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# Stand By Your Man, Redneck Woman: Towards a Historical View of Country Music Gender Roles

Cenate Pruitt

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STAND BY YOUR MAN, REDNECK WOMAN: TOWARDS A HISTORICAL  
VIEW OF COUNTRY MUSIC GENDER ROLES

by

CENATE PRUITT

Under the Direction of Wendy S. Simonds

ABSTRACT

Country music, considered a uniquely American musical genre, has been relatively under-researched compared to rock and rap music. This thesis proposes research into the topic of country music, specifically the ways which country music songs portray gender. The thesis uses *Billboard* chart data to determine commercially successful songs, and performs a content analysis on the lyrics of these songs. I will select songs from a fifty year period ranging from 1955 to 2005, so as to allow for a longitudinal study of potential changes in presentation. Attention will be focused on the lyrical descriptions of men and women and how their roles are described in the songs.

INDEX WORDS: Country music, American music, Popular music, Gender, Gender roles, Content analysis, Longitudinal study

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VIEW OF COUNTRY MUSIC GENDER ROLES

by

Cenate Pruitt

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Georgia State University

2006

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2006

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STUDY OF COUNTRY MUSIC GENDER ROLES

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## Introduction

2004 was a banner year for country music. Sales were up 12 percent from 2003, and a cluster of new stars were shooting up the charts, including Gretchen Wilson, whose debut album, *Here For The Party* went double platinum less than three months after its release, driven partly by the strength of the hit single “Redneck Woman,” which spent six weeks at the number one spot on *Billboard’s* country charts (Gormly 2005, “Wilson’s Debut” 2004). “Redneck Woman,” which exalts such virtues as shopping at Wal-Mart and knowing “all the words to every Charlie Daniels song” as necessary to attaining the titular status of “redneck,” represents a dramatic shift from the country music of the 1950’s and 60’s, when only a handful of female artists found success in a male-dominated field, usually by singing chaste songs about the errors men make.

Despite an unusual place in the market due to having its strongest listener base amongst older listeners and those in rural areas (Witt 2003), country sales continue to grow in strength. Furthermore, country’s position on the Arbitron radio rating charts is very strong, with country by far the most popular format in the United States (Witt 2003). Kenny Chesney’s *When the Sun Goes Down* was the third best-selling album of 2004 across all genres, trailing R&B star Usher and pop singer Norah Jones (“Foxworthy to host”, 2005). Wilson’s *Here For the Party* and Tim McGraw’s *Live Like You Were Dying* were fifth and sixth in total album sales for the year, respectively (Gerome, 2005). Clearly, country music has carved a definite niche in the mainstream, with multiple cable networks (Country Music Television and its video-oriented spinoff CMT Pure Country, as

well as rival network Great American Country) and a reality show (*Nashville Star*) dedicated to the genre. The television series *Blue Collar T.V.* regularly features popular new country artists both performing and participating in the *Saturday Night Live*-style skits. American-style country music also has a strong international following, in places such as Canada (Abramson, 2002), the Netherlands (Van Elteren, 1996, 1998), Latin America (Cusic, 1999), and even rural Zimbabwe, where Dolly Parton was, for a time as much, if not more of, a pop culture icon than in the United States due to weekly broadcasts of her 1979 television series throughout the mid-90's. (Zilberg, 1995)

Clearly, country music is a successful and influential genre within mainstream music, and yet very little attention has been paid to it as a culturally influential force. The genre has always been relatively popular in the United States on and off the radio, with country-themed films garnering both critical acclaim (*Coal Miner's Daughter*) and commercial success (the car-chase classic *Smokey and the Bandit*, co-starring country singer Jerry Reed and featuring a soundtrack full of his songs, was the second-most successful film of 1977 behind *Star Wars*) (IMDB.com), while a host of country music performance shows (e.g., ABC's *The Johnny Cash Show*, CBS's *Hee-Haw*) were a staple of network television from the sixties through the early eighties, until the advent of cable television and country's removal from the mainstream pop charts. However, despite its commercial success, country music is generally frowned upon in elite circles as being base or low, to the point that Nashville is actively trying to escape its image as a "one-horse country music town" (McCloud, 20) Similarly,



by featuring younger, sexier stars and aggressively pursuing younger consumers, the country music establishment is trying to escape its image as music for old folks and hillbillies.

Ching (2000) claims that country music is self-consciously low-brow, acting as a form of burlesque. Country music presents “intentional and spectacular violations... of good taste and behavior” (27). When Vern Gosdin claims that he has destroyed copies of his favorite jukebox tunes by overplaying them while bemoaning a failed relationship (“Set ‘Em Up, Joe,” 1985), we understand that this is an exaggeration for comic effect. The relationships, the struggles, the triumphs and tragedies in country music are all larger-than-life, yet still close to home.

Shusterman (1999) claims country music provides an “ethnic” experience for young white people who might find identifying with hip-hop culture problematic, as musical cultures offer “a comprehensive lifestyle for self-fashioning” (222). Where rap and hip-hop are urban-oriented styles, often focused on discussions of city life, country lionizes rural life and rural dwellers (rock, presumably, is relegated to the suburbs in this pseudo-typology). While rap offers an idealized (and often, exaggerated) version of black culture (regardless of the race of the actual consumer), country offers an idealized (and again, exaggerated) version of white culture. Musical genres offer young people a culture and identity they can immerse themselves in and draw strength from. Country also provides a shared group identity, with its own indicators (cowboy hats and boots, jeans, oversized belt buckles, etc.) and history, all White-centric

without being explicitly racist. However, this idealized country is mostly a fiction, as many “country” traditions were born out of racial outgroups (for example the African origins of the banjo, and the Hawaiian roots of the steel guitar), and the fact that no less an august source than *Billboard* initially considered country music part of its foreign music coverage, before being shuffled into the “race music” category, and then into its own category as “American Folk Music” (Shusterman 225).

Grabe (1997) wisely points out that when we, as academics, criticize popular music and art forms as “fit only for those with barbaric taste and dull wit” (64) we reify class distinctions based on something as arbitrary as consumption habits. The notion that popular culture is somehow “by its very nature a lower cultural form” (Grabe 64) is ridiculous at best and horrifyingly elitist at worst. After all, popular culture is “popular” for a reason, i.e., a sufficiently large portion of society has identified with a work with enough intensity for it to become culturally relevant.

