fields and to the square dances.<sup>11</sup>

The rural southern and southwestern history of country music is one of the most important factors in determining the politics that characterises so much of it today. The sound of country music was created in the Appalachian Mountains and in the farms around the post-industrial south as artists looked to reminisce of a simpler time in log cabins or in the plains. Indeed, one of the first radio stations that played country music used the call sign WSB, standing for ‘Welcome South, Brother.’<sup>12</sup> It became music for southerners that spoke to the forgotten American, whose American experience was never going to be told were it not for country music. As such, it became a medium of nostalgia, with early songs like *Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane*<sup>13</sup> romanticising the times of slavery, or songs rooted in the simplicity of religious worship on a Sunday morning, like *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*.<sup>14</sup> This combination of rurality and southern values naturally lends itself to what would now be understood as a staunchly conservative audience.

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<sup>10</sup> Burns and Coyote, Ken Burns: Country Music, 2019

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix I

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix II

What must also be understood is that country music attracts a predominantly white audience, with country music Hall of Famer Kris Kristofferson even going so far as to describe it as ‘white man’s soul music’.<sup>15</sup> Though this is a gross generalisation and far from prescriptive, there is truth to this claim. It was minstrel shows, performed by white musicians in blackface singing songs that romanticised the south even in times of slavery, that helped to popularise country music to begin with.<sup>16</sup> Country music has been the anthem of the rural American, a community dominated by white people, that have continued to participate in country music. It becomes inevitable, as with so many other political media in the US, that this focus on the white rural American has lent itself to conservatism.

In short, the history of country music has given it an inextricable link to the rural south and a predominantly white audience. Moreover, country music is an intrinsically nostalgic art, that looks almost exclusively to the past as opposed to the future. It occupied a space that had been left vacant by other musical mediums that developed alongside it like blues and jazz, speaking to the American longing for a simpler time.<sup>17</sup> With this history, it is no surprise that country music has become aligned with conservative values.

### **Country Music as Seen Today**

This history has given rise to themes and sounds that create this instant sense of community when one hears country music. This sense of community is first created by the very sound that characterises country music, with iconic instruments and a musical style that has served as the cornerstone of country ever since it was popularised in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the mere sound banjo, fiddle, steel guitar, and the mandolin create a sound that one would be hard pressed to find in any other genre of music. Before any words

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<sup>15</sup> Burns and Coyote, Ken Burns: Country Music, 2019

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Meier, “Looking for Meaning in All the Wrong Places: Country Music and the Politics of Identity” p.90

are spoken, if there are any at all, the sounds of country music will bring up this instant sense of identity in its listeners.

The instruments alone don't characterise country music, however. It has a distinct musical style, that can first be understood by what it omits. For example, unlike jazz and blues, country music does not have 'blue notes' or 'blues harmony,' notes that lie between those of traditional western scales.<sup>18</sup> Blues players also use far less of the major third in their music, with scholars like Weisethaunet even making the case that overreliance on these make the music sound more 'countrylike.'<sup>19</sup> The fact that scholars like Weisethaunet have identified themes in country music while trying to separate it from blues, jazz, and rock demonstrates that it has a style unlike any other genre. Similarly, the chord progressions for jazz, blues, and country are entirely different, with country music predominantly using the I, IV, V chord progression<sup>20</sup> whilst blues and jazz use a II-V-I progression.<sup>21</sup> Again, these are far from prescriptive, but the larger reliance and adherence of different genres to these patterns adds to this idea that country music, just like blues or jazz, has an incredibly unique aural impression. Finally, it has adopted musical styles from immigrant cultures, such as the upbeat style of traditional German folk music that accompany the traditional instruments like the fiddle from Ireland.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, though the American musical art forms of country, blues, and jazz all started with similar roots, country music has developed an audible distinction from them that is abundantly clear even before any lyrics are spoken.

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<sup>18</sup> "Learning the Blues Scale and the Blue Note," Simplifying Theory, accessed April 22, 2023,

<https://www.simplifyingtheory.com/blues-scale-blue-note/#:~:text=The%20blue%20note%20in%20blues,case%20of%20the%20major%20pentatonic.>

<sup>19</sup> Weisethaunet, Hans. "Is There Such a Thing as the 'blue Note'?" *Popular Music* 20, no. 1 (2001): 99–116. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143001001337>.

<sup>20</sup> Kate Brunotts, "Country Chord Progressions: A Beginner's Guide," *Online Audio Mastering by Grammy Winning Engineers*, 2022 <https://emastered.com/blog/country-chord-progressions#:~:text=The%20most%20common%20chord%20progressions%20in%20country%20music%20revolve%20around,%2C%20IV%2C%20and%20V%20chords.>

<sup>21</sup> James Noble, "2-5-1 Chord Progression: What You Need to Know: Freshsheetmusic.com Blog," *Music Blog | About Sheet Music Notes, Chords, Guitar Tabs*, July 18, 2022, <https://freshsheetmusic.com/blog/2-5-1-chord-progression/>.

<sup>22</sup> Burns and Coyote, Ken Burns: *Country Music*, 2019

The importance of musical style in defining country music today is exemplified by the recent debate regarding Lil Nas X's country song *Old Town Road*.<sup>23</sup> The African-American singer was unable to have his song counted in the among the top 50 country songs as it was seen as a pastiche of traditional country music, not country music in and of itself.<sup>24</sup> Debate inevitably ensued about country music's inclusivity problem, especially the lack of women and non-white performers. Thus, it became for some a kind of protest song against the 'country music establishment', flying in the face of what they saw as the traditional sound. Notably, it was not the lyrics that did this; these were mostly generic, neutral country lyrics about horses and tractors. Rather, it was the sound and the aesthetic of the music itself, which replaced traditional instruments like the guitar, fiddle, and banjo with electronic synth.<sup>25</sup>

Once this distinct musical style is established, it creates an immediate aesthetic community for all its listeners. It is within this community that the lyrics then begin to more clearly shape and articulate the political values country music has come to be associated with. Country music is an incredibly lyrical medium, after all. The country community pays close attention to the lyrics, and as such the political meaning that they hold cannot be understated. The songs of Cash, Kristofferson, and so many more are often treated as poetry in which the ever-varying country music community can find political meaning. Indeed, many explicitly reference current events of the time. The lyrics of country music are intended to be as relatable as they can possibly be, speaking of the places that the both the listener and the performer would know well, or experiences that everyone would have gone through such as a death in the family, to again use the example of *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the lyrics of country music are just as accessible as its musical style. Whilst the music focuses on

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix III

<sup>24</sup> Allegra Frank, "Lil Nas X's Lone CMAS Nod Is Faint Praise from Country Music's Biggest Award Show," Vox (Vox, August 30, 2019), <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/8/30/20838444/lil-nas-x-country-music-association-awards-nominations-billy-ray-cyrus>.

<sup>25</sup> See Appendix III

<sup>26</sup> See Appendix II

instruments that were portable and readily available in the countryside, the lyrics focus on an everyday rural American experience.

There are several key themes that seem to arise consistently in country music. Country music lyrics frequently focus on a traditionally conservative rejection of big government and big corporations, whether it be the rampant urbanisation that has so damaged small-town America, or seemingly intrusive government policies telling Americans how to think and act.<sup>27</sup> Rurality is perhaps the most iconic and common theme to feature in country music lyrics, with songs referencing nature, farms, and abandoned old rural towns making up some of country music's most recognisable anthems. One only needs to look to Woodie Guthrie's *This Land is your Land*<sup>28</sup> for the perfect case study of a country music staple celebrating the land that we come from and the simplicity of nature. The theme of rurality, is so dominant that it has even become common for bands to name themselves after the land that they sing about, such as the Foggy Bottom Boys and the Smoky Mountain Travellers.<sup>29</sup> Another unavoidable theme is cowboys and frontierism, with the replication of the cowboy aesthetic and the 'wild west' dating all the way back to the costumes and musical television series of Gene Autry.<sup>30</sup> Finally, religious lyrics have been a constant in country music. The simplicity and romanticism of Sunday morning in an old country church speaks not only to the relatable rural experience that country music is giving voice to, but it also gives credence to the underlying moral codes that help inform the political actions of the country music community. It would take an infinite amount of time to examine the myriad of country songs that talk about God, or church, or traditional Christian values; it is perhaps the clearest

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<sup>27</sup> Knoke, David, and Constance Henry. "Political Structure of Rural America." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 429, no. 1 (1977): p.52 <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271627742900106>.

<sup>28</sup> See Appendix IV

<sup>29</sup> Carney, George O. "Bluegrass Grows All Around: The Spatial Dimensions of a Country Music Style." *Journal of Geography (Houston)* 73, no. 4 (1974): 34–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221347408980277>.

<sup>30</sup> Austin, Wade. "Hollywood Barn Dance: A Brief Survey of Country Music in Films." *The Southern Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1984): p.111

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reminder in modern country music, even stadium country music, that the genre began with influence from the church house choirs across rural America.

Country music is indubitably distinct from all other forms of American music. It has a distinct sonic impression as a result of its unique chord progression, instrumental choice, and blend of musical influences that make it up. The country music sound is what transports listeners to that nostalgic, simple place where country music was born. It is this sound that lets the country music community know that their experiences are being spoken to, whilst other genres may leave these forgotten Americans by the wayside. Within this community the lyrics then inform us more clearly of the political leanings that characterise country music. Though the music and the lyrics stem from the same history, when listening to country lyrics it becomes clear that, with backgrounds in the rural south, religion, and a fear of ‘everything big,’ the country music community would lean far more to the traditionally conservative side as the stereotype would indicate.

## Satire

Satirical country is an important means of understanding the aesthetic and politics of country music, as it provides the clearest image of what the stereotype of country music truly is. Although satire is obviously not entirely representative of any genre, it is always built upon a foundation of truth, or at the very least perceived truth. This is illustrated clearly by William van O’Connor’s analysis of Hemmingway’s *The Torrents of Spring*, a parody of Sherman Anderson. Hemmingway paints Sherman’s qualities and weaknesses as ‘exaggerated [and] distorted, but not necessarily misrepresented.’<sup>31</sup> Through this analysis, O’Connor points out the clear value of satire and parody. It puts the art in ‘quotation marks,’

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<sup>31</sup> Van O’Connor, William. “Parody as Criticism.” *College English* 25, no. 4 (1964): p.242  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/373569>.

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often to make a point contrary to the one being outwardly presented.<sup>32</sup> Despite the fact that O'Connor did not direct his analysis towards country music in the slightest, it is not difficult to apply this same theory to it: parody can illuminate the perceived truths of country music's aesthetic and politics by exaggerating them. Naturally, the tone of these songs cannot be taken to be representative, but an analysis of the themes and aesthetic that they portray is incredibly useful.

Two country music parodies do this perfectly: Bo Burnham's *Country Song (Pandering)*, and Wheeler Walker Junior's *F\*\*\*\*d by a Country Boy*. Though crude and uncouth, they do accomplish what O'Connor argues Hemmingway did with Sherman: they exaggerate the key themes and aesthetics of the art that they are imitating. The first thing that strikes someone listening to *The Country Song* is the fact that Bo Burnham dons a southern accent. It is used as a signifier that the song is beginning, and gets laughs from the crowd who find it ridiculous that this comedian from Massachusetts has changed his voice so quickly. But for the purposes of this study it helps to identify a troupe of country music as being from the historically conservative south. Of course, country music is not exclusively southern, nor are all of its artists using a southern accent. However, it points to where country music comes from, and by extension points to the politics that these areas inevitably bring with them. Walker adds to this idea of country music as southern music with references to southern food, college football's South Eastern Conference, and explicitly calling out Tennessee.<sup>33</sup>

Also present in both of these songs are persistent references to rurality. This is clear just in the title of Wheeler Walker Jr's song, but also in the lyrics of both of them in two different ways. Walker alludes to the country's rural audience by crudely repeating the title in

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<sup>32</sup> Nielsen, Anne-Sophie Sørup. "Can Parody Change the World? On the Philosophical and Political Aspects of Satirical Parody." *Tidsskrift for Medier, Erkendelse og Formidling* 7, no. 2: p.34

<sup>33</sup> See Appendix V

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the refrain to his song, whilst Burnham takes a more tactful approach. His references to hunting deer and fishing are explicitly noted as being pandering to a rural conservative audience, in an effort to show that modern country music artists are not in touch with the values that they sing about.<sup>34</sup> In this way he not only identifies the history and stereotype of country music being a rural art, but he also calls out the ways that artists over exaggerate these themes that make their art country music. This is clearest in the verse:

I could sing in Mandarin, you'd still know I'm pandering.  
Hunting deer, chasing trout, a Bud Light with the logo facing out.

Burnham not only identifies the key theme of rurality, but also how country music is about connecting to the common American experience. Though his message is that singers are entirely missing this, it indicates that this is something country music singers constantly try to do. Burnham doubles down on this, talking about how singers write songs for the *people who do jobs in towns that [he'd] never move to*.<sup>35</sup> Again, through criticism of country musicians' hypocritical appeal to the common 'forgotten' American, Burnham shows that it is an important feature of it. This is not limited to country music songs either. CBS's *Hee Haw* in the 1960s, hosted by Country Music Hall of Famer Buck Owens, was a country-musical comedy that featured characters in overalls and straw hats, and a logo of a buck-toothed donkey.<sup>36</sup> Morris points out that this indicates the show was aimed at the 'lowest common denominator,' and whilst I believe this to be a gross over-exaggeration, it certainly mocks the country music attempt to speak to the experiences of the common man and avoid the elitist artistic regime that many other forms of modern art have fallen into.