I contend that the economic success of country music clearly shows that a sizeable portion of contemporary society identifies with it on very personal and visceral levels. As such, it seems relevant to study what country music has to say about gender; after all, the bread and butter of the genre has always been songs about heterosexual relationships and the men and women who go through them. As such, the focus of this thesis will be to ascertain how gender is portrayed and constructed in country music and to discover how, if at all, this presentation has changed over the last fifty years, which have seen a variety of

events with strong and far-reaching impacts (the civil rights movement and the ensuing changes in racial politics, the women's movement and the sexual revolution, and their alterations in societal and sexual roles for women, September 11<sup>th</sup> and the ensuing groundswell of patriotism and masculine military action) that have the potential to drastically alter societal options for women and men.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social Cognitive Theory is based on the idea that with continued exposure to a repeated, rewarded, and simplified message (like in a television commercial or pop song), viewers will learn and draw ideas from what they have observed (Mastro and Stern, 2003). As such, country music listeners hear the messages presented in song lyrics, internalize the ideas presented in the songs, and use those ideas to shape their worldview.

One way of looking at country music songs is Griswold's (1987) conception of the "cultural diamond," which views cultural artifacts from four angles, the audience, the creator, the cultural object, and the social world. Each of these four angles affects and directs the other three, and the diamond is constantly in a state of flux, as new creators come and old creators go, audiences change, and the cultural objects themselves (the songs) change to meet these new challenges. I will use the cultural diamond to shape my analysis, using the *Billboard* chart position of a song to represent audience involvement and songs as a cultural artifact. By analyzing a cultural artifact that is embraced

by a specific audience, I believe I can make statements about the social world in which the artifact and the audience interact.

Franke (1997) argues that country music uses clichés and metaphors as a means of connecting with audiences, for example, making specific references that only fans of the genre will understand. Ching specifically cites David Allan Coe's "If That Ain't Country", the last minute of which is "nonsense" to a non-country fan, as it is comprised of the melody to a 1920's Carter Family tune called "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes," and each line is borrowed from a later song that used that same melody; Roy Acuff's "The Great Speckled Bird," Hank Thompson's "The Wild Side of Life," and Kitty Wells' "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels." By being able to identify a cliché that is coded to be country-specific, country fans feel closer to the artists and to country music as a genre.

### **Literature Review**

Grabe (1997) found that country music listeners, even over a 13-year period of analysis, stayed demographically stable. Country music listeners are almost all (roughly 95%) white, mostly (more than 50%) between the ages of 25 and 44, married (about 60%), and women were slightly more likely to be listeners than men (68, 78).

Grabe also discusses the history of country music radio, specifically its origins in the 1920's when stations in the South began to play country. Dedicated country music stations did not actually develop until the 1950's (65).

However, it was not until the 1970's that country music truly began to be a viable format for entire stations; an alternate interpretation being that in the 1970s, country music was divorced (no pun intended) from the mainstream and ghettoized onto its own stations on the AM band. Regardless, by 1974, 20% of all AM stations in the United States were dedicated to the country format (Grabe 1997, 66). However, country stations are primarily located in towns with populations of 500,000 or less (Grabe, 66), which Grabe argues puts country music in a unique situation, where instead of cultural developments trickling down from the big city to the rural areas, country music trickled up from the rural areas to the big cities.

By tracking *Billboard* ratings, Sernoe identified several years that could be considered "boom" years for country, specifically years in which country songs not only crossed over onto the pop charts, but obtained a position on *Billboard's* year-end list of the 100 hottest songs of the past year. The "hot" periods for country music in the mainstream between 1955 and 1996 were the late 50's, early 60's, and then two peak years in 1975 and 1981. Country music's popularity appears to move in cycles, and it could be argued the genre is in the midst of another boom period, with Toby Keith and Tim McGraw headlining prime-time TV concert specials, Keith's Ford truck endorsement campaign (a spot previously held by fellow country singer Alan Jackson), and the recent announcement that Keith would lend his name and likeness to a chain of restaurants (CNN.com, "Toby Keith" 2004). Furthermore, other country artists like Shania Twain and Faith Hill have found success in the Top 40 charts as well

as the country charts. Reba McEntire had her own series on the WB television network (recently announced to be returning mid-season on the new CW network), and the winner of *American Idol's* 2005 season, Carrie Underwood, was positioned as a “country girl,” as opposed to the rock stylings of the second-place contestant.

Despite its successes, country music is unusual relative to the mainstream, lacking some of the rebellious nature of rock and rap in favor of a more conservative and traditional point of view (Shusterman 1999). During the 1990s, when country began to wax heavy on the cultural landscape, rock music was in a stalling pattern, and “the most exciting new genres developing out of its transgressive tradition – rap, techno, and heavy metal – [were] very unappealing to the vast majority of Americans” (223). Shusterman argues that this lack of shock value draws listeners who are ‘too old’ for Eminem, Linkin Park, or any other flavor-of-the-week act toward country. Furthermore, country artists tend to tailor their messages to appeal to these more “traditional” listeners. However, Shusterman also argues that country labels are using music videos to push a new breed of sexy, wholesome young country stars in order to draw in younger audiences with a bevy of potential “heartthrobs” (223).

Lewis (1991) describes country songs as “three minute word-movies,” that “reflect... the everyday trials, troubles, hopes, fears, and dreams of their audience” (103). Shusterman claims this simple, “easy to understand” songwriting format actually serves to reinforce the messages and morals presented in country songs, and to encourage a belief that the song or artist is

“authentic”, i.e., that the performer honestly believes what he or she is saying, and that the words have truth to them as well.

Lewis (1991) and Shusterman both identify “home” and “love” as the core themes of country music, along with “failure” for Shusterman (228) and “family, patriotism, work... liquor and the passing of the good old days” rounding out Lewis’s list (104). Malone (1993) similarly suggests that country music offers “self-affirmation through such security-laden symbols as home, family, church, and the South,” as well as “escape and catharsis” for listeners (114). Furthermore, country music themes are, according to Franke (1997) universal, and emphasize the “collectivity and continuity of human experience” (411). While listeners may not relate to a song about growing up in the inner city or the back country, most people can identify with a broken heart.

Lewis (1989) points out that the madonna/whore dichotomy in country music divides women into “honky tonk angels” and “mommas,” (235) two fields with a fair degree of overlap. “The woman is, before marriage, supposed to be free and sexual enough to attract a man but, at the same time, be socially responsible enough that she ... can be considered a legitimate candidate for marriage” (Lewis 235). Saucier (1986) addresses the role of women similarly, arguing that “the only really acceptable role for women in country music is of housewife, mother, and lover” (157). Women in country songs must offer the “best of both worlds,” that is, they must be sexual dynamos as well as maternal figures. Conversely, Ching argues that men in country music (at least, in traditional-style “hard” country) are often buffoonish figures, wallowing in self-pity,

incapable of making any improvements whatsoever to their situation (indeed, the classic Johnny Paycheck song “Take This Job and Shove It” is in fact a fantasy about leaving work, not an actual declaration of rebellion by the song’s narrator). Whereas other genres focus on men’s ability (or at least their desire) to survive challenges and face threats, the classic country response is -- in the words of Hank Williams -- to “move it on over” and accept fate.

According to Ellison (1995), the role for women in country differs strongly from the male role; specifically, songs by the most popular female performers (e.g., Dolly Parton, Reba McEntire) focus on life’s successes, personal independence, and triumph over adversity. Very rarely do they wallow in the kinds of exaggerated self-pity found in the songs of Hank Williams (e.g., “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry”). Keel (2004) cites the release of K.T. Oslin’s 80’s *Ladies* (1987) as heralding a new wave of feminist-inspired lyrics and performance in country. Keel specifically as influences cites rock artists like Alanis Morissette and PJ Harvey, who created aggressive, even macho music in the mid-1990’s, and argues that a song like Morissette’s angry and sexually-charged “You Oughta Know” would never be released as a country single, as the genre is still too concerned with traditional gender roles to allow such a drastically different message. Furthermore, while songs like Garth Brooks’ “Papa Loved Mama,” concerning a husband murdering his cheating wife, become major hits, country stations ban or underplay tracks like the Dixie Chicks’ “Goodbye, Earl,” in which two women poison an abusive husband. Obviously, there are still



behaviors within the realm of country song lyrics which are acceptable for men, but not for women.

Relative to country, the acceptable gender roles in some genres of music are equally traditional, while others are more forward-looking. Krenske and McKay (2000) pointed out that heavy metal, as a genre, is so incredibly hyper-masculine that some female fans actually internalize this hyper-masculinity and develop a resentment of “glam chicks,” who present a hyper-feminized identity (e.g. tight and short skirts, tight tops). Butler (1999) discusses how white “Southern rock” artists of the 1960s and 1970s simultaneously lionized traditional “Southern” concepts of manhood (via the usage of Confederate symbols and praise of the hard-drinking, hard-fighting, hard-loving working class) and yet embraced traditionally black styles of music (primarily by covering traditional blues songs, as well as by integrating their lineups). These artists created an identity that was simultaneously true to traditional Southern norms about masculinity, yet challenged white supremacy in a racially tumultuous time. Schilt (2003) argued that while the initial “Riot Grrrl” movement of the early 1990s was downplayed and almost ignored by the mainstream press, the “Angry Women of Rock” trend that followed in mid-decade were championed by that same press, due in part to the later artists’ willingness to co-opt themselves and work within the mainstream music business, where the Riot Grrrls primarily moved in a subculture connected by small-press zines and small-press labels. Whereas both groups of artists confronted and challenged contemporary gender roles for women, the “Angry Women” movement was more successful because of the

artists' relative passivity, precisely the sort of thing the Riot Grrrls spoke out against. Similarly, Westmoreland (2001) argues that "Angry Women" artists like Meredith Brooks combine confidence and vulnerability to redefine the feminine role within rock culture, if not within society at large. By rejecting the extreme frustration (and explicitly feminist) bent of the Riot Grrrls, the "Angry Women" reach a broader audience, albeit with a more moderate message.

When it comes to country music, Keel argues that since country labels are all male-owned and country album producers are all male as well, there are fewer avenues for "feminist" (i.e., non-traditional) presentations of gender roles when compared to pop or rock music. Therefore, while the broadening of gender roles in country may be minor compared to other genres, it is a relatively large gain for country performers. Witt (2003) quotes a country radio executive who suggests that women listen to contemporary country music because it is less "testosterone-driven," compared to the 1960's and 70's, when "manly men" like Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard dominated airwaves, singing about trains, prison, and shooting men in Reno just to watch them die (20).

Armstrong (1986) points out that country music is by and large dedicated to the discussion of sexual relationships, and a list of songs concerning extramarital sexual relationships "could expand almost indefinitely" (372). However, while many of the songs share themes, they do not treat sexuality as "monolithic"; instead country songs with sexual themes range from the "strongly moralistic to the lecherously explicit" (377).

## Research Questions and Hypothesis

Given the popularity and influence of country music in mainstream culture, I propose the following research questions: How do country music lyrics portray and construct gender? What messages about gender are presented in the lyrics? Have the messages changed over time? If so, what has changed?

The unit of measurement is the individual song, specifically the primary theme of the song, which I analyzed and categorized. I found that while the primary themes of home, love, and family remain steadfast, the ways in which they are presented have changed considerably over time. I also thought that men and women's roles would diversify over time, as men and women challenge existing social norms, discard outmoded ones, and create entirely new ones. Franke (1997) claims this is already happening, as female artists transfer and reappropriate male roles to suit their needs. However, I found very little expansion of the masculine role in my results, and while the feminine role expanded in some areas (particularly in freedom to express sexual desire), it remained relatively static in others (e.g., participation in sexual relationships outside of committed heterosexual partnerships).

## Methodology

In order to ascertain the popularity, and therefore presumably, the cultural impact of songs, I utilized *Billboard's* Hot Country Singles Chart to identify the most popular songs. I pulled the *Billboard* year-end issues, which track the top

songs of each year, beginning in 2005 and working back in a “0, 3, 5, 8” progression until 1970, before which *Billboard* did not do a year-in-review that I could find. To cover the remaining timeframe, I used Joel Whitburn’s Country Annual, 1944-1997, which compiled *Billboard* country music charts from 1944 onwards into yearly rankings based on total time spent on the charts (those who are interested in the details of Whitburn’s system are encouraged to find a copy of the book, as it is a fantastic work of reference). I also used Whitburn’s book to cover the year 1975, as the issues of *Billboard* I had access to were missing the review supplement for that year.