A final theme that's identified by these parody artists that comes up constantly in real country music is the distaste for everything that is 'big', whether it be 'big government', big

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<sup>34</sup> See Appendix VI

<sup>35</sup> See Appendix VI

<sup>36</sup> Morris, Chris. "Honky-Tonky Hero: Some Knew Him Only as the Overall-Clad Co-Host of Television's 'Hee Haw,' but Buck Owens and His 'Bakersfield Sound' Helped Revolutionize Country Music." *The Hollywood Reporter* 394, no. 6 (2006): S-32-.

corporations, or big cities. Burnham's quote about the Bud Light logo facing the crowd is a clear example of this, saying that country singers have sold themselves out to big corporations and as a result are betraying country music values. Right off the bat, Walker too uses extremely critical, gendered language to criticize people from New York city and also their vaccination status.<sup>37</sup> In doing so, Walker identifies urban culture not only as incompatible with country music, but as the antithesis of it.

Most importantly, though, in both songs' attempts to imitate the style of country music, they land at a rather similar result. Both use traditional country musical styles that create the same distinct sound that can be seen in non-satirical country, with Burnham even referencing the mandolin, one of country music's most relied upon and common instruments, as a tool for pandering towards the country music audience.<sup>38</sup> This implies that there exists a sonic aesthetic of country music, an aesthetic that people have long identified with country music and with their sense of belonging to the community that accompanies it. For clarity, these songs should not be considered to be country music. Rather, they are insulting to the country music audience, mocking the art that they feel unites the country music community. However, that is not to say that they are not without value when studying how country music is perceived and separated into a musical genre and community by itself. These parodies emphasize the themes that make a song 'country,' but still maintain the same sonic patterns and the same instruments. In so doing, they display the essence of country music, and emphasize the elements within it that could be considered divisive. This is what makes these two parody songs so valuable in understanding what the image of country music is: a combination of common themes, which the artists often take in a politically conservative way, and a sonic aesthetic that serves as a template for what country music sounds like. In

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<sup>37</sup> See Appendix V

<sup>38</sup> See Appendix VI

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short, they establish the sonic aesthetic that makes up a country song, and they point to the key lyrical themes that help to clarify the political conservatism in this pre-established community.

### **Illuminating the Stereotype in Times of American Identity Crisis**

Country music is synonymous with American identity. As such, there is no clearer time to examine country music's perceived and real political leanings than when the very notion of what it means to be American is threatened. In these times of crisis, the underlying politics of country music come to the fore, boiling into songs of protest or support for a nation divided, whilst maintaining the musical themes that make a song truly country. Though some authors like Van Sickle cast these hyper-politicized times aside, seeing them as unrepresentative of the true politics of country music, I posit that they illuminate politics that always existed and provide an opportunity for the values that define country music to interact with real political issues. Indeed, Van Sickle's data shows this politicization, as the 1960s saw the highest rate of political lyrics in country music featuring in number 1 songs at over 48%, with the 1970s being the second most politicized era at 29%.<sup>39</sup> It is no coincidence that these coincided with the Vietnam War and Watergate. In examining these key points of crisis, one can see how country music artists used the same themes that country songs have used for decades prior to illuminate conservative values. In the last 60 years, few instances have challenged the fabric of American identity more than the Vietnam War, 9/11, and Trump-era republicanism. Much like the rest of the nation, country music had a strong response to all three. Using themes like patriotism and individuality, as well as the valorization of American history, this conservative trend became noticeable.

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<sup>39</sup> Van Sickle, Robert W. "A World Without Citizenship: On (the Absence of) Politics and Ideology in Country Music Lyrics, 1960-2000." *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 3 (2005): p.318

The Vietnam War

Regarding Vietnam, a kind of jingoism started to tie many country music artists together. None was more divisive, nor clearer, about the values that they wanted their art to represent than Merle Haggard. His traditional, upbeat musical tone was the epitome of the country sound and yet his lyrics featured a kind of jingoism and a fervor for the American fighting force that hadn't before been seen in his music. In 1970, amidst some of the most intense protest against the Vietnam War, Haggard released the patriotic anthem *Fightin' Side of Me*. January of that year, when that song was released, was just one month after the government introduced the first draft lottery since the Second World War.<sup>40</sup> 1970 would later see widespread protests, including one that would turn fatal at Kent State, throughout all of which Haggard's anthem retained its popularity.<sup>41</sup> The song valorizes all that America has given to its people, and clearly rejects those that insult these privileges by protesting American principles. Those who protest should be met with his 'fighting side,' whilst demeaning them as 'squirrely guy[s] that don't believe in fighting.'<sup>42</sup> If there was any doubt that these angry lyrics were not about the war, the chorus will quickly dispel it, arguing that protesters are not only criticizing Haggard's nation but his very *raison d'être*:

They're walkin' on the fightin' side of me  
Runnin' down a way of life  
Our fightin' men have fought and died to keep  
If you don't love it, leave it  
Let this song that I'm singin' be a warnin'  
When you're runnin' down our country, hoss  
You're walkin' on the fightin' side of me

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<sup>40</sup> History.com Editors, "Vietnam War Timeline - History," HISTORY, 2017, <https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-timeline>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> See Appendix VII

This was far from a one-off vent about liberal society, but instead a follow on from a song Haggard had released just a year earlier, *Okie From Muskogee*, where he directly calls out liberal ‘hippie’ protestors, and indeed entire liberal areas of the nation: <sup>43</sup>

We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee  
We don't take our trips on LSD  
We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street  
'Cause we like livin' right, and bein' free  
We don't make a party out of lovin'  
But we like holdin' hands and pitchin' woo  
We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy  
Like the hippies out in San Francisco do

The politics of these lyrics is unmistakable, and the jingoism that accompanies them is palpable. Haggard is one of the most recognizable names in the history of country music, and has since been inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame, not just for works such as this but for his vast array of music that goes far beyond his response to the Vietnam War. Yet, though these are not his only popular songs, they are indicative of a pattern during the war. Liberal, hippy culture is identified clearly and plainly as the ‘out group’ to the country music community, leaving country music to be defined by extension as traditional conservative culture.<sup>44</sup> Growing one’s hair ‘long and shaggy,’ or protesting the war were labelled by Haggard to be as contradictory to the values that his artistic community stood for. It was a clear point of dissensus, where those that did not share such a supportive view of the US government may have been forced to other communities to find some art that shared their own values.

Haggard, though the most popular voice of conservative country music at the time, was not alone in his politicised music. He was preceded by the now revered Marty Robbins, who wrote about the Freedom Riders in 1966, likening them to the communists that were being fought abroad. Robbins, writer of the sensational cowboy songs like *Big Iron* and a true

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<sup>43</sup> See Appendix VIII

<sup>44</sup> Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Matthew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J Westwood. “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019): p.130 <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.

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adherent to the ‘outlaw’ aesthetic of country music, sings that the people that came to the south were threatening their way of life, and that their communist beliefs should be fought at home just as they were abroad.<sup>45</sup> This sense of a culture under threat was not unique to Robbins either, but can be seen in other extremely popular singers like Tanya Tucker with her 1973 song *The South Will Rise Again*. Both of these songs speak of a fear that northern culture, and in Tucker’s case big government, are putting their culture at risk. Tucker’s fear is the epitome of Meier’s identification that country music opposes everything big,<sup>46</sup> with her line *I see wooded parks and big skyscrapers, where dirty rundown shacks stood once before*.<sup>47</sup> This common fear in the conservative lyrics indicates where the common values of country music were at the time. They rejected liberalism and the north whilst maintaining a proud patriotism and southern identity. They clearly defined the ‘out group’ in their scathing criticism of hippies and big corporations, and as a result shaped the country music community to be one that remained more conservative-leaning.<sup>48</sup> To follow Rancière’s philosophy, the result is that anti-war protesters, and those that sympathise with them, reject country music because there is no unity between aesthesis and poesis.<sup>49</sup> These lyrics will therefore shape the aesthetic community that country music listeners ascribe to, associating with these more conservative values as they become affectively polarised even just by hearing the ionic sonic patterns of country music.

## 9/11

The conservative country response to Vietnam was rather similar to that of 9/11. Its focus became less on the tragic events themselves, and more on the nation’s response to

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<sup>45</sup> See Appendix IX

<sup>46</sup> Meier, “Looking for Meaning in All the Wrong Places: Country Music and the Politics of Identity” p.90

<sup>47</sup> See Appendix X

<sup>48</sup> Iyengar et al. “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States.” p.130

<sup>49</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. 1st English ed. London ;: Verso, 2009. pp.60-61

them. Yet again, songs released about 9/11 illuminated a kind of jingoism in country music to the extent that some country music scholars entirely discount this era as overly politicised, a mistake that I have detailed in this paper already. Following the attack, conservative country music embraced the same kind of jingoism that had lain relatively dormant since Vietnam. The work of Toby Keith, Daryll Worley, and Hank Williams Jr. became songs of healing to a grieving country music community, and with this healing came an aggressive kind of patriotism. Importantly, though there was a lyrical shift towards this jingoistic and aggressive tone, the musical style of country music remained relatively unchanged. It used the same chord progressions, the same themes of rurality and family, and the same instruments, meaning the aesthetic of country music was uninterrupted by the events of 9/11. Whilst the lyrics may have shifted and become more outwardly political, the music certainly did not.

One conservative country response flew higher than any other in response to 9/11, and that was Daryll Worley's *Have You Forgotten*.<sup>50</sup> With the same stereotypical country sonic impression, it remains the only country song to mention Osama Bin Laden by name, and directly call for war in the Middle East. It soared through the charts, spending time as the peak, and remains a hit today.<sup>51</sup> The conservatism and jingoism in this song couldn't be clearer than the very first line: *I hear people saying, we don't need this war, but I say there are some things worth fighting for*. Worley equates the war effort with American values of freedom, arguing that American freedom itself was under threat. Importantly, Worley criticises the censorship of the 'experts' who push for the removal of 9/11 footage from television, saying that they need to show it to fuel American anger ahead of the upcoming fight. The distance that Worley puts between himself and the 'experts' contributes to this opposition to big government and institutions that intervene in the common American

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<sup>50</sup> See Appendix XI

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<https://www.musicvf.com/songs.php?page=year&year=2003&tab=countrysongchartstab&sort=pointsup&filter=all> (accessed on 12/3/2023)

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experience, making the lyrics far more conservative as though his unabashed support for the war in Iraq had not made it clear enough.

Toby Keith is one of country music's most popular, and unapologetically conservative artists. In his album that he released following 9/11 in 2002, his song *Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue* adopted this very tone of aggression mixed with patriotism. It shows a pride for the military that has come to be common in country music, with the chorus professing the clearest example of this aggression.

Hey Uncle Sam, put your name at the top of his list  
And the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist  
And the eagle will fly man, it's gonna be hell  
When you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell  
And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you  
Brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue

Keith's album was released shortly after the invasion of Afghanistan began in late 2001, and seems to conflate patriotism with militarism, praising what can only be understood as American military firepower.<sup>52</sup> This is accompanied by this same, traditional, upbeat country music sound accompanying it. The lyrics, though inflammatory, remain accessible and the traumatic response to 9/11 is relatable to his listeners. This is not the only song shows Keith's conservative response either, but also another song released on the same album called *Beer for My Horses*.<sup>53</sup> In this song, Keith demonstrates a conservative view of law and order, using the imagery of the west and frontierism to argue a traditional 'tough on crime' attitude. This is taken to its most extreme in only the second verse, where he references finding a rope and a tree to deal with the offender at hand.<sup>54</sup> The reason why this is so important is because it expands the conservatism of country music past the trauma of 9/11 and into more common political issues. The trauma of 9/11 may have stirred up a politically divisive response to the

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<sup>52</sup> See Appendix XII

<sup>53</sup> See Appendix XIII

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

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crisis itself, but songs like *Beer for my Horses* help to indicate that politically divisive music is not reserved for references to crisis.

### Trump-Era Conservatism

This final case study is less about foreign policy, and more about an increasingly hyper-partisan climate at home. Across the nation, since Trump's successful campaign for the presidency was run off the back of a far more conservative brand of Republicanism than had been to the White House before, the political preferences of the everyday American returned to the spotlight. Naturally, as the music that champions the experience of the everyday American, country music responded. Yet it must be noted that the crisis itself did not address the identity crisis directly as they had done with 9/11 and the Vietnam War. Rather, country music followed the trend described briefly with the release of *Beer for my Horses*. The lyrics did not mention Trump, or the wall, or anything of the sort, but instead country music trended towards more political topics.

Songs like Brad Paisley's *Love and War* about how our nation has failed to adequately respect our veterans,<sup>55</sup> or Colby Acuff's *If I Were the Devil*, about indoctrination in schools and forced medication by the government, came to the fore.<sup>56</sup> The nature of modern hyperpolarisation as a crisis means that it is hard to make a song directly about it, however the country music community still reacted to this new climate and it showed in the lyrics that accompanied their traditional country music style.

It showed outside of the recording booth as well, with artists assuming the role of influencers and taking far clearer action to shape their community of listeners. For example, Luke Bryan brought the highly polarising Florida Governor Ron DeSantis onto the stage

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<sup>55</sup> See Appendix XIV

<sup>56</sup> See Appendix XV

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during a concert in Jacksonville.<sup>57</sup> Though it was defended as a way to raise money for Florida following the recent hurricane, it was an overtly political action, aligning Luke Bryan's art with support for Ron DeSantis. Desantis is one of the most politically divisive characters in American politics today, and Bryan made the active decision to use him as the face of his effort to raise money.

The crisis of modern hyper partisanship, brought on by the Trump presidency and its aftermath, has certainly not left country music unscathed. Though the country music's political voice was perhaps not as overt as it was with the crises that preceded it, it has still seen a rise in country music artists using their art and the community that follows them as a political medium.

## **Conclusion**

Country music has a history that lends itself to conservatism. Developing out of working-class communities in the rural south and southwest, and focusing on values like religion, patriotism, being tough on crime and rurality only add to the fact that when one hears the country sound, many immediately associate it with conservative politics. This sound, after all, is a distinct one, using a distinguishable set of chords that differentiate it from jazz or blues, and a set of instruments that is seldom seen in other genres. This sound carves out a community in and of itself, a community with politics that are then illuminated by the lyrics that accompany the iconic sound, especially in the heated political moments of American identity crises.