*Billboard* did not begin printing a single country hit chart until 1958, with the period from 1944-1958 sometimes represented by as many as three separate charts, tracking such divergent measurements as total jukebox plays, actual physical album sales, and radio airplay. For this reason, I started my research in 1958, the first year with a single chart based solely on radio airplay. I obtained lyrics<sup>1</sup> from each of the top five songs from these charts, resulting in a total of 100 songs. I identified specific lyrics in each song that discuss gender presentation, i.e. statements about men or women that feature some statement about a gender role, whether it be reinforcing contemporary mainstream values or transgressing them, and then the context of the statement. I then looked for patterns and changes over time. I followed Saucier’s (1986) methodology and

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<sup>1</sup>Lyrics were obtained from Internet-based databases included <http://www.cowboylyrics.com>, <http://www.roughstock.com>, and <http://www.songlyrics.com>. I also transcribed several songs by hand.

grouped each song by its primary theme, a list of themes can be found in my results.

Saucier's (1986) research is methodologically similar to mine; however, she only used the top 40 songs from a specific year, 1981, and as such could only comment on that particular moment in history, as opposed to my project, in which I will perform similar work in a longitudinal fashion. Ryan, Calhoun, and Wentworth's (1996) research method was also close to my proposed technique (although they, like Saucier, only drew from one issue, specifically the February 20, 1993 issue). However, Ryan, Calhoun and Wentworth point out that songs usually enter the *Billboard* charts at a low position, then climb upward before eventually falling down and off, a process that can take weeks or even months. As such, using the *Billboard* charts is an ideal way to track songs that remain in the cultural consciousness during a particular period in time. Armstrong (1986) explicitly chose songs from his personal experience and from friends who were also country listeners as opposed to *Billboard* or a similar source. While this is a reasonable means of song selection, and certainly finds songs that were memorable, it is not representative of songs that had the most mass appeal.

Clearly, this method is far from perfect in obtaining a completely random sample of country songs, and while the *Billboard* charts are an effective way to track radio airplay and consumer sales, they cannot determine listener interpretation. However, Saucier (1986) points out that country music lyrics are specifically intended to be listened to and related to, especially relative to other

genres where a catchy hook or a sexy star can propel a song up the charts just as if not more easily than, intense lyrical content. Logically, the more popular and successful a song, the broader an audience it will reach and the more likely it will be to get into listeners' minds. Furthermore, earlier work in this field (Saucier, 1986; Sernoe, 1998) tends to utilize *Billboard* data, as it is generally accepted that the *Billboard* data represent those songs that are the most omnipresent on country music radio during a specific period. Barnes (1988) claims that radio stations use *Billboard* and similar hit ranking charts to identify songs that are hits in other markets and then adds them to their rotations in order to draw more listeners. The songs that make the *Billboard* charts are confirmed hits that work nationwide in a variety of markets and, as such have the deepest penetration and the broadest impact on the listening audience.

By "impact" I mean the effects described in Social Cognitive Theory; the idea that constant exposure to a message will import that message onto the listening audience. The songs with the greatest exposure would logically seem likely to have the largest influence on the country music audience. Thus, a number one hit with a more traditional theme would be more influential than a minor hit with a more radical message (unless, perhaps, audiences latched onto that message, and via requests, turned it into a hit). This is, of course, by no means a perfect measurement. We can measure how often an audience may have heard a song, but measuring how intensely an audience reacted to a song, or how much they may have internalized its message is a far more daunting task.

## Data

A total of 100 songs were obtained, spanning the timeframe 1958-2005. One song, "Tennessee Birdwalk," was a novelty song concerning the necessities of life as a bird, and will be coded as missing. Of these songs, the most popular primary themes were "lost love" (30 total), "strong love" (17 total), "new love/hope for love" (12 total) and "cowboy life/open road" (8 total). Of the remaining categories, 5 songs were about "country life," four songs were about "reconciliation", while there were three songs or less about "aging," "fame," "family," "homesickness," "infidelity," "liquor," "nostalgia," "relationship demands," "sex," "social problems," "temptation," and "prison/crime". On a general level, "love" was the primary theme of 59 songs, more than half of the total output.

The list of artists reads like a "who's who" of the genre, including legends like Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, and Willie Nelson as well as newer stars like Tim McGraw, Toby Keith, and Rascal Flatts. Much to my chagrin, Garth Brooks, arguably the most famous country star of the last 20 years, was nowhere to be found in my sample, due primarily to his largest commercial success happening in 1991 and 1992. Kenny Rogers, another extremely successful country artist, only appeared as part of a duet (although he only barely missed the chart in 1980). Despite quite a few remarkably aggressive songs about gender and sexuality (1975's "The Pill," 1967's "Don't Come Home a Drinkin' (With Lovin' on Your Mind)"), Loretta Lynn did not appear in my sample.

Johnny Cash was the single most-represented artist in my results, appearing four times as a solo artist and a fifth time as part of country “super-group” The Highwaymen. Buck Owens appears four times by himself, and Willie Nelson appears four times counting duets and group performances. Clint Black, Conway Twitty, Sonny James, Ray Price and Ronnie Milsap all appear three times. Waylon Jennings, Toby Keith, and Dolly Parton also appear three times each, including duets and group performances. Nineteen songs were performed by females or all-female groups, while 78 songs were performed by men or all-male groups. Two songs (including “Tennessee Birdwalk”) were male/female duets, and one song was performed by a mixed-gender group. No women appeared on the top five chart until 1968. 1998 was the only year in my results where women outnumbered men on the charts. Seven of the 19 female-performed songs were about lost love, two were about strong love, while the rest were divided equally across multiple categories. The most common theme I found, lost love, appeared at least once every year until 1995. It returned to the charts in 1998 and 2000, but was not in the top five in the last two research periods. A single African-American artist, Charley Pride, appeared in my results.