The politics behind the common themes of rurality, patriotism, and opposition to big government are suddenly revealed to be far clearer, and the politics of the community to

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<sup>57</sup> Ashley Iasimone, "Luke Bryan Defends Welcoming 'Polarizing Figure' Ron DeSantis to the Stage at Florida Concert," *Billboard*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/luke-bryan-ron-desantis-florida-concert-1235163450/>.

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which country music listeners belong gets more defined. Those that have long identified with the community that country fosters begin to be affected by its evolving politics, whether it be taking opposition to the ‘hippies out in San Francisco’ as Haggard did, or simply assuming the fear of an encroaching liberal culture as Tanya Tucker sings about.<sup>58</sup> What cannot be stressed enough, is that the musical style of country music did not change significantly throughout these times of crisis. It was, of course, modernised as time went on, but it never lost the same sonic patterns that one always associates with country music. With such a dominant and popular conservative response to these times of American identity crisis, it becomes clear that there is some truth to the stereotype that country music is a conservative medium.

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<sup>58</sup> See Appendices VII, X

## Contextualising Country Music in Academic Literature

### Country Music and the Distribution of the Sensible

A fundamental aspect of my study will be the work of philosopher Jacques Rancière and his theory on the politics of aesthetics. Admittedly, Rancière rarely spoke of music, and certainly not of country music. Rather, he chose to focus almost entirely on visual art: cinema, installations, paintings, and performances.<sup>59</sup> However, in this paper I hope to appropriate his theories on art and apply them to the almost entirely sonic medium of country music. Country music is, after all, art to its millions of listeners both musically and lyrically. Of course, this applies to the music itself, both in the sounds that define country music and also the lyrics as form of poetic art. Country has always been a distinctly lyrical medium, with its lyrics being adopted as anthems and its songwriters adopting the role of storytellers.<sup>60</sup> It is intended to be an entirely accessible art form, and as such the easiest way to present the common American experience is simply to speak it aloud. The lyrics make this appeal to the common American clear, but what cannot be understated when dealing with the philosophy of Rancière is the sonic impression that the music leaves, and the sense of identification that accompanies it. Those who participate in the artistic community of country music share these country music values merely by hearing and experiencing the country sound. Once this sense of community is established, the lyrics can more explicitly express the values that the community shares like traditional family values, religion, and the retelling of traditional stories. For example, the song *May the Circle Be Unbroken* is a staple of country music partially because its lyrics pick up on so many important themes to country music listeners

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<sup>59</sup> Alvarez, Sam. "A Rancièrian Approach to Classical Music Performance: Optimizing Political Engagement through Collage" *Art, Literature, and Contemporary European Thought*, 2022. p.4

<sup>60</sup> Van Sickle, Robert W. "A World Without Citizenship: On (the Absence of) Politics and Ideology in Country Music Lyrics, 1960-2000." (2005): p.316

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such as religion and perseverance in the face of adversity all in the framework of a family death.<sup>61</sup>

Rancière deals primarily with the aesthetics of the art, in this case music, which I will understand as the sounds and images that make up country's rich variety. When clarified through the lyrics that accompany them, this aesthetic will provide the framework to understand what truly gives country music this artistic community and how it can develop a unified political identity. Rancière is also important because he helps to clarify one of the oldest debates in country music: what country music truly is beyond the musical patterns mentioned earlier in this paper. He does this, inadvertently of course, by describing its antithesis. Rancière argues that modern art has become part of an *aesthetic regime*, meaning art that has become foreign even unto itself.<sup>62</sup> This means that the community that is fostered by this elitist art is no longer accessible by the common man. Rather, it has marginalised itself politically, and has become out of touch with the values and artistic desires of the majority.<sup>63</sup> Country music is intended to be the epitome of accessibility, created by the community for the purpose of togetherness. Its lyrics address the problems and reality of the everyday American, and its instruments use the most accessible sounds that rural America has historically had to offer. Though country music is not always immune to political marginalisation, it as art that has the intention to mark the difference from the aesthetic elite and epitomise the values and artistic desires of those the aesthetic regime left behind.

Herein lies an important clarification in the type of country music being discussed in this thesis. Country music is an incredibly broad medium, one that musicians and scholars are constantly, and unsuccessfully, trying to define the boundaries of. Many may understand folk

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<sup>61</sup> Carena Cliptak, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken: The History of Country Music's Most Iconic Song," The Boot, September 3, 2019, <https://theboot.com/will-the-circle-be-unbroken-history-carter-family/#:~:text=%22Will%20the%20Circle%20Be%20Unbroken%22%20is%20an%20anthem%20of%20hope,to%20its%20long%20gone%20heroes.>

<sup>62</sup> Rancière, Jacques. "The Politics of Aesthetics". Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013. p.22

<sup>63</sup> Rancière, Jacques. "The Emancipated Spectator". 1st English ed. London ;: Verso, 2009. p.53

music to be included in this wide definition but this is not the case. Folk music is different genre, even though it may share some key themes and history with country music. The difference lies in audiences that consume the music and thereby the artistic communities that they participate in. The folk music of the anti-Vietnam era and onwards shifted from concert halls to the coffee houses filled with college-educated listeners.<sup>64</sup> The music of Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Bob Dylan was not consumed by the same audience as those of Waylon Jennings or Hank Williams. It is this separation, and the fact that it can be characterised by the participation of folk audiences in elite institutions, that differentiates folk music from country. To use Rancière's framework, folk music has engaged in aesthetic separation and become a part of an aesthetic regime, leaving country music to attempt to become the accessible art for the regular American to consume. Though country has far from dominated the field of accessible, it certainly is understood as the preeminent accessible form of music, especially in the land of its creation in the south and south-west.

Rancière's main contribution to this paper is his development of the *partage du sensible*, or the *distribution of the sensible*. These are the divisions that appear in society as art and values contradict each other and fail to inspire a sense of community and commonality in their audience. This kind of dissensus, for Rancière, is the incongruity between *aesthesis*, and *poesis*.<sup>65</sup> Aesthesis is the expression of the philosophy and politics of the artist, whilst poesis is the active connection of the person experiencing the art to it.<sup>66</sup> Classical theatre is a clear example of this that Rancière uses; it is a sensory lens through which one can understand the virtues and the vices of the actors and the playwright, and as a result create a sense of community for those that relate to it.<sup>67</sup> However, when there is not a

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<sup>64</sup> Eyerman, Ron, and Scott Barretta. "From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States." *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (1996): p.534 <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00160675>.

<sup>65</sup> Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator", 2009, p.60-61

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p.57

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p.60

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reaction from the person experiencing the art, there is no sense of community created; rather, this form of art becomes a kind of dividing force. As such, they become part of a separate distribution of the sensible that is defined by the commonly held values that this unsatisfied viewer has, and how they use their time and attention when it comes to consuming art.<sup>68</sup> To apply this to country music, participation in the country's community would involve experiencing poesis when listening to the country sound. This is why country music can become politically polarising: there will of course be many who do not share this experience, and as such do not participate in country music's distribution of the sensible, including the politics that come along with it.

Precedent for this can be seen in how Rancière and the distribution of the sensible have been applied to classical music by Alvarez. While Rancière argues that politics and art are two distinct distributions of the sensible that need to be perceived in different ways, Alvarez uses a third distribution of the sensible that helps listeners of musical art glean political significance from their experience of perceiving the art. This third distribution is a sonic one, meaning that the way one listens to the music gives a new way of reading politics into it.<sup>69</sup> It follows then, that the art of performance, and the way the piece of music is portrayed, can also form a separate distribution of the sensible. Though Alvarez wrote exclusively of classical music, this kind of Rancièrian application can be easily replicated in the context of country music. To Rancière, this idea of the distribution of the sensible is what politics revolves around.<sup>70</sup> I intend to demonstrate that this pattern is not only clear in the community that is country music, but also that the idea of the distribution of the sensible helps to understand how country music itself has evolved as a political medium.

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<sup>68</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*. 2013 p.12

<sup>69</sup> Alvarez, Sam. "A Rancièrian Approach to Classical Music Performance: Optimizing Political Engagement through Collage" *Art, Literature, and Contemporary European Thought*, 2022. p.12

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p.7

Finally, Aristotle is an important foundation for understanding Rancière and his application to politics specifically. As Rancière states in the earliest stages of his work *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Aristotle believed that a speaking being is a political being.<sup>71</sup> From this foundation, we can understand how virtues of classical art can then relate to politics where it may not seem as obvious. For example, Voltaire's *Mahomet* shares its author's commitment to combatting fanaticism.<sup>72</sup> With regards to country music, songs that may not explicitly reference political opinions but still give invaluable insight into them. For example, the innumerable references to 'mama' in different ways across country music proves an insight into how they view the traditional structure of an American family, a topic that has become incredibly political in recent decades.

To conclude, Rancière's philosophy of the distribution of the sensible, and how it can be a politically divisive tool is a key underlying principle in this paper. The incongruity between aesthesis and poesis experienced by so many when they experience elitist art gave rise to country music as a means of speaking to the experiences of neglected communities. Rancière therefore provides a philosophical explanation for why country music came to be, but he also contextualises it in politics. The political values of the art shine through, and identifying with that community can overlap with identifying with the politics that are held within it. It is because of this that country music can be so polarising, an often-insular distribution of the sensible that so many associate with politics that oppose their own. This becomes clearest in the moments of American identity crisis, when the politics of the artist are most evident and as a result there is far greater dissensus between the aesthesis and the poesis in country music listeners.

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<sup>71</sup> Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics* 2013. p.12

<sup>72</sup> Rancière. *The Emancipated Spectator*. 2009 p.60

## Country Music and Affective Polarisation

At the crux of this examination of the real and perceived political leanings of country music is the idea that every action one takes, whether intentionally political or not, helps to consolidate, or even inspire one's political leanings. With this in mind, an examination of existing literature on affective polarisation and how it can help to explain the politics of country music becomes a necessity. Scholars of affective polarisation argue that political polarisation comes not entirely as a result of explicit political preference, but rather as a result of social identity.

Lars Tønder provides an excellent starting point for examining what exactly affective polarisation is and how it can be used to identify politics. He begins with an outline of what exactly 'affect theory' is. It stems from a criticism of contemporary political and social theory and its focus on reason, arguing that it does not adequately address the dimensions of social and political subjectivities.<sup>73</sup> It posits that there is no one political theory that can explain why one's political affiliations lie where they do, but rather that one must expand the scope of investigation past the political field. Affect is a key determinate of political action since at its most basic level, it determines the feelings that one uses to navigate through our complex political world. Tønder uses the example of sadness and happiness to address this: sadness will limit one's ability to make a connection with the environment that they are in, whereas joy encourages one to be affected and to affect others.<sup>74</sup> There are scholars such as Massumi that argue the impact of affect is the 'be all and end all' in personal politics, but Tønder takes a far more reasonable approach. It is only natural that one's politics are not determined in their entirety by subconscious interactions with one's environment; humans are naturally reasonable creatures and it is for that reason that it would be naïve to ignore the role of

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<sup>73</sup> Tønder, Lars. "Affect and reason in divided societies: entanglement, conflict, possibility." *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 22, no. 3 (2021): p.248

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p.249

rationality in determining politics. Therefore, Tønder suggests that there is an ‘entanglement’ between these two schools of thought, that affect and reason interact within each political actor to generate political affiliation.<sup>75</sup> This thesis does not intend to participate in the incorrect division of labour that Tønder argues has become common in this debate, but rather to use the idea of affect that he puts forward to give a framework for how one can see something like country music as a political medium. It is rare, after all, to find a song that is written with outwardly political motivations and lyrics and as such one needs to examine them using this idea that the music is a vessel for affect.

Scholars tend to agree that it is almost impossible to provide one clear mechanism for what drives affective polarisation. Banda and Cluverius attempt to provide an explanation for just one of the many factors that drive it, by identifying the political affiliations and actions of elite members of society as root causes.<sup>76</sup> They do not frame this as an issue of rational politics, but rather of as one of affect. Increasing polarisation in the interactions of elite lawmakers trickles down to those that follow the elites and by extension makes the rest of society more polarised, regardless of where their opinions on actual policy lie. Whilst Banda and Cluverius intended for this idea to be extended to government elites, I contend that it can also be extended to the music world, including country music artists. Popular artists are revered in their fanbases, and one needs to look no further than the palatial Country Music Hall of Fame in the heart of Nashville, the home of country music, where decades of singers remain enshrined in bronze for country music fans to make pilgrimage to. If the artists take a politically polarising stance, either in their music or in their statements outside of the recording booth, there is a possibility that this polarisation will be adopted by their listeners and help to inform the political communities that they identify with. As such, Banda and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Banda, Kevin K., and John Cluverius. “Elite Polarization, Party Extremity, and Affective Polarization.” *Electoral Studies* 56 (2018): p.91

Cluverius can help to point to an important idea of how elites are valorised in society that can be used in country music if only we broaden their definition of what an elite is from a lawmaker to someone who has a platform and adoring listeners that could be used for a political purpose like Merle Haggard, for example.

Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes contribute to this by giving a more pessimistic viewpoint of affective polarisation that becomes extremely important when understanding the significance of the country sound and the sense of belonging that it inspires. They examine affect as an engine for polarisation in the United States, as when one feels an affective connection with ‘their’ group, this is inevitably accompanied by a rejection of the ‘out group.’<sup>77</sup> Evidence for this animosity is increasingly available in contemporary America, as can be seen with the proliferation of partisan news outlets and their consistent comparisons of those in their ‘out group’ to Nazis and Communists, or in the social media interactions that have become a constant in everyday life.<sup>78</sup> What these authors point out that is most relevant to this study of country music, however, is how increasingly homogenous social and political relationships have helped to exacerbate this polarisation.<sup>79</sup> As the process of polarisation progresses, there will be far less interaction between the groups that people have cut out for themselves which will only serve to extend the rift between ideological communities.<sup>80</sup> The essay concludes by looking at what can be done about affective polarisation, which regrettably is beyond the scope of this study. However, in their research they indicate that there has not been sufficient proof that affective interactions, and an affective distaste for the ‘out group’, is the predominant feature in determining political polarisation. Rather, it may result in an informational response as psychologists argue, leading people to put more thought into their

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<sup>77</sup>Iyengar et al. “The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States.” p.130

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. pp.134-135

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p.136

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

rational approach to their political leanings.<sup>81</sup> This thesis will seek not to entirely disprove that, but to contribute to the idea that affective relationships as defined by Inyegar, Sood, and Lelkes can help to explain country music and the politics of its adoring community. Whilst it will not entirely explain the underlying mechanisms of social polarisation that they allude to, it will strive to provide an in-depth analysis of one community where the idea of animosity towards the ‘out group’ can be easily applied. This theory is complemented by that of Lilliana Mason, who describes political identity as a ‘team’ that one supports.<sup>82</sup> A win for your team, becomes a personal win, but also a loss for the other team is a personal win.<sup>83</sup> By this logic, country music can become the ‘team’ that one supports, and when one has the utmost devotion to their team, they reject the values of other teams. Just as country music is about an adoration for the culture of religion, rurality, and patriotism, it is accompanied by a rejection of the antithesis of these things. Frequent themes of rejecting crowded urban culture to name one example, indicates the presence of this polarisation based on an ‘in group’ and an ‘out group’ as outlined in this paper. More specifically, the aforementioned controversy over whether Lil Nas X’s *Old Town Road* could be considered country music despite its pop music aesthetic clearly indicates this kind of affective polarisation that Inyegar and Mason describe. There was an outward reaction of anger over the fact that it was to be considered country music, since Lil Nas X was not a part of the ‘in group’ that was considered to be ‘country.’ It was a win for the ‘other team’, or the out group, and the result was anger.

In conclusion, one cannot understate the political significance of affect. There is immeasurable political significance in our everyday interactions, and those that we align ourselves with. It is only natural that this theory be extended to country music and its community of listeners. Whilst one’s music choices should not be considered to be the most

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p.141

<sup>82</sup> Mason, Lilliana. “‘I Disrespectfully Agree’: The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization.” (2015): p.130

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

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dominant indicator of political preference, that is not to say that it plays no role at all. Logically, there are aspects of identification that have absolutely nothing to do with sound. Rather, one can simply look at the idea that when people hear country music, they believe they are with their people and their community. With the importance of affect and the different ways that it can inform political identification outlined above, it only follows to outline its relationship to reason-based politics. Whilst both doubtless prove important aspects of how one thinks about politics, I argue that affect can arguably be said to precede thought. This sense of identification to an art form and a community in country music is incredibly powerful. From valorising the heroes of country music, or rejecting the antithesis of country music values, this affect serves a foundation to the rational political thought that follows. In essence, it can help to set guidelines for how one interacts with politics. Though it is not impossible to break from these communities and the ideologies that bind them, it is almost undeniable that affect is incredibly important to all aspects of politics and political identification.

### **Country Music from a Political & Academic Lens**

Finally, when looking at how to apply existing political theory to country music, it is of course necessary to look at how country music has already been analysed. With regards to its political leanings, country music has remained conservative in the eyes of most academics. Indeed, this is not without some caveats, as can be seen in the activist songs by artists like Taylor Swift, however there is undeniably a theme of conservatism surrounding the existing analysis of the politics of country music.

As previously mentioned, my thesis will focus on the aesthetic community of country music, as well as the lyrics and what politics can be understood from them. This lyrical analysis is not original, but rather has been the focus of almost all country music scholarship

to this point. One example of these purely lyrical analyses comes from Van Sickle, who analyses the lyrics of country music in the forty years leading up to 9/11. He stops in 2001 because he argues that the level of political polarisation that has leaked into country music was without precedent, and therefore not representative of country's political climate at the time.<sup>84</sup> This could not be further from the truth. Firstly, the Vietnam War created a political division in country music just as it had the rest of the nation in the 1970s, marked by the political demonstrations that characterised the home front. Secondly, 9/11 illuminated divisions in country music that already existed. If country music erupted into political divisions during a crisis of American identity, then that is a sign that country music is a fundamentally political medium. Moreover, Van Sickle follows this by correctly identifying how politically charged these times and the subsequent country music lyrics were. He alludes to, to name but two examples, Merle Haggard's conservative response to Vietnam and Watergate, and Loretta Lynn's songs preaching gender equality in the same time period.<sup>85</sup> Van Sickle's conclusion after examining the top 40 songs from 1965 to 2000 is that popular country music songs tend not to show any political leaning, and more damning yet do not tend to involve any references to the traditionally conservative themes.<sup>86</sup> The flaws in this analysis are recognised by Van Sickle himself: his focus on the Top 40 eliminates some of the most prolific songwriters in the history of country music. Legends of country music like Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson find themselves being largely outside the scope of his study, despite being integral parts of the country music community.<sup>87</sup> Secondly, in coding for set lyrical references, he gains an incomplete image of country music. Not only does he not code for important topics like the valorisation of the frontier, but Van Sickle addresses country

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<sup>84</sup> Van Sickle, Robert W. "A World Without Citizenship: On (the Absence of) Politics and Ideology in Country Music Lyrics, 1960-2000." (2005): pp.316-317

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p.321

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p.329

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p.316

music solely as an art form and not as an artistic community. The invaluable theories of Rancière and affective politics are thus absent from the study. Finally, real-world examples call into question his theory. If country music is almost entirely apolitical, then why is it most popular in conservative communities, in southern and southwestern rural towns?

One important thing that Van Sichel does contribute, is the identification of key themes that persist in country music as it relates to political identity. Though each scholar that tries to name these key political themes arrives at a slightly different conclusion, the overlap is undeniable. Van Sichel focuses on religion, patriotism, social change, work and unemployment, government and law, and freedom and inequality. Other scholars, like Meier, come to a very similar conclusion. Meier arrives at the key themes of patriotism, feminism, race, and the common man.<sup>88</sup> Keeping these themes in mind will help to inform the way that country music is analysed through a political lens, both in this paper and in future studies. In light of this, I will focus my analysis of country music, or at the very least the lyrical portion thereof, on the key themes of religion, rurality, patriotism and jingoism, the common man, and the broader category used by Van Sichel of social change and traditional values.

The question that arises from this selection of these categories, then, is how they can be understood as political. More accurately, why is it that things like the traditional family structure and religion are associated with a more conservative leaning? Firstly, one must look to the ideologies of rural America. David Knoke and Constance Henry's foundational work on the political structure of rural America begins to provide a comprehensive analysis of this. Despite being written in 1977, much of their characterization and explanation of rural America remains true to this day. They argue that rurality accompanies many of the aforementioned themes that also happen to be recurring themes in popular country music: religion, intense patriotism, a distaste for big business, and an isolationist take on foreign

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<sup>88</sup> Meier, "Looking for Meaning in All the Wrong Places: Country Music and the Politics of Identity"

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policy.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, much of this is framed as a way of life that is based around rejecting urban society, and the encroachment into rural society that people have associated with it.

Furthermore, they provide ample evidence for how these base beliefs have been politicised by elites in the United States, specifically in the Republican party.<sup>90</sup>

Rurality does not prescribe conservatism, however, nor does urbanism prescribe liberalism. Thus, one must look to other scholarship to argue that many of the common themes of country are stereotypically conservative ones. Irving Kristol identified a growing trend in conservatism in 1995: a kind of conservatism with an increasing focus on religion had come to the fore in the recent decades beforehand.<sup>91</sup> Kristol contends that this was a result not of an aggressive Christian force rising out of the conservative party, but rather it because out of a fear of ‘militant liberalism and the militant secularism that associated with it.’<sup>92</sup> In other words, it was an ideology formed to defend American religious conservatives from the liberal ‘out group.’ In the post-war years, religious parents wanted to regain the autonomy over themselves and their children that Kristol argues they feel like they had lost. A host of seemingly menial examples are used to indicate this, such as the presence of gay and lesbian student organisations whilst the religious ones faced scrutiny, or the distribution of condoms in classrooms while teachers were forbidden by the Supreme Court to put the Ten Commandments on the wall.<sup>93</sup> These are all examples that Kristol believes pushed religious conservatives, specifically Christian conservatives, into their ideology as a defensive response.

It is easy to theorise why key themes of country music, like religiosity and rurality are traditionally conservative ideals. However, one must also recognise that it is near impossible

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<sup>89</sup> Knoke, David, and Constance Henry. “Political Structure of Rural America.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 429, no. 1 (1977): p.52 <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271627742900106>.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Kristol, Irving. “AMERICAN CONSERVATISM 1945-1995.” *The Public Interest* 121, no. 121 (1995): p.81

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p.88

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

to provide any kind of blanket philosophical or psychological explanation as to why this is; political affiliation in these communities is an incredibly personal matter. Whatever these motivations for politically conservative values may be, there is an inextricable link between those that voted for republican candidates in elections, and those who would be theorised to be listeners of country music. To look at the 2020 elections as just one indicator, the ultra-conservative incumbent President Trump won 65% of rural voters.<sup>94</sup> This is a pattern that can also be seen in the religious vote, with estimates of white evangelical voters reaching 81% in favour of President Trump, while non-religiously aligned voters sided with President Biden.<sup>95</sup> As a final indicator of the conservative themes of country music, the south has historically the most conservative area of the United States, with almost its entirety voting accordingly in 2020. This is not just a theme for presidential elections, nor is it a theme for only elections. Rather, it is indicative of a far larger pattern where themes like the south, religiosity, rurality, and the common man against the big government take on an unmistakable conservative affiliation. These presence of these themes in country music, as examined by the likes of Meier and Van Sickel, help to establish its leanings as conservative. It is dangerous at this point of the review to conclude that country music is inherently conservative. This is not always the case. Rather, I argue that there is significant overlap between these conservative values and the values of country music.

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<sup>94</sup> Reem Nadeem, "Behind Biden's 2020 Victory," Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy (Pew Research Center, November 17, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/behind-bidens-2020-victory/>.

<sup>95</sup> Frank Newport, "Religious Group Voting and the 2020 Election," Gallup.com (Gallup, May 20, 2022), <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/324410/religious-group-voting-2020-election.aspx>.

## Political Dialogue in Country Music

### Rancière and the *Sensus Communis*

We have established that country music and conservative values have a significant degree of overlap, however to argue that country music is intrinsically a conservative medium would be a disservice to the diverse art that country music is. Using the philosophy of Rancière, his theories on the politics of art seek to bridge political cleavages, and country music has long seen these efforts from singers and songwriters to introduce political dialogue in this traditionally conservative medium, pushing more liberal themes with their lyrics whilst remaining true to the musical traditions of the country sound.

To fully understand this dialogue, one must return to Rancière and look not to his theories about the potentially divisive distribution of the sensible, but towards the common sense, or *sensus communis*, that Rancière seeks to find in artistic communities. This *sensus communis* occurs when there is the marriage between poesis and aesthesis as one experiences art.<sup>96</sup> Rancière argues that, through art and a shared common sense, there is community even in solitude.<sup>97</sup> He gives the example of a low-income suburb of Paris, where people were invited to enter a space alone, and write a sentence of their choosing on it. The sentences that they wrote revealed a shared experience of loneliness in their suburb, and Rancière points to how this is the perfect example of how art can unify even in a situation where one may seem isolated.<sup>98</sup> Community is found through collective life and collective sensation, and it is this relationship that forms the foundation of art as a political community, and the foundation of the *sensus communis*.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Dimitris Gkoulimaris, "When I Die, Throw Me into the Sea!: Greek Rebetiko as a Political Art Form," *Northwestern in Paris: Art, Literature, and Contemporary European Thought*, 2019. p.24

<sup>97</sup> Rancière. *The Emancipated Spectator.*, 2009. p.53

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* pp.55-57

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* p.57

Country music seeks to participate in this same idea of art as a unifying medium, and it certainly has the capacity to. Songs that speak to the experiences of the common rural American were, after all, intended to give a voice to those who felt that they were left voiceless through other art forms. It was not intended to be what many unfairly characterise country music to be: a means of spreading conservative values. This has been recognised by many country music artists, who have tried to expand the dialogue of country music beyond traditionally conservative responses to crises with new approaches that still maintain a strict adherence to the values and musical patterns of country music. In pushing a liberal message whilst maintaining these traditions, these songs show that country music is not inherently political. Rather, country singers have prioritised the values of country music above those prescribed by political identification. Affective polarisation also helps to explain why there is this political diversity, as the songs and the values instilled by growing up in this community of country music are adopted prior to becoming a political actor. Thus, country singers are equipped to attempt to expand the political discourse that takes place within country songs.

In the following pages I hope to demonstrate some of these important efforts, where singers have used country music values to arrive at a liberal message. For example, in response to Vietnam, artists like Jan Howard write incredibly mournful songs that leave behind the value of militaristic support in favour of prioritising the family structure. Similar instances follow throughout the war, and also in response to 9/11 and Trump-Era republicanism, all whilst maintaining a kind of sonic impression that is unmistakably country.

The existence of these lyrics is a sign that country music's *sensus communis* nationwide is incomplete. There is political dissensus within the art form that still can be polarising even to other country music singers. However, it does point to the unique diversity in country music, and that there is a conscious effort to generate *poesis* in a much larger

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audience. This is the ultimate aim of any art form that wants to be a truly popular medium and avoid the aesthetic separation.

Therefore, it is necessary to examine liberal country music in a similar way to the previous investigation of conservative country to understand how these artists are creating a broader political dialogue. Using the same argument that times of crisis illuminate the underlying politics and more clearly define the political cleavages in country music and its listeners, I will examine popular attempts to introduce broader political dialogue from the Vietnam era, the aftermath of 9/11, and Trump's presidency. I hope to demonstrate that conservatism, whilst it may be prominent, does not have a monopoly over country music. Instead, liberal singers are using this conservative medium to convey a more liberal message and in doing so introduce the idea of country music as a unifying art.