## **Analysis**

### **BY THEME**

**LOST LOVE:** By far the most popular theme, songs about lost love ranged from the slyly ironic (Buck Owens’ “Act Naturally”) to almost hysterical self-



loathing (Don Gibson's "Oh Lonesome Me"). Treatment of the topic ran from heartfelt pleas for reconciliation (Tammy Wynette's "D-I-V-O-R-C-E") to almost nostalgic recollections of days gone by (Ray Price's "For the Good Times") to a more modern, "empowering" type of breakup song, in which the singer bids the former lover good-bye and good riddance (Jo Dee Messina, "Bye Bye").

Traditionally, male-fronted songs with this theme often fit into one of three sub-categories; the "come back, baby" song, the "don't go, baby" song, and the "I'm leaving, baby" song. The "come back, baby" songs are largely self-pitying, with the (usually male) narrator/protagonist wondering where his love has gone, often admitting some form of wrongdoing. Very often, the narrator states that he will never find love again. Some of the most famous songs in my sample fit into this category, including Willie Nelson's "Blue Eyes Cryin' in the Rain" (1975) and George Jones' legendary "He Stopped Loving Her Today" (1980), which, as discussed below, is perhaps the archetypical example of this theme.

Jim Reeves' "This Is It" (1965) portrays this sort of heartbreak as a grim fate, worse than death. The narrator in Reeves' song describes the situation with terms usually reserved for the dying; "time's run out for me/ it's over/ it's all through." However, he hopefully reminds his lover that she is welcome to return if she so desires, because he will never find another love. Conway Twitty's "Hello, Darlin'" (1970) concerns the narrator's brief, casual reunion with his former lover (a popular story for songs of this type), during which he expresses interest as to her well-being, and mentions that she has found a new partner.

The narrator says he is glad she is doing well, but that he still cannot sleep, and cries over her. As seems to be the standard, the narrator reminds his former love that he will gladly take her back if she will forgive him and let him have another chance. Ray Price's "For the Good Times" (1970) is also told from the perspective of a man contemplating a failed relationship. In this song, the relationship is newly ended, and the narrator asks his former lover for a one-night stand to remember the titular "good times." True to genre conventions, he then wishes that she will be happy and find love again, but tells her that he will not, and will wait for her to return.

Ronnie Milsap's "My Heart" (1980) is a traditional "broken heart" song; as the narrator struggles to get over his failed relationship, he realizes that his heart still 'belongs' to his lover. Despite all his attempts to forget (going to parties, taking a long vacation), he simply cannot get over the memory of his lost love. This song fits cleanly into the "come back, baby" theme; the male narrator is reduced to abject pity and self-loathing while the female role is essentially a cipher, with no motivation or purpose beyond (perhaps unknowingly) tormenting the hapless narrator.

George Jones's "He Stopped Loving Her Today" (1980) was ranked number two in a Country Music Television poll of the 100 greatest country songs of all time, second only to "Stand By Your Man" (CMT.com, "The Greatest" 2006). The song recalls a friend of the narrator's who swore that he would love the same woman until the day he died, despite her leaving him many years ago

(indeed, the lyrics expressly mention him keeping love letters “dated 1962” by his bed). The narrator then explains that his friend kept his word, as he attends his friend’s funeral. “He Stopped Loving Her Today” is perhaps the ultimate example of the “come back, baby” motif; the friend keeps pictures and mementoes of a long-gone lover in his home, hopes against hope that she will return, and the only time he smiles is when posed in his casket. Interestingly, the lost lover returns at the end of the song “to see him one last time,” adding an element of mystery to the song. It is never explained why she returns, but she does, and her physical presence in the song’s lyrics separate it from many of its predecessors.

Freddie Fender’s “Wasted Days and Wasted Nights” (1975) is perhaps one of the bitterest songs in my results. The narrator explains that he changed his behavior and his ways to please his lover, who then left him for another man. The narrator wonders why he should pray for her to return when she “is to blame for making me blue.” This song stands out from many of the previous “lost love” songs, as the narrator, rather than desperately hoping for his lover to return, or trying to get away from her memories, essentially says “good riddance” and wonders why he bothered in the first place. This song serves as sort of a revisionist version of the “come back, baby” song, serving essentially as a predictor of future versions of the “lost love” theme (especially Messina’s “Bye Bye” and Keith’s “How Do You Like Me Now?”, which both have a similar “goodbye and good riddance” perspective). Songs like these reify heterosexual

relationships; life has no meaning outside of a committed relationship, and a single individual has no recourse but to complain and wallow in self-pity.

A female-fronted version of this theme appears in Barbara Fairchild's "Teddy Bear Song" (1973), as the narrator expresses sorrow at having ever fallen in love. Indeed she says she would rather be like a teddy bear, deaf, blind, mute, and sitting on a shelf forever rather than have to feel the heartbreak of lost love. In this song, the lover barely exists except as the fulcrum of the failed relationship. There is no hint as to what caused things to go wrong, they just are wrong.

Another example, Charly McClain's "Radio Heart" (1985), tells the story of a woman who married young and had two children before her husband left her. Now, broken-hearted, she listens to country music to escape the bad memories and the drudgery of daily life. This song, in a manner somewhat similar to Milsap's "Lost in the Fifties Tonight" (1985) and Gosdin's "Walkin' the Floor" (1988) provides a sort of meta-textual statement about the power of music (and country music in particular) as a means of emotional release. In this song, the traditional "come back, baby" roles are again inverted; the woman is distraught and devastated by a male partner leaving the relationship for reasons summed up with the vague "he couldn't take it."

The narrator of Dolly Parton's "Heartbreaker" (1978) berates a former lover for breaking her heart and deceiving her into thinking she "needed" him.

The man in this song is what I have dubbed a “serial heartbreaker,” a stock character in several country songs, who often has several women under his spell at a time, using all of them for their attention (and presumably their sex) then discarding them as he sees fit. As in Parton’s “Here You Come Again,” the narrator is relatively weak, and has a hard time resisting the charms of the serial heartbreaker.

The “don’t go, baby” theme, while less common, also appeared several times in my sample. In these songs, the narrator (usually male) begs his partner not to leave, often with the same sort of exaggerated “I’ll never love again” protestations found in the “come back, baby” theme. Conway Twitty’s “Touch the Hand” (1975) discusses a failing relationship where the woman is about to leave, but the male narrator asks her to stay. He explains that he was the one that “made her a woman” and caused “unfamiliar feelings” that made her “tremble,” essentially implying that he gave her her first orgasm. He then asks her to “touch the hand of the man that made [her] a woman” and reconsider her decision. In this song, again, female sexuality is essentially there to be unlocked by men, and only within the confines of a serious relationship. Furthermore, a woman’s decision to leave a relationship can be swayed by sexuality, despite whatever other problems might exist.