### **Political Dialogue in Times of American Identity Crisis**

#### The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War brought with it an antiwar movement the likes of which had never before been seen in the US. It was a moment of mass dissensus, where the country music that it introduced often proved divisive and potentially alienating. As Merle Haggard sang a scathing criticism of draft dodgers and protesters, Glenn Campbell responded with his heart wrenching classic *Galveston*, about a soldier fearing death as he prepares his gun in Vietnam whilst dreaming about his home in Texas.<sup>100</sup> Though it is far from Haggard's conservative clarion call, it remains a definitively country song. It valorizes the beauty of the soldier's hometown of Galveston Texas, even in light of the cannons flashing before him. At its essence, it is a patriotic love song to the land that the soldier misses which very much aligns with the patriotic American values of country music. It paints a terrifying and helpless picture

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<sup>100</sup> See Appendix XVI

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of the military in Vietnam, and yet keeps this traditional country focus on the American land. A similarly hopeless picture is painted by Jan Howard as she mourns the loss of her son in *My Son*. Based on her very real loss, she laments the fact that he went to fight and die in a land that *until a short time ago, [she] didn't even know was there*.<sup>101</sup> Both of these songs touched on traditionally country music values of family and a love for one's homeland, whilst rejecting any sense of militaristic support that so many other singers adhered to.

Also released during the Vietnam era were songs that did not reference the war, but became anthems for other liberal movements in the time of hyper-politicization and protest. The two clearest examples of this, released by two of the most famous artists in country music, are *9 to 5* by Dolly Parton, and *The Pill* by Loretta Lynn. Parton's song carries a message of feminist equality that has echoed through the years and remains wildly popular today, lamenting the work that women do and the credit that they don't receive.

9 to 5  
Yeah, they got you were they want you  
There's a better life  
And you think about it, don't you?  
It's a rich man's game  
No matter what they call it  
And you spend your life  
Putting money in his wallet

In just this section, Parton's feminism becomes abundantly clear whilst also using the same themes of fearing big corporations taking hard-earned money from the hands of the common American woman that deserves it.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, Lynn praises the efficacy of contraception in her song *The Pill*, empowering women through her lyrics of sexual liberation that fly in the face of traditional conservative family values.<sup>103</sup> In both cases, they use traditional country music themes, with an appeal to the experiences of the normal American woman, to present a liberal message in a conservative medium.

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<sup>101</sup> See Appendix XVII

<sup>102</sup> See Appendix XVIII

<sup>103</sup> See Appendix XIX

Notably, Lynn and Howard were not liberals. When anti-war protesters came to the Howard's door, she threatened to shoot them.<sup>104</sup> Loretta Lynn spent time and money campaigning for both Bush campaigns, and even used country music to do so, saying that 'she knows George Bush, and he *is* country,' playing on her popular slogan 'if you're looking at me, you're looking at country.'<sup>105</sup> With both of these artists, we can see understand their liberal songs as a sign that country music values take priority over political values. Both of their songs do not participate in the same political community that they both later would become famous for, but they remain extremely popular and entirely unapologetic. This helps us to understand liberal country songs, especially in the time of Vietnam, as a discontinuity in the distribution of the sensible that holds country music together. The work of these liberal artists in this time can be understood as introducing new liberal dialogue into the typically conservative space, in search for a more inclusive *sensus communis*.

It truly did prove to be an identity crisis for country music, as artists fought with their values that did not coincide with those being pushed by the more conservative singers like Haggard and Robbins. But just because they disagreed on this issue of, for example, family values, does not eliminate them from the country music community. Understanding this not as an issue of liberal versus conservative politics, but as a demonstration of liberal dialogue functioning alongside country music values then helps us to understand liberal country music as a broadening of the values in country music's *sensus communis*.

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<sup>104</sup> Trigger Coroneos, "Jan Howard's Quiet Support of Servicemembers Remembered after Passing," Saving Country Music, March 31, 2020, <https://www.savingcountrymusic.com/jan-howards-quiet-support-of-servicemembers-remembered-after-passing/>.

<sup>105</sup> Elving, Ron, "How Loretta Lynn, Country Music and a Rural Republican Tide Changed U.S. Politics," The Current (Minnesota Public Radio, October 9, 2022), <https://www.thecurrent.org/feature/2022/10/08/npr-loretta-lynn-country-music-politics-republicans>.

9/11

Country songs performed by liberal artists took a noticeably different tone in the wake of 9/11. Unlike the upbeat, empowering country sound that defined the conservative response, liberal artists did not focus on restoring American pride, but instead on remembrance. This mournful tone is encapsulated in a song that reached similar levels of popularity to Worley's *Have You Forgotten*: Alan Jackson's *Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)*.<sup>106</sup> The tone is not one of anger, nor encouragement of the coming military response, but rather that of a helpless onlooker as so many Americans were. Most importantly, Jackson says that while he is clueless about the politics of the situation, he is certain about Jesus and his lessons on unrequited love. The chorus encapsulates this perfectly, even explicitly mentioning Iraq:

I'm just a singer of simple songs  
I'm not a real political man  
I watch CNN, but I'm not sure I can tell you  
The difference in Iraq and Iran  
But I know Jesus and I talk to God  
And I remember this from when I was young  
Faith, hope, and love are some good things He gave us  
And the greatest is love

In this way, Jackson prioritises the religious values and the experience of the common man that have been a cornerstone of country music for over a century over military support and patriotism. At least in part, his liberalism can be explained by this prioritisation, and despite this liberalism he still maintains his status as a legendary country singer who not only participates in the country music community but actively shapes it.

It is worth noting, however, that this response was certainly in the minority amongst country singers. The response of country music to 9/11 was characterised by jingoism, as this unwavering support for the military won out in the ensuing debate over the Middle East. Yet songs like Jackson's indicate that this response was not entirely unified. Jackson's active

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<sup>106</sup> See Appendix XX

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rejection of politics, saying that he doesn't even know the difference between Iraq and Iran, suggests a gap in the knowledge and a sense of unpreparedness that was far from uncommon at the time. This sentiment is the antithesis of encouraging military action, and as such Jackson is able to use country music themes to present the a rare, but liberal take on 9/11. Again, we see that even when there seems to be such a dominant conservative response from the country music community, this conservatism does not have a monopoly. There is variation in the politics of country music, and an attempt to expand the political dialogue therein to arrive at a more inclusive art form.

### Trump-Era Republicanism

Music of all genres has been used as a mode of protest for centuries. It is an inherently political tool that has the power to propagate.<sup>107</sup> Its power to promote change and unite people behind it has been capitalised upon by predominantly liberal musicians in recent decades in the US, as can be seen by the folk music that provided the soundtrack to Vietnam protests in the 1960s. In modern country music in the wake of the Trump presidency, many country singers have adopted this legacy left by their folk-singing predecessors by introducing this activist tone into their art. While the conservative response has largely been defined by a stricter adherence to 'country values' like the south, rurality, and religion, it is the liberal country singers that now have taken up the torch to write more explicitly political protest music, and take explicitly political action.

This was clearest during performances organised by the Trump presidency, where incredibly popular country singers, like Grand Ole Opry member Luke Combs, refused to sing for occasions like the famous White House 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration.<sup>108</sup> Instead, Combs

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<sup>107</sup> Neuman, Dard. "Music & Politics in the Classroom: Music, Politics, and Protest." *Music & Politics* 2, no. 2 (2008). p.1

<sup>108</sup> Helena Andrews-Dyer and Emily Heil, "The Fourth of July White House Concert Used to Be a Sea of Stars. for Trump, It's a Drought." *The Washington Post* (WP Company, December 2,).

opted to perform for CBS. This kind of rejection was not unheard of during the Trump presidency, and in doing this they rejected the politics it represented and by extension shaped the community that follows them and takes political influence by them. Combs would follow up with songs of hope during the Covid, like *6 Feet Apart* that encouraged hope by sympathising with the average American, saying that with time and with quarantine this struggle would put behind us.<sup>109</sup> Though not inherently political, it later would be as Covid restrictions became a topic of heated political debate, and the dialogue that Combs' decision created in the country music community would be imperative in expanding the political boundaries of country.

Combs' was one of the subtler responses to the conservatism that has characterised the last 8 years. Tyler Childers, an artist who has shot into the country music scene from rural Kentucky, introduced one song with lyrics in his album, the title track: *Long Violent History*.<sup>110</sup> After an album packed with traditional acoustic bluegrass sound, filled with long solos of traditional instruments like the fiddle, comes a searing rebuke of the police in America and a call to action for his predominately white audience as a nation dealt with the murder of George Floyd. His recognition of this largely white conservative audience one makes this song an invaluable resource to this paper.

Now, what would you give if you heard my opinion  
Conjecturin' on matters that I ain't never dreamed  
In all my born days as a white boy from Hickman  
Based on the way that the world's been to me

It's called me belligerent, it's took me for ignorant  
But it ain't never once made me scared just to be  
Could you imagine just constantly worryin'  
Kickin' and fightin', beggin' to breathe

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/reliable-source/wp/2018/07/03/the-fourth-of-july-white-house-concert-used-to-be-a-sea-of-stars-for-trump-its-a-drought/>

<sup>109</sup> See Appendix XXI

<sup>110</sup> See Appendix XXII

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He acknowledges that country music and his rural home town host a conservative political community and as a result the art that he learned from these roots may naturally reflect this conservatism. Childers flips that on his head, singing that what we hear in our insular communities may not be the full truth, and that in using the individualism that comes from this basis, we can find the truth that people outside the community are suffering. So not only does Childers give testimony from a liberal artist that those in his artistic community tend towards conservatism, but amidst a full album of traditional bluegrass sound gives this rebuke of conservative political bias on the foundation of individualism. This could be the clearest evidence of using a conservative aesthetic and medium to try to expand the political dialogue that characterises country music, as it is essentially mentioned in the song itself.

Artists have taken their political message far beyond just their music. Grammy award-winning artists Jason Isbell openly endorsed democratic candidate Beto O'Rourke for Texas governor, and promised to release an album covering songs by Georgian singers if Joe Biden flipped the state.<sup>111</sup> The superstar Taylor Swift even endorsed democratic candidates in Tennessee for the first time in her career, shaking the image that she had accidentally attained as an advocate for far-right politics. Though outside the boundaries of music, these singers are shaping their community of listeners in the most obvious way they know how: by stating their political preferences outright and. Their music then becomes associated with the views that they hold, and the political influence that they had affected in their listeners prior to these statements manifests itself in this attempted political evolution. Those that remain listeners participate in their distribution of the sensible, injecting outwardly liberal and explicitly political views into the music that they then enjoy and are affected by.

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<sup>111</sup> Sauers, Camille. "Country Artist Jason Isbell Will Drop a Texas Cover Album IF O'Rourke Unseats Abbott." Chron. mySA, November 16, 2021. <https://www.chron.com/politics/article/jason-isbell-texas-governor-beto-orourke-abbott-16625927.php>.

### **Cash: A Case Study in the Primacy of Country Music Values**

Finally, the artists who have successfully expanded the political boundaries of country music must be recognized to show that it is indeed possible not only to introduce new, more liberal values into country music's distribution of the sensible, but to actively expand it and further its attempt to achieve a nationwide *sensus communis*. Songs previously discussed like Loretta Lynn's *The Pill* have been a start, with her later endorsements of the Bush family and later of Trump complicating her political affiliation. Lynn is one example, but not the clearest. This title belongs to the darling of country music: Johnny Cash. To this day, his music can be heard echoing through the hallways of liberal and conservative homes alike, encapsulating how country music can be unifying. Cash epitomizes a theory that the singer does not identify as liberal or conservative, but prioritizes certain 'country values' over the those espoused by liberal or conservative thinkers. Cash made an entire career out of actively avoiding politically alienating lyrics on both sides of the political spectrum, whilst simultaneously expanding the population that could experience poesis when listening to his music. Cash's music shows that affect precedes political preference as well, as his popularity transcended the polarizing times of Vietnam and Watergate even when his songs assumed more liberal lyrics.

Cash was most famous for his ability to tell the story of the forgotten American, which was clearest with his live album at Folsom Prison, which was the feather in the cap on his efforts to push prison reform.<sup>112</sup> This outwardly rejected the harsh crime and punishment rhetoric that outlaw music like Toby Keith now adheres to, as Cash banters with the prisoners using lyrics that relate to their experience of Folsom and reminds listeners at home that prisoners were a very real part of American society, and of the country music community.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Geary, "'The Way I Would Feel About San Quentin': Johnny Cash & the Politics of Country Music." (2013): p.67

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. p.68

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Cash criticized government officials and businesses for ignoring the suffering of prisoners, and skirting prisoner welfare. In this respect, he prioritised the theme of the common American man and the common American experience above all else, something that could not have been made clearer by his song *Man in Black*, about the suffering of all types of Americans.<sup>114</sup>

I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down  
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town  
I wear it for the prisoner who is long paid for his crime  
But is there because he's a victim of the times  
I wear the black for those who've never read  
Or listened to the words that Jesus said  
About the road to happiness through love and charity  
Why, you'd think He's talking straight to you and me

Cash not only relates with the common, unrepresented American experience in his music, but religion as well. These are the values that allow his art to transcend politics, he could relate to the sensory experience of Americans through art that preceded political affiliation.