On the other hand, Tammy Wynette’s “D-I-V-O-R-C-E” (1968) is a (female) narrator’s plea for her husband not to leave; she is presented as maternal and caring, taking custody of the couple’s child and begging the

husband to stay for the child's sake if not her own. The mother in this song does everything she can to shield her child from the truth of the divorce, spelling out words like "c-u-s-t-o-d-y" so that he will not understand what they mean. This is the first female-performed song to appear in my sample, and it essentially inverts the male role in the "lost love" songs. Wynette's narrator begs her lover not to leave and protests that the separation is "killing" her. Indeed, in this song, the male exists only to torment the narrator, with no real explanation offered as to why the divorce is taking place at all, as it seems the narrator is entirely content to remain in the marriage, despite whatever issues it may have.

The "I'm leaving, baby" theme is also relatively common, presenting songs where the narrator is leaving (or attempting to leave) a relationship that has failed. Sonny James' "Don't Keep Me Hanging On" (1970) concerns the narrator's attempts to get out of a bad relationship, but every time he tries to leave, his lover begs for him to stay. However, as soon as he returns, she begins treating him poorly again, making him feel like a "clown." In this song, the female role is almost malevolent, an irresistible siren whose clutches the narrator cannot escape. The logical solution would be for the narrator to simply leave the relationship, but, of course, the pull of love, even painful love, is too powerful.

Charley Pride's "Is Anybody Goin' to San Antone?" (1970) takes the theme one step further, as the song's narrator is actively abandoning a failing relationship, hitchhiking cross-country to San Antonio, Phoenix, Arizona, or anywhere else where he can "forget [he'd] ever known her." The narrator states

that he prefers sleeping on a park bench in the rain and cold than sharing a bed with his former lover. In this song, it seems better to be homeless than in an unsatisfactory relationship. The situations in the song are presented as pitiful, rather than angry; Pride's performance is more in line with the traditional "high lonesome" sound, as opposed to a more forceful delivery.

In songs performed by male artists, the "lost love" is often a particularly mysterious figure, with explanations for her departure infrequently offered, and even then usually via vagaries such as "I did you wrong" (Conway Twitty, "Hello, Darlin'") or "she set me free" (Don Gibson, "Oh, Lonesome Me"). Other women generally only appear to be contrasted as inferior to the lost lover, sometimes even presented merely as brief distractions from the narrator's self-pity. These roles are obviously problematic, as the female characters in these songs largely lack any sort of motivation, and are essentially objectified, both in an idealized manner (as "the only woman he could ever love") and insofar as they serve primarily as a fulcrum for the narrator's complaining. Men were similarly constrained in these songs, appearing primarily as jilted suitors, completely lacking in self-esteem and content to cry over a lost love rather than go out and seek a new one (indeed, the concept of simply "getting over it" and moving on was almost unheard of until the 1990s).

Starting around 1990, the "lost love" songs (both male and female-fronted) had a change in tone, focusing less on self-pity and more on "positive" themes, like moving on from a broken heart (Clint Black, "Walking Away", 1990) and even

arrogantly taunting women who spurned the singer's affections in the past (Toby Keith, "How Do You Like Me Now?", 2000). As mentioned above, in the more traditional songs, the male role is to wallow in self-pity, crying over lost love, occasionally venturing away from home to try and "forget" by dating other women, which never seems to work. The "modern" role, however, is more active, generally focusing on the positive aspects of the relationship or encouraging the listeners to move past the hard memories. However, the woman's role remains constant, as Other, the source from which all masculine misery flows.

In the early female-fronted "lost love" songs, the woman's role is to lament her situation and beg "her man" for forgiveness or attention, while the masculine role is to be absent, either physically or emotionally, with the protagonist of Jeanne Pruett's "Satin Sheets" more-or-less explicitly stating that while her lover has bought her a variety of fine things (including the titular satin sheets), he cannot meet her emotional or physical needs, causing her to seek solace in another man's arms. This song is a relatively advanced portrayal of women compared to earlier songs; it gives a woman's motivation and the explanation that the finer things in life are not enough to maintain a relationship; there must be physical and emotional satisfaction as well.

Alternately, a man may appear as a "serial heartbreaker," who toys with women's emotions, using them for sexual and emotional pleasure, and whom the women are unable to resist, despite knowing full well what his intentions are.



This character, the “serial heartbreaker” reappears in female-fronted songs about temptation and improper love, and is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In the more recent female-fronted songs, women like the narrator of Jo Dee Messina’s “Bye Bye” (1998) are far more independent, actively leaving unsatisfactory relationships. In this song, the female narrator tells her former lover that she cannot wait any longer for him to make up his mind about their relationship, so she is leaving, and she “ain’t never looking back.” She states that she has “begged and pleaded, in true lover’s fashion,” but now she is taking matters into her own hands and leaving what appears, by all accounts, to be a fruitless relationship behind. Here the man is indecisive and wishy-washy, refusing to declare his feelings one way or another (perhaps, a serial heartbreaker?), while the woman is patient to a point; when it becomes obvious that things are not going to work out, it is time to leave, with no real regrets, no looking back, and perhaps most importantly, with pride intact. In this way, Messina’s song is an updated, empowered version of the “I’m leaving, baby” theme.

**STRONG LOVE:** The second most common theme, these songs concern a relationship that is alive and well, making them something of the opposite to the “lost love” songs. Often, songs about strong love describe the relationships as “wild”, carrying the partners along without control. The earliest example of this from my results is 1963’s “Ring of Fire”, which classically compares love to “a

fiery ring”, consuming all who enter into its clutches. Similarly, Buck Owens’ “I’ve Got A Tiger By The Tail” (1965) compares his lover to a wild animal who pulls him to and fro. The narrator discusses how he believed his lover was mild and tame, but their relationship is now wild and active, and while it was not necessarily what he was planning on, he would not have it any other way.