That being said, Cash's fame forced him into the political arena fairly often. In the throes of the Vietnam War and the subsequent protests, Cash was tokenized by a Republican party that had been trying to use the straightforward appeal of country music and its Irish roots to appeal to their voter base.<sup>115</sup> Cash was invited to play for the troops, and to the White House to perform a concert for President Nixon. However, Cash took active steps to avoid excessively divisive statements, and ensure that his music remained as separate from politics as it could be, and as unifying as possible. He refused to perform the song *Welfare Cadillac* for Nixon despite his explicit request, and whilst he supported the war effort and rallying behind the troops in Vietnam, he also sang anti-war songs like *What is Truth* that celebrated people who challenged the status quo.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> See Appendix XXIII

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p.66

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. pp.68-71

Without any discernible political party affiliation, Cash was able to become perhaps the most famous name in country music. He is the embodiment of the primacy of country music values over political affiliation and as such demonstrates that it is possible to successfully expand the proverbial political boundaries of country music. He tip-toed through the political minefield of the Vietnam Era, and remained faithful to the central country theme of his music: the experience of the common man. Whether this be relating to prisoners, writing religious songs, or songs that just celebrated home and the American landscape, Cash's first purpose was to celebrate the American experience whilst adhering to the same sonic patterns that make every country music listener feel at home. As a result, he finds himself now revered by liberal and conservative country music lovers alike. His intention was to unite, and he demonstrated exactly how country music can do this.

## **Conclusion**

Country music, though it has often aligned with the political right, has not always been conservative. Rather there are notable, popular attempts by country singers throughout all three of these times of crisis to introduce a wider political discourse into the genre. This was all done with strict adherence to the distinct country music style, and also the key values that have persisted throughout country's history. Times of crisis show that when values come into conflict, singers do not choose that which is conservative but rather simply choose the one that fits them. This demonstrates that country music's conservatism is not prescriptive, but rather there is a place for political dialogue. Johnny Cash's success in country music proves this theory; he was able to rise to become one of the most recognizable names in country music without blindly adhering to a polarizing set of political values. His work for prison reform, and his refusal to become aligned with Nixon's agenda show that popularity in

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country music, and the ability to perform songs whose popularity transcends political affiliation, are a testament to the fact that country music leaves room for political discourse.

## A Look to the Future

Rancière's philosophy looks to take us to a point where art, in this case country music, has completely avoided aesthetic separation and the distribution of the sensible can include the entire nation. Country music is not yet at that point, and some philosophies, like that of Bordieu, argue that this will never happen.

Bordieu argues that every rational action is separated into fields, ranging from the economic field, to the cultural field, to the educational field and so on.<sup>117</sup> There is constant competition in each of these fields, though not always as a result of actors' conscious decisions, but it affects success in the fields that they are interacting with.<sup>118</sup> Most relevant to this paper is the interaction between the cultural and economic fields, where success in one can mean failure in the other. Like Rancière, Bordieu naturally does not discuss country music, nor would one expect him to. Instead, he looks to art like magazines, which are produced by large companies and made for a broad audience. Bordieu argues that these large corporations supporting big magazines place too much value on the economic field for them to maintain cultural value; those funding the magazines place so much value in quickly turning a profit that they cannot take the time to contribute to the cultural.<sup>119</sup> Smaller publications, however, are not weighed down by the economic and temporal pressures of their larger competitors. As such, these smaller, less profit-driven groups are able to take the time to achieve more of a symbolic success, actively contributing to a dynamic cultural field at the expense of economic gain.<sup>120</sup>

This philosophy is easily applied to modern country music: the music is increasingly produced as a means of profit, and less out of adherence to the traditional values of country

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<sup>117</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, and Randal Johnson. *The Field of Cultural Production : Essays on Art and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. p.6

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* pp.99-100

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* p.100

music. This is inevitable in almost all musical media; popular music will always have to appease, for example, the record labels that support them and the markets that consume their music. Country music is no exception; it is often constricted to aligning with its politically conservative majority or not taking any political stance at all. After all, given that country music is dominated by traditionally conservative values, there will always be a motive to remain with what is safe, what makes a profit, and what is popular. This pattern has only been enforced by the negative response of the country music community to outwardly political songs and actions that many considered to have gone beyond the values of country music. The clearest example is the rejection of the newly named Chicks after Natalie Maines' criticism of George Bush during a concert, or the criticism that Brad Paisley received after writing *Accidental Racist*<sup>121</sup> in a failed attempt to write an anthem of unity.<sup>122</sup> As a result of this, songs almost always remain apolitical. If they talk about politics at all they go to great lengths to remain intentionally neutral, as can be seen with songs like *The Great Divide* by Luke Combs and Billy Strings that talks only of making a political bridge and not what the values of country music really are.<sup>123</sup> As the above analysis of popular, liberal country songs demonstrates, efforts to introduce liberal dialogue remain largely subtle.<sup>124</sup> For Bordieu, this shows that country music will not be able to reach the nationwide common sense that Rancière outlines as it participates purely in the economic field and not the cultural.

That does not necessarily mean that country music is doomed to its largely conservative audience, however. Though some would say that the subtlety of liberal songwriting in country music is damning to its hope of expanding its audience, that does not

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<sup>121</sup> See Appendix XXIV

<sup>122</sup> Jewly Hight, "Think Politics Is Gone from Country Music? Listen Closer," NPR (NPR, March 20, 2018), <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2018/03/20/594043497/think-politics-is-gone-from-country-music-listen-closer>.

<sup>123</sup> See Appendix XXV

<sup>124</sup> Jewly Hight, "Think Politics Is Gone from Country Music? Listen Closer," NPR (NPR, March 20, 2018), <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2018/03/20/594043497/think-politics-is-gone-from-country-music-listen-closer>.

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account for the fact that there is at least some effort to create dialogue and create a wider *sensus communis*. Though not always successful, the existence of this effort throughout the history of country music is undeniable.

No matter how seemingly small, the mere fact that this effort exists is enough to demonstrate that country music is not an inherently conservative medium. To the contrary, it has the potential to create political dialogue and achieve a much larger artistic community than the stereotype would imply. It will take time to develop this more inclusive dialogue completely, but it has already begun. Reaching out to more liberally inclined audiences who still identify with some of the key values of country music (religion, the feeling of the ‘forgotten American,’ and rurality, to name but a few) means that country music has the necessary foundations to be used as a kind of political bridge. Whilst Bordieu argues this may take time, and it certainly will take time to shake this conservative stereotype, country music can be, and has been, a unifying art form.

## Conclusion

Country music and conservatism have stereotypically gone hand in hand. Whilst there is truth to this claim, it would be incorrect to say that country music is inherently conservative. While there is a certainly a large degree of overlap between the values of country music and traditionally conservative values, conservative values do not have a monopoly over country music. Rather, there have been attempts to broaden the political dialogue in country music when country values are used to espouse a liberal message. This become especially true in times of American identity crisis, where values of patriotism may contradict other fundamental country music values like religion, the traditional family structure, or the rejection of large government and corporations. The fact that there is space at all for both of these political dialogues demonstrates that country music has the potential to be used as a political bridge, able to reach far more than just the southern rural Americans that the stereotype limits it to.

Underpinning country music are communities that have been raised into it, and communities that understand themselves to be at home when they listen to country music's unique sound. This feeling of community precedes and informs any political thought thereafter. The shared experiences of these listeners can result in the formation of an artistic community around the values displayed in the art that they consume. Whilst this overlaps with conservatism frequently, this is not always the case.

Country music has not often ventured into liberal activism. Indeed, recent events have shown that its audience is dominated by those who largely do not want to see politics brought into their music. Though some argue that this condemns country music to being a polarizing medium, the work of popular artists like Tyler Childers, Dolly Parton, and Johnny Cash to reach across this political rift has shown that the country music community reserves room for political dialogue, subtle though it may be.

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So, when looking to country music, it is unfair to reject it as a polarizing genre for a conservative audience. The key values that country songs adhere to, be they speaking for an American experience many believe is unspoken for, celebrating the land that people come from, or something as simple as 'mama,' are not exclusive to a conservative audience. The music of the banjo and the fiddle is not made to be a political tool. It is made to bring people together and give them an art that they can share in, regardless of their politics.

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## Appendices

### Appendix I: William Shakespeare Hays – *Little Old Cabin in the Lane* (1871)

Oh I'm gettin' old and feeble and I cannot work no more  
The children no more gather 'round my door  
And old masters and old mrs they are sleepin' side by side  
Near the little old log cabin in the lane

Oh the chimney's fallen down and the roof's all caved in  
Lettin' in the sunshine and the rain  
And the only friend I've got now is that good old dag of mine  
And the little old log cabin in the lane

Oh the trees have all growed up that lead around the hill  
The fences have all gone to decay  
And the creeks have all dried up where we used to go to mill  
And things have changed their course another way

Oh I ain't got long to stay here what little time I've got  
I want to rest content wile I remain  
'Til death shall call this dog and me to find a better home  
And a little old log cabin in the lane

### Appendix II: A.P. Carter - *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* (1935)

I was standing by my window  
On one cold and cloudy day  
When I saw that hearse come rolling  
For to carry my mother away

Will the circle be unbroken  
By and by, Lord, by and by  
There's a better home a-waiting  
In the sky, Lord, in the sky

I said to that undertaker  
Undertaker please drive slow  
For this lady you are carrying  
Lord, I hate to see her go

Will the circle be unbroken  
By and by, Lord, by and by  
There's a better home a-waiting  
In the sky, Lord, in the sky

Oh, I followed close behind her  
Tried to hold up and be brave  
But I could not hide my sorrow  
When they laid her in the grave

Will the circle be unbroken  
By and by, Lord, by and by  
There's a better home a-waiting  
In the sky, Lord, in the sky

I went back home Lord, my home was lonesome  
Missed my mother, she was gone  
All of my brothers, sisters crying  
What a home so sad and lone

Will the circle be unbroken  
By and by, Lord, by and by  
There's a better home a-waiting  
In the sky, Lord, in the sky

Will the circle be unbroken  
By and by, Lord, by and by  
There's a better home a-waiting  
In the sky, Lord, in the sky

### **Appendix III: Lil Nas X - *Old Town Road* (2019)**

Yeah, I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road  
I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more  
I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road  
I'm gonna ride (Kio, Kio) 'til I can't no more

I got the horses in the back  
Horse tack is attached  
Hat is matte black  
Got the boots that's black to match  
Riding on a horse, ha  
You can whip your Porsche  
I been in the valley  
You ain't been up off the porch, now

Can't nobody tell me nothing  
You can't tell me nothing  
Can't nobody tell me nothing  
You can't tell me nothing

Riding on a tractor  
Lean all in my bladder  
Cheated on my baby  
You can go and ask her  
My life is a movie  
Bull riding and boobies

Cowboy hat from Gucci  
Wrangler on my booty

Can't nobody tell me nothing  
You can't tell me nothing  
Can't nobody tell me nothing  
You can't tell me nothing

Yeah, I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road  
I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more  
I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road  
I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more

Hat down, cross-town, livin' like a rockstar  
Spent a lot of money on my brand-new guitar  
Baby's got a habit: diamond rings and Fendi sports bras  
Ridin' down Rodeo in my Maserati sports car  
Got no stress, I've been through all that  
I'm like a Marlboro Man so I kick on back  
Wish I could roll on back to that old town road  
I wanna ride 'til I can't no more

Yeah, I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road  
I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more  
I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road  
I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more

**Appendix IV: Woody Guthrie - *This Land is Your Land* (1940)**

This land is your land and this land is my land  
From California to the New York island  
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters  
This land was made for you and me

As I went walking that ribbon of highway  
I saw above me that endless skyway  
Saw below me that golden valley  
This land was made for you and me

I roamed and rambled and I've followed my footsteps  
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts  
All around me a voice was sounding  
This land was made for you and me

When the sun come shining, then I was strolling  
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling  
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting  
This land was made for you and me

This land is your land and this land is my land  
From California to the New York island  
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters  
This land was made for you and me

When the sun come shining, then I was strolling  
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling  
The voice come a-chanting and the fog was lifting  
This land was made for you and me

**Appendix V – Wheeler Walker Jr - *Fucked by A Country Boy* (2022)**

Hey bitch from New York City  
With them fake California titties  
I know you're waxed and vaxxed  
But have you ever been smashed to some old school Conway Twitty  
I know you got your man with the spray on tan  
But you need to get your ass down South  
Trade that dick up in the Penthouse,  
For some cock down in the henhouse

Have you ever been fucked, fucked, fucked by a country boy?  
Rammed, rammed, rammed by a redneck?  
Spread, spread, spread by an inbred,  
Who's kind of got your daddies voice?  
If you've never been licked by a hick with a hillbilly dick  
Or got a rash on your stash from some trailer trash  
Then girl you need to get fucked by a country boy

So head on down to Tennessee,  
Where the men chug beer and crush pussy  
Flap down to mouth  
And let me show your flap  
Some home-cooked southern fried meat  
We'll fuck you like family

Have you ever been fucked, fucked, fucked by a country boy?  
Rammed, rammed, rammed by a redneck?  
Spread, spread, spread by an inbred,  
Who's kind of got your daddies voice?  
If you've never been licked by a hick with a hillbilly dick  
Or got a rash on your stash from some trailer trash  
Then girl you need to get fucked by a country boy

Girl you can suck my D  
While we watch the SEC  
If that sounds good to you,  
It sure sounds great to me.

Have you ever been fucked, fucked, fucked by a country boy?  
Rammed, rammed, rammed by a redneck?  
Spread, spread, spread by an inbred,  
Who's kind of got your daddies voice?  
If you've never been licked by a hick with a hillbilly dick  
Or got a rash on your stash from some trailer trash  
Then girl you need to get fucked by a country boy  
Then girl you need to get fucked by a country boy

**Appendix VI – Bo Burnham - *Country Song (Pandering)* (2016)**

A dirt road,  
a cold beer,  
a blue jeans,  
a red pickup.  
A rural noun, simple adjective.

No shoes,  
no shirt,  
no Jews...  
You didn't hear that.  
...sort of a mental typo.

I walk and talk like a field hand,  
but the boots I'm wearing  
cost three grand.  
I write songs about riding tractors,  
from the comfort of a private jet.

I could sing in mandarin,  
you'd still know I'm pandering...  
Hunting deer, chasing trout.  
A Bud Light with the logo facing out.

Hear that subtle mandolin;  
that's textbook pandering.  
I own a private ranch that I rarely use.  
I don't like dirt...

[Spoken:] One verse,  
one chorus in the bag.  
Now it's time to talk to the ladies.  
I am hoping my Southern charm offsets  
all these rape-y vibes I'm putting out.

Good girl,  
in a straw hat  
with her arms out in a corn field...  
That is a scarecrow.

Thought that was a human woman, sorry.

A cold night,  
a cold beer,  
a cold jeans,  
strike that last one.  
I'm wanting you,  
I hope you're feeling me.  
Subtextually!

We go to bed, you doze off.  
So I take your country girl clothes off.  
I put my hands on your body...  
It feels like hay,  
it's the fucking scarecrow again!

Like Mike's Evander-ing,  
fuck your ears, I'm pandering...  
I write songs for the people who do  
jobs in the towns  
that I'd never move to.

Legalize gerrymandering,  
tolerate my pandering...  
You got a beautiful mouth,  
I got a beautiful...  
Y'all dumb motherfuckers  
want a key change?

Thematically meandering,  
emphatically pandering...  
I got a tight grip on my demo's balls!  
Say the word "truck",  
they jizz in their overalls.

You don't know what land you're in,  
I'm in the land of pandering...  
And I'll be upfront,  
I do what I do,  
'cause I'm a total fucking cun-try boy.

**Appendix VII: Merle Haggard – *Fightin' Side of Me* (1970)**

I hear people talkin' bad about the way we have to live here in this country  
Harpin' on the wars we fight, an' gripin' 'bout the way things oughta be  
An' I don't mind 'em switchin' sides, an' standin' up for things they believe in  
When they're runnin' down my country, man  
They're walkin' on the fightin' side of me

Yeah, walkin' on the fightin' side of me  
Runnin' down a way of life our fightin' men have fought and died to keep  
If you don't love it, leave it  
Let this song I'm singin' be a warnin'  
When you're runnin' down my country, man  
You're walkin' on the fightin' side of me

I read about some squirrely guy who claims he just don't believe in fightin'  
An' I wonder just how long the rest of us can count on bein' free  
They love our milk an' honey, but they preach about some other way of livin'  
When they're runnin' down my country, hoss  
They're walkin' on the fightin' side of me

Yeah, walkin' on the fightin' side of me  
Runnin' down a way of life our fightin' men have fought and died to keep  
If you don't love it, leave it  
Let this song I'm singin' be a warnin'  
When you're runnin' down my country, man  
You're walkin' on the fightin' side of me

Yeah, walkin' on the fightin' side of me  
Runnin' down a way of life our fightin' men have fought and died to keep  
If you don't love it, leave it  
Let this song I'm singin' be a warnin'  
When you're runnin' down my country, man  
You're walkin' on the fightin' side of me

**Appendix VIII: Merle Haggard – *Okie From Muskogee* (1969)**

We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee  
We don't take our trips on LSD  
We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street  
'Cause we like livin' right, and bein' free

We don't make a party out of lovin'  
But we like holdin' hands and pitchin' woo  
We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy  
Like the hippies out in San Francisco do

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

Leather boots are still in style for manly footwear  
Beads and Roman sandals won't be seen

And football's still the roughest thing on campus  
And the kids here still respect the college dean

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

**Appendix IX: Marty Robbins – *Ain't I Right?* (1966)**

You came down to this southern town last Summer  
To show the folks a brand new way of life  
But all you've shown the folks around here is trouble  
And you've only added misery to their strife  
Your concern is not to help the people  
And I'll say again, though it's been often said  
Your concern is just to bring discomfort, my friend  
And your policy is just a little red

Now, ain't I right? (Ain't he right?)  
(Ain't he right?)

It matters not to you how people suffer  
And should they, you'd consider that a gain  
You bring a lot of trouble to the town and then you leave  
That's part of your Communistic game  
I detect a little Communisim  
I can see it in the things you do  
Communisim, socialism, call it what you like  
There's very little difference in the two

Now, ain't I right? (Ain't he right?)  
(Ain't he right?)

Your followers sometimes have been a bearded, hatless bunch  
There's even been a minister or two  
A priest, a nun, a rabbi, and an educated man  
Have listened and been taken in by you  
Aw, the country's full of two-faced politicians  
Who encourage you with words that go like this  
"Burn your draft card if you like, it's good to disagree"  
That's a get acquainted Communistic kiss

Now, ain't I right? (Ain't he right?)  
(Ain't he right?)

One politician said it would be nice to send some blood  
And help the enemy in Vietnam  
That's what he says, here's what I say  
"Let's just keep the blood  
Instead let's send that politician man"  
Let's rid the country of the politicians  
Who call us tramps that march out in our streets  
Protesting those who wanna fight for freedom, my friend  
This kind of leader makes our country weak

Now, ain't I right? (Ain't he right?)  
(Ain't he right?)

Let's look and find the strong and able leaders  
It's time we found just how our neighbours stand  
If we're to win this war with Communism  
Let's fight it here as well as Vietnam  
Let's rise as one and meet our obligations  
So Communistic boots will never trod  
Across the fields of freedom that were given to us  
With the blessing of our great almighty God  
Across the fields of freedom that were given to us  
With the blessing of our great almighty God

**Appendix X: Tanya Tucker – *I Believe the South is Gonna Rise Again* (1973)**

Mama never had a flower garden  
'Cause cotton grew right up to our front door  
Daddy never went on a vacation  
He died a tired old man at forty four

Our neighbors in the big house called us redneck  
'Cause we lived in a poor share-croppers shack  
The Jacksons down the road were poor like we were  
But our skin was white and theirs was black

But I believe the south is gonna rise again  
But not the way we thought it would back then  
I mean everybody hand in hand  
I believe the south is gonna rise again  
I see wooded parks and big skyscrapers  
Where dirty rundown shacks stood once before  
I see sons and daughters of share-croppers  
But they're not picking cotton anymore

But more important I see human kindness  
As we forget the bad and keep the good  
A brand new breeze is blowing 'cross the southland  
And I see a brand new kind of brotherhood

Yes I believe the south is gonna rise again  
Oh, but not the way we thought it would back then  
I mean everybody hand in hand  
I believe the south is gonna rise again  
I believe the south is gonna rise again  
I believe the south is gonna rise again

**Appendix XI: Daryll Worley – *Have You Forgotten* (2003)**

I hear people saying we don't need this war  
I say there's some things worth fighting for  
What about our freedom and this piece of ground  
We didn't get to keep 'em by backing down  
They say we don't realize the mess we're getting in  
Before you start your preaching  
Let me ask you this my friend

Have you forgotten how it felt that day  
To see your homeland under fire  
And her people blown away  
Have you forgotten when those towers fell  
We had neighbors still inside  
Going through a living hell  
And you say we shouldn't worry 'bout Bin Laden  
Have you forgotten

They took all the footage off my TV  
Said it's too disturbing for you and me  
It'll just breed anger that's what the experts say  
If it was up to me I'd show it everyday  
Some say this country's just out looking for a fight  
After 9/11 man I'd have to say that's right

Have you forgotten how it felt that day  
To see your homeland under fire  
And her people blown away  
Have you forgotten when those towers fell  
We had neighbors still inside  
Going through a living hell  
And you say we shouldn't worry 'bout Bin Laden  
Have you forgotten

I've been there with the soldiers  
Who've gone away to war  
And you can bet that they remember  
Just what they're fighting for

Have you forgotten all the people killed  
Some went down like heros in that Pennsylvania field  
Have you forgotten about our Pentagon  
All the loved ones that we lost  
And those left to carry on  
Don't you tell me not to worry about Bin Laden

Have you forgotten  
Have you forgotten  
Have you forgotten

**Appendix XII: Toby Keith – *The Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue* (2002)**

American girls and American guys  
We'll always stand up and salute  
We'll always recognize  
When we see Old Glory flying  
There's a lot of men dead  
So we can sleep in peace at night when we lay down our head

My daddy served in the army  
Where he lost his right eye but he flew a flag out in our yard  
Until the day that he died  
He wanted my mother, my brother, my sister and me  
To grow up and live happy  
In the land of the free

Now this nation that I love has fallen under attack  
A mighty sucker punch came flyin' in from somewhere in the back  
Soon as we could see clearly  
Through our big black eye  
Man, we lit up your world  
Like the fourth of July

Hey Uncle Sam, put your name at the top of his list  
And the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist  
And the eagle will fly man, it's gonna be hell  
When you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell  
And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you  
Brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue

Justice will be served and the battle will rage  
This big dog will fight when you rattle his cage  
And you'll be sorry that you messed with  
The U.S. of A.  
'Cause we'll put a boot in your ass  
It's the American way

Hey uncle sam put your name at the top of his list  
And the Statue of Liberty started shakin' her fist  
And the eagle will fly it's gonna be hell  
When you hear mother freedom start ringin' her bell  
And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you  
Brought to you courtesy of the red white and blue  
Oh oh of the red, white and blue  
Oh oh of my red, white and blue

**Appendix XIII: Toby Keith – *Beer for My Horses* (2002)**

Well a man come on the 6 o'clock news  
Said somebody's been shot, somebody's been abused  
Somebody blew up a building, somebody stole a car  
Somebody got away, somebody didn't get too far yeah  
They didn't get too far

Grandpappy told my pappy, back in my day, son  
A man had to answer for the wicked that he done  
Take all the rope in Texas find a tall oak tree,  
Round up all them bad boys hang them high in the street  
For all the people to see

That justice is the one thing you should always find  
You got to saddle up your boys, you got to draw a hard line  
When the gun smoke settles we'll sing a victory tune  
And we'll all meet back at the local saloon  
We'll raise up our glasses against evil forces singing  
Whiskey for my men, beer for my horses

We got too many gangsters doing dirty deeds  
Too much corruption, and crime in the streets  
It's time the long arm of the law put a few more in the ground  
Send 'em all to their maker and he'll settle 'em down  
You can bet he'll set 'em down

'Cause justice is the one thing you should always find  
You got to saddle up your boys, you got to draw a hard line  
When the gun smoke settles we'll sing a victory tune  
We'll all meet back at the local saloon  
And we'll raise up our glasses against evil forces singing  
Whiskey for my men, beer for my horses  
Whiskey for my men, beer for my horses

You know justice is the one thing you should always find  
You got to saddle up your boys, you got to draw a hard line  
When the gun smoke settles we'll sing a victory tune  
And we'll all meet back at the local saloon  
And we'll raise up our glasses against evil forces singing

Whiskey for my men, beer for my horses  
Singing whiskey for my men, beer for my horses

**Appendix XIV: Brad Paisley – *Love and War* (2017)**

He was nineteen  
When he landed at Bagram  
Scared and all alone  
He lost a leg and a girlfriend  
Before he got home

And they say all is fair in Love and War  
But that ain't true, it's wrong  
They ship you out to die for us  
Forget about you when you don't

He was nineteen in '68  
After all this time  
That broken boy is now a broken man  
Waitin' in a VA line  
They say all is fair in Love and War  
But that ain't true, it's wrong  
They ship you out to die for us  
Forget about you when you don't

And the nightmares  
And he's running scared  
Far from home  
And he wakes up  
From a nightmare  
He's in another one  
He's still not home

They call 'em decorated heroes  
And pin some medals on their chest  
Give 'em a tiny little pension  
Could we do much less

They say all is fair in Love and War  
But that ain't true, it's wrong  
They ship you out to die for us  
Forget about you when you don't

They say all is fair in Love and War  
But that ain't true, it's wrong  
They ship you out to die for us  
Forget about you when you don't

They say all is fair in Love and War  
But that ain't true, it's wrong

They ship you out to die for us  
But forget about you when you don't

**Appendix XV: Colby Acuff – *If I Were the Devil* (2021)**

One, two, three, four  
If I were the devil, first thing that'd I'd do  
Is I'd come off like I ever gave a damn about you  
I'd let you catch a peak of all your greatest desires  
And I'd watch the flames in your eyes burn like hellfire

Find all the wolves in the land  
And I'd make them fight each other  
Tooth and nail and hand to hand  
Find all the sheep, make 'em stir up the pot  
'Cause once the wolves have killed each other  
Sheep are what I want

The devil walks among us, friends, I know this is true  
And I don't know if he's red, and I don't know if he's blue  
One thing that I know, we need to take a look around  
If I were the devil, this world would be my playground

As I place that thorny crown on my furrowed brow  
Well, I'd shine in all the tears of joy, yellin' from the crowd  
I'd want to brainwash some parents, and I'd have the world  
I'll be in every schoolhouse lecturin' little boys and girls

The devil walks among us, friends, I know this is true  
And I don't know if it's me, and I don't know if it's you  
But one thing that I know, we need to take a look around  
If I were the devil, this world would be my playground

Mmm  
Mmm, mmm, mmm

For my final act, I'll tell you what'd it'd be  
I'd have everyone so medicated, they could never see  
My cloven hooves or horned head would be all disguised  
And the best part of it all is they'd comply with their demise  
The devil walks among us, friends, I know this is true  
And I don't know if it's me, and I don't know if it's you  
One thing that I know, we need to take a look around  
If I were the devil, this world would be my playground

If I were the devil, this world was mine to see  
Well, I'd witness all the atrocities, and it'd probably frighten me  
So I'd run back home with a story to tell  
I'd tell all my demon friends that I always preferred Hell

**Appendix XVI: Glenn Campbell – *Galveston* (1969)**

Galveston, oh Galveston  
I still hear your sea winds blowing  
I still see her dark eyes glowing  
She was 21  
When I left Galveston

Galveston, oh Galveston  
I still hear your sea waves crashing  
While I watch the cannons flashing  
I clean my gun  
And dream of Galveston

I still see her standing by the water  
Standing there looking out to sea  
And is she waiting there for me?  
On the beach where we used to run

Galveston, oh Galveston  
I am so afraid of dying  
Before I dry the tears she's crying  
Before I watch your sea birds flying in the sun  
At Galveston, at Galveston