Another popular theme for “strong love” songs is the theme of abandoning the rest of the world and hiding out together. Indeed, Sonny James had top five hits in two consecutive periods (1963 and 1965) with a pair of songs on this theme; “You’re the Only World I Know” and the similarly named “A World of Our Own.” A similar topic is one partner abandoning something desirable in favor of their love. In Johnny Cash’s “Ballad of a Teenage Queen” (1958), the titular character leaves fame and fortune in Hollywood to be with her true love, a modest young man who works at the local candy shop. Sawyer Brown’s “Thank God For You” (1993) is a paean to the life-changing power of love, presenting the narrator as a former hell-raiser (he thanks the devil for the trouble he has gotten into, and thanks God for his lover) who has turned down the straight and narrow because of love. This theme, of love changing a “hell-raiser” into a meeker sort of man, reappears in songs about new love, and will be discussed in depth below.

Faith Hill’s “This Kiss” (1998) is a testament to strong love, more specifically, to a strong sexual love. The narrator begins the song by expressing her reluctance to get into a relationship for fear of “another heartbreak,” but then

turns to describing how her lover's kisses excite her in a variety of ways. The sexual metaphors here range from somewhat vague ("perpetual bliss") to fairly overt ("ride me off into the sunset"). Despite whatever misgivings the narrator may have about relationships and love, the sexual and emotional aspect of this particular pairing is clearly worth the hassle. While this song is perhaps not as demanding as "Any Man of Mine," the narrator of "This Kiss" clearly expects her lover to be a talented performer in the bedroom. This is perhaps nothing new within the genre, indeed, the narrator of 1973's "Satin Sheets" expresses dismay that her husband does not satisfy her sexual needs. Still, a woman openly expressing a desire for sexual contact is a relatively uncommon event in country music.

As with the songs concerning lost love, songs about strong love generally reify heterosexuality as an ideal, suggesting that men and women can only find true happiness when engaged in a committed relationship.

**NEW LOVE:** The third most popular theme, "new love", consists of songs which either detail the founding of a relationship or the narrator's desire for a relationship with a specific person (as opposed to a general theme of "looking for love"). These songs differ from those in the "temptation" category in that the relationships in these songs are presented as positive and hopeful, as opposed to forbidden and dangerous. The earliest "new love" song in my sample is 1958's "Alone With You" (Faron Young), an upbeat rockabilly track where Young expresses his (for the time, somewhat racy) desire to be alone with his ideal

partner. He offers to kiss her and “hold her tight” for “just one night.” Young’s song is somewhat aggressive, as he states repeatedly that he would love to have the subject “for his own,” which can be read both as an expression of fidelity and of actual physical possession. However, Young promises that were his lover to offer the chance, he would change his ways and “cut out all (his) flirtin’”, offering his fidelity in exchange for hers. Young’s song is the only one concerning new love for a full thirty years, during which time most of the songs dedicated to new relationships focused on the negative, temptation aspects.

Several of the “new love” songs positioned themselves as being something of the alternative to the “come back, baby” songs; rather than mourn a lost relationship, the narrators move on, or try to help their new lover (or would-be lover) move on.

Keith Whitley’s “Don’t Close Your Eyes” (1988) concerns new love, specifically a man whose new lover is still fixated on her previous partner. He expresses his desire that she will one day forget about her old lover, but for now, when they have sex, he asks her not to “close her eyes/ let it be me/ don’t pretend it’s him/ in some fantasy.” In this song, the narrator is almost hyper-idealized; he loves his partner despite her apparent fixation (both emotional and sexual) on another man, and insists that he will stay with her, no matter how foolish he is for trying to make her love him instead. On the other hand, the woman is somewhat similar to the usual broken-hearted victim of country songs;

hopelessly infatuated with the memory of a long-gone lover, seemingly incapable of getting away from the one that “done them wrong.”

Rosanne Cash’s “If You Change Your Mind” (1988) also deals with the hope for love; in this case, the narrator knows that she is not the woman her ideal partner is interested in, but she says that if he ever changes his mind, she will be ready and waiting for him. This song is somewhat similar to “Don’t Close Your Eyes,” except in this song, the narrator is not even involved with the object of desire; however, she is certain that she would find “all the love we need” with him if he would only give her a chance. The female role in this song is rather passive, similar to the men narrators in Bill Anderson’s “Still” (1963), Conway Twitty’s “Hello Darlin’” (1970), and Tim McGraw’s “Just to See You Smile” (1998), preferring to watch their ideal lover spend time with someone else rather than aggressively pursue a relationship (although in the songs mentioned above, the narrator failed in an earlier attempt at a relationship).

The Dixie Chicks’ “There’s Your Trouble” (1998) reads similarly to “If You Change Your Mind,” as the narrator is a third party outside of the failed relationship. She encourages the broken-hearted male to get on with his life and forget about his former lover. Furthermore, the narrator presents herself as an ideal partner for the male in question. The female narrator in this song is relatively aggressive, openly telling her would-be lover that she is interested in him, and chiding him for his foolishness. The masculine role here is somewhat

short-sighted and ill-informed, blinded to the obviousness of his situation and almost buffoonish in his ignorance.

John Michael Montgomery's "I Can Love You Like That" is a more straightforward offer of romance, where the narrator promises a variety of idealized romantic fantasies to his would-be lover. He promises that he will love her forever, be sensitive to her needs, and will do anything for her, if she only gives him a chance. The song cites love stories like *Romeo & Juliet*, *Cinderella*, and *Casanova* to establish how epic or classic this proffered romance would be. Montgomery positions the female love interest as the passive fairytale princess, waiting in her castle for a brave and handsome knight (or cowboy) on horseback to save her from her dull existence. Conversely, the masculine persona, while more "sensitive" and "understanding" than in the past, is still the active one, the one who takes the initiative and challenges the female to accept affection.

John Michael Montgomery's "Sold (The Grundy County Auction Incident)" is a classic "story song" relating how the narrator, while at an auction, sees a woman he desired, and then, through use of various auction-related metaphors (e.g., "something I just had to have," "go ahead and make a bid on that"), approaches and woos the woman. He instantly and immediately attaches himself to her, and she seems to return his interest. The end of the song suggests an epilogue, some years later, as the two "still love to laugh about the way we met that day." Chad Brock's "Yes!" (2000) is a story-song that relates the narrator's chance encounter with a woman whom he asks out on a whim, and

their eventual whirlwind romance, engagement, and marriage. In both of these songs, the man is the initiator; the one who asks the woman on a date, the one who proposes, the one who takes initiative and sets things in motion.