**Appendix XVII: Jan Howard – *My Son* (1968)**

My son my son I pray that you'll come home to me my son my son  
It seems only yesterday the most important thing on your mind  
Was whether you'd make the baseball team or get the new school jacket  
Like all the other kids had

And I remember how your eyes lighted up when you got your first rod and reel  
For that big fishing trip just you and your dad  
And I remember wiping the tears away when you hurt yourself on your sled  
In those days it seems the house was filled with laughter and joy  
Filled with your friends and they were all such good boys  
And then came the day that you walked down the aisle  
To receive that all important diploma

I was so proud but I couldn't believe that tall young man was my son my wonderful son  
And then I remember the little girl that was always around kinda tagging after you  
She's not so little anymore but she's still around who knows maybe someday  
Then you received the call that I guess we knew would come someday

But it came so quick and now you're so very far away  
In the land that until a short time ago I didn't even know was there  
I know the time will pass you'll be home again

But until that time my darling take care take special care  
My son my son I pray that you'll come home to me my son my son

**Appendix XVIII: Dolly Parton – 9 to 5 (1980)**

Tumble out of bed  
And stumble to the kitchen  
Pour myself a cup of ambition  
And yawn and stretch and try to come to life

Jump in the shower  
And the blood starts pumpin'  
Out on the streets, the traffic starts jumpin'  
For folks like me on the job from 9 to 5

Workin' 9 to 5  
What a way to make a livin'  
Barely gettin' by  
It's all takin' and no givin'

They just use your mind  
And they never give you credit  
It's enough to drive you  
Crazy if you let it

9 to 5  
For service and devotion  
You would think that I  
Would deserve a fat promotion

Want to move ahead  
But the boss won't seem to let me  
I swear sometimes that man is  
Out to get me, hmmm

They let you dream  
Just a watch 'em shatter  
You're just a step on the boss man's ladder

But you got dreams he'll never take away  
In the same boat with a lot of your friends  
Waitin' for the day your ship'll come in  
And the tide's gonna turn  
And it's all gonna roll you away

Workin' 9 to 5  
What a way to make livin'  
Barely gettin' by  
It's all takin' and no givin'

They just use your mind  
And you never get the credit  
It's enough to drive you  
Crazy if you let it  
9 to 5

Yeah, they got you where they want you  
There's a better life  
And you think about it, don't you?  
It's a rich man's game

No matter what they call it  
And you spend your life  
Putting money in his wallet  
9 to 5

Oh, what a way to make a livin'  
Barely gettin' by  
It's all takin' and no givin'  
They just use your mind

And they never give you credit  
It's enough to drive you  
Crazy if you let it  
9 to 5

Yeah, they got you where they want you  
There's a better life  
And you dream about it, don't you?  
It's a rich man's game

No matter what they call it  
And you spend your life  
Putting money in his wallet  
9 to 5

**Appendix XIX: Loretta Lynn – *The Pill* (1975)**

You wined me and dined me  
When I was your girl  
Promised if I'd be your wife  
You'd show me the world  
But all I've seen of this old world  
Is a bed and a doctor bill  
I'm tearin' down your brooder house  
'Cause now I've got the pill

All these years I've stayed at home  
While you had all your fun

And every year that's gone by  
Another baby's come  
There's a gonna be some changes made  
Right here on nursery hill  
You've set this chicken your last time  
'Cause now I've got the pill

This old maternity dress I've got  
Is goin' in the garbage  
The clothes I'm wearin' from now on  
Won't take up so much yardage  
Miniskirts, hot pants and a few little fancy frills  
Yeah I'm makin' up for all those years  
Since I've got the pill

I'm tired of all your crowin'  
How you and your hens play  
While holdin' a couple in my arms  
Another's on the way  
This chicken's done tore up her nest  
And I'm ready to make a deal  
And ya can't afford to turn it down  
'Cause you know I've got the pill

This incubator is overused  
Because you've kept it filled  
The feelin' good comes easy now  
Since I've got the pill  
It's gettin' dark it's roostin' time  
Tonight's too good to be real  
Oh, but daddy don't you worry none  
'Cause mama's got the pill  
Oh, daddy don't you worry none  
'Cause mama's got the pill

**Appendix XX: Alan Jackson – *Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)***

**(2002)**

Where were you when the world stopped turnin'  
That September day?  
Were you in the yard with your wife and children  
Or workin' on some stage in L.A.?  
Did you stand there in shock at the sight of that black smoke  
Risn' against that blue sky?  
Did you shout out in anger, in fear for your neighbor  
Or did you just sit down and cry?

Did you weep for the children, they lost their dear loved ones  
Pray for the ones who don't know?  
Did you rejoice for the people who walked from the rubble  
And sob for the ones left below?  
Did you burst out with pride for the red, white, and blue  
And the heroes who died just doin' what they do?  
Did you look up to heaven for some kind of answer  
And look at yourself and what really matters?

I'm just a singer of simple songs  
I'm not a real political man  
I watch CNN, but I'm not sure I can tell you  
The difference in Iraq and Iran  
But I know Jesus and I talk to God  
And I remember this from when I was young  
Faith, hope, and love are some good things He gave us  
And the greatest is love

Where were you when the world stopped turnin'  
That September day?  
Teachin' a class full of innocent children  
Or drivin' down some cold interstate?  
Did you feel guilty 'cause you're a survivor?  
In a crowded room did you feel alone?  
Did you call up your mother and tell her you love her?  
Did you dust off that Bible at home?

Did you open your eyes and hope it never happened  
Close your eyes and not go to sleep?  
Did you notice the sunset for the first time in ages  
And speak to some stranger on the street?  
Did you lay down at night and think of tomorrow  
Go out and buy you a gun?  
Did you turn off that violent old movie you're watchin'  
And turn on I Love Lucy reruns?  
Did you go to a church and hold hands with some strangers  
Stand in line to give your own blood?  
Did you just stay home and cling tight to your family  
Thank God you had somebody to love?

I'm just a singer of simple songs  
I'm not a real political man  
I watch CNN, but I'm not sure I can tell you  
The difference in Iraq and Iran  
But I know Jesus and I talk to God  
And I remember this from when I was young  
Faith, hope, and love are some good things He gave us  
And the greatest is love

I'm just a singer of simple songs  
I'm not a real political man  
I watch CNN, but I'm not sure I can tell you  
The difference in Iraq and Iran  
But I know Jesus and I talk to God  
And I remember this from when I was young  
Faith, hope, and love are some good things He gave us  
And the greatest is love  
And the greatest is love  
And the greatest is love

Where were you when the world stopped turnin'  
On that September day?

**Appendix XXI: Luke Combs – *6 Feet Apart* (2020)**

When the dogwoods start to bloom  
And the crickets hum their tune  
That's usually about the time  
That I feel most alive  
But the news has all been bad  
And the whole world seems so sad  
I ain't had much else going on  
So I sat down and wrote this song

I miss my mom, I miss my dad  
I miss the road, I miss my band  
Giving hugs and shaking hands  
It's a mystery I suppose  
Just how long this thing goes  
But there'll be crowds and there'll be shows  
And there will be light after dark  
Someday when we aren't six feet apart

First thing that I'm gonna do  
Is slide on in some corner booth  
And take the whole damn family out  
And buy my buddies all a round  
Pay some extra on the tab  
Catch a movie, catch a cab  
Watch a ballgame from the stands  
Probably over-wash my hands

I miss my mom, I miss my dad  
I miss the road, I miss my band  
Giving hugs and shaking hands  
Well, it's a mystery I suppose  
Just how long this thing goes

But there'll be crowds and there'll be shows  
And there will be light after dark  
Someday when we aren't six feet apart

I miss my mom, I miss my dad  
I miss the road, I miss my band  
Giving hugs and shaking hands  
Well, it's a mystery I suppose  
Just how long this thing goes  
But there'll be crowds and there'll be shows  
There will be light after dark  
Someday when we aren't six feet apart  
There will be light after dark  
Someday when we aren't six feet apart

**Appendix XXII: Tyler Childers – *Long Violent History* (2020)**

It's the worst that it's been since the last time it happened  
It's happening again right in front of our eyes  
There's updated footage, wild speculation  
Tall tales and hearsay and absolute lies

Been passed off as factual when actually, the actual  
Causes they're awkwardly blockin' the way  
Keeping us all from enjoyin' our evening  
Shoving it's roots through the screens in our face

Now, what would you give if you heard my opinion  
Conjecturin' on matters that I ain't never dreamed  
In all my born days as a white boy from Hickman  
Based on the way that the world's been to me

It's called me belligerent, it's took me for ignorant  
But it ain't never once made me scared just to be  
Could you imagine just constantly worryin'  
Kickin' and fightin', beggin' to breathe

How many boys could they haul off this mountain  
Shoot full of holes, cuffed, and laid in the streets  
'Til we come in to town in a stark ravin' anger  
Looking for answers and armed to the teeth

30 aught sixes, papaw's old pistol  
How many, you reckon, would it be, four or five?  
Oh, would that be the start of a long, violent history  
Of tuckin' our tails as we try to abide?

Oh, would that be the start of a long, violent history  
Of tuckin' our tails as we try to abide?

**Appendix XXIII: Johnny Cash – *Man in Black* (1971)**

Well, you wonder why I always dress in black  
Why you never see bright colors on my back  
And why does my appearance seem to have a somber tone  
Well, there's a reason for the things that I have on

I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down  
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town  
I wear it for the prisoner who is long paid for his crime  
But is there because he's a victim of the times

I wear the black for those who've never read  
Or listened to the words that Jesus said  
About the road to happiness through love and charity  
Why, you'd think He's talking straight to you and me

Well, we're doin' mighty fine, I do suppose  
In our streak of lightnin' cars and fancy clothes  
But just so we're reminded of the ones who are held back  
Up front there ought to be a man in black

I wear it for the sick and lonely old  
For the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold  
I wear the black in mournin' for the lives that could have been  
Each week we lose a hundred fine young men

And I wear it for the thousands who have died  
Believin' that the Lord was on their side  
I wear it for another hundred-thousand who have died  
Believin' that we all were on their side

Well, there's things that never will be right, I know  
And things need changin' everywhere you go  
But 'til we start to make a move to make a few things right  
You'll never see me wear a suit of white

Ah, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day  
And tell the world that everything's okay  
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back  
'Til things are brighter, I'm the man in black

**Appendix XXIV: Brad Paisley – *Accidental Racist* (2013)**

To the man that waited on me  
At the Starbucks down on Main  
I hope you understand  
When I put on that t-shirt  
The only thing I meant to say  
Is I'm a Skynyrd fan  
The red flag on my chest somehow is  
Like the elephant in the corner of the south  
And I just walked him right in the room  
Just a proud rebel son with an 'ol can of worms  
Lookin' like I got a lot to learn  
But from my point of view

I'm just a white man comin' to you from the southland  
Tryin' to understand what it's like not to be  
I'm proud of where I'm from but not everything we've done  
And it ain't like you and me can re-write history  
Our generation didn't start this nation  
We're still pickin' up the pieces, walkin' on eggshells, fightin' over yesterday  
And caught between southern pride and southern blame

They called it Reconstruction, fixed the buildings, dried some tears  
We're still siftin' through the rubble after a hundred-fifty years  
I try to put myself in your shoes and that's a good place to begin  
But it ain't like I can walk a mile in someone else's skin

Cause I'm a white man livin' in the southland  
Just like you I'm more than what you see  
I'm proud of where I'm from but not everything we've done  
And it ain't like you and me can re-write history  
Our generation didn't start this nation  
And we're still paying for the mistakes  
That a bunch of folks made long before we came  
And caught somewhere between southern pride and southern blame

Dear Mr. White Man, I wish you understood  
What the world is really like when you're livin' in the hood  
Just because my pants are saggin' doesn't mean I'm up to no good  
You should try to get to know me, I really wish you would  
Now my chains are gold but I'm still misunderstood  
I wasn't there when Sherman's March turned the south into firewood  
I want you to get paid but be a slave I never could  
Feel like a new fangled Django, dodgin' invisible white hoods  
So when I see that white cowboy hat, I'm thinkin' it's not all good  
I guess we're both guilty of judgin' the cover not the book  
I'd love to buy you a beer, conversate and clear the air  
But I see that red flag and I think you wish I wasn't here

I'm just a white man  
(If you don't judge my do-rag)  
Comin' to you from the southland  
(I won't judge your red flag)  
Tryin' to understand what it's like not to be  
I'm proud of where I'm from  
(If you don't judge my gold chains)  
But not everything we've done  
(I'll forget the iron chains)  
It ain't like you and me can re-write history  
(Can't re-write history baby)

Oh, Dixieland  
(The relationship between the Mason-Dixon needs some fixin')  
I hope you understand what this is all about  
(Quite frankly I'm a black Yankee but I've been thinkin' about this lately)  
I'm a son of the new south  
(The past is the past, you feel me)  
And I just want to make things right  
(Let bygones be bygones)  
Where all that's left is southern pride  
(RIP Robert E. Lee but I've gotta thank Abraham Lincoln for freeing me, know what I mean)  
It's real, it's real  
It's truth

**Appendix XXV: Luke Combs, Billy Strings – *The Great Divide* (2021)**

We're striking matches on the TV  
Setting fires on our phones  
Bearing crosses we believe in dying on  
Tempers flare, the flame flies higher  
As we soar closer towards the sun  
But I like to think too much damage ain't been done

We're all so far, so far apart now  
It's as deep as it is wide

We're about to fall apart now  
If we can't reach the other side  
We gotta find a way across the great divide

Sometimes it seems that our convictions  
Side of the fence that we stand on  
Makes us all too damn different to get along

But I've seen strangers love each other  
Like a mother does her son  
What we see ain't only all that's going on

We're all so far, so far apart now  
It's as deep as it is wide  
We're about to fall apart now  
If we can't reach the other side  
We gotta find a way across the great divide

We're all so far, so far apart now  
It's as deep as it is wide  
We're about to fall apart now  
If we can't reach the other side  
We gotta find a way across the great divide

The great divide