Furthermore, the man in "Sold" is possessive in a very physical sense; he is "sold" on her love at an auction and "haul[s] her heart away." She is quite clearly his property, bought and paid for. The woman is essentially a willing, albeit passive partner; she accepts his proposals and goes along with what he suggests.

Two songs concerned the transformative ability of love; Ronnie McDowell's "You're Gonna Ruin My Bad Reputation" (1983) details a relationship between the narrator and his new lover, who is causing him to change his lifestyle. The narrator mentions how he used to be a "hell raiser, a heartbreaker, footloose and fancy free," but his new relationship has turned him into a more responsible individual. He has even proposed to his new lover, a move that he says would likely surprise members of his previous cohort.

Tim McGraw's "I Like It, I Love It" (1995) is similar to McDowell's song, in that it concerns a man whose new lover has brought about a variety of drastic changes in his life. While McDowell's lover curbed his drinking and sexual irresponsibility, McGraw's song is a bit more moderate; the narrator states that he hasn't seen a baseball game this year and refers to his friends as "long lost buddies," and performs various "courtesy" tasks like pulling out chairs, sweeping floors, and opening doors. Despite his friends' protests, the narrator states that

he enjoys this new way of life, because “that little gal’s lovin’” is worth sacrificing his previous activities for. Here again we see the “hell raiser” brought low by the power of female sexuality. While it seems the majority of country songs focus on getting into or out of heterosexual relationships, the relationships themselves sometimes seem to be portrayed as not particularly fun, and possibly even embarrassing (and emasculating) to the men that are involved in them.

In these songs, a woman’s love is a powerful force that turns “wild” men into straight-laced individuals who “sip iced tea” instead of getting into bar fights. Masculine exploits like baseball games and time spent with friends are pushed to the side in favor of more “effeminate” behavior, like cleaning and being polite. Clearly, there are two conflicting versions of masculinity in these songs; the hell-raising party animal, who is generally presented as a fun sort of character; and the straight-laced “settled down” man, who prefers to stay in with his lover as opposed to being “crazy.” These two roles could almost be seen as stages in a life course, with young men expected to be “wild” until they get married, at which point they must “settle down.” Indeed, at least one song in my sample deals with the conflict between a husband who wants to act “wild” and a wife who expects him to be “settled down.”

**THE OPEN ROAD/THE COWBOY LIFE:** The fourth most popular theme I found, these songs generally feature the “cowboy” way of life as a primary theme, whether in the classical sense or in a more modern application. For instance, “Convoy” (1975) is a story-song (later turned into an identically-titled



film), in which a group of truck drivers unite and roll through all obstacles in their path. The truckers are presented as cowboys of a sort, and definitely as outlaws, as their ride brings them into conflict with “Smokey” (the police) and the National Guard. As the truckers continue to defy the law, more and more truckers join up with them, until, at the end of the song, the truckers’ solidarity allows them to overcome authority and reach their destination. The truckers in this song are overwhelmingly masculine, as are the trucks themselves (large, powerful, and overwhelmingly phallic, especially in the song’s context of breaking through barricades, roadblocks, etc.). In this song, working class masculinity attacks and overcomes powerful (governmental) authority, serving as a sort of cathartic victory for the listening audience.

The cowboy life has its rewards, but it is also presented as being extremely difficult. Roger Miller’s “King of the Road” (1965) is sung from the perspective of a drifter, wandering from town to town, doing odd jobs to rent flophouse rooms, smoking discarded cigars. While this lifestyle seems rough, Miller describes a certain type of skill required to be successful in his trade; he claims to know every conductor, and the names of all their children, and where he can find work and food, and where the safe places to sleep are. Because of these talents, he is the self-proclaimed “king of the road”. The hobo may be poor, but he is wise and canny, as he knows how to survive in a hostile world. In this way, the hobo character serves as a sort of cowboy, riding the trains across the country, getting by with his wits and his luck.

Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson's "Mamas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys" (1978) is perhaps one of the best known songs in my results, and sums up the cowboy lifestyle perhaps better than any other song I found. The cowboy is a complex figure, who does things that normal people may not understand, because "he ain't wrong, he's just different" and his "pride" prevents him from blending in with the rest of society. While the cowboy is rough, with his "faded Levi's" and "old trucks," he also has a gentle side that cares for "puppies and children and girls of the night." However, the song pleads mothers to encourage their children to become "doctors and lawyers and such," implying that the cowboy life is hard, and definitely not for everyone. As the chorus reminds us, "they never stay home and they're always alone, even with someone they love." Clearly, the cowboy image was starting to change by the 1970's, from white-hat heroes like Roy Rogers to a more modern, ambiguous concept.

A few songs present country artists themselves as modern cowboys, riding the range from performance to performance, with nothing to hold them back. The Bellamy Brothers' "Dancin' Cowboys" (1980) explicitly frames the artists as modern-day cowboys, with "the road in our blood" and "a cowgirl in every single town." Rather than the "hard to love and harder to hold" cowboys of Jennings and Nelson, the Bellamy Brothers are jovial figures, who dedicate the majority of the song to cheerfully glorifying the musician's lifestyle. The cowboy travels like a "gypsy," singing about horses and love, a sharp contrast to other

songs about the country singer's lifestyle (e.g., Don Williams' "Amanda" (1975) or the aforementioned Jennings/Nelson duet).

Jo Dee Messina's "I'm Alright" (1998) presents the singer/narrator as a cowboy-type of character, living from town to town and show to show. The song recounts a chance encounter with an old friend who is now a successful businessperson. While the narrator may not have found financial success, and is living "where money gets tight," she has no real complaints. The second verse positions the narrator as a "hell raiser" type as well, who went out chasing dreams instead of staying in school and being responsible. This song is interesting as it is the only one in my results to even suggest that a female could lead the cowboy lifestyle. The narrator is generally content with her lot in life, and seems unconcerned with others' opinions of her. This song presents a completely different role for women; where previous songs may have offered more sexual agency (within the confines of a committed "love" relationship), "I'm Alright" actually offers an alternative lifestyle from the traditional heteronormative existence, as a solitary individual, following one's dreams and getting by on one's own.

The most recent song to lionize the open road, Sugarland's "Something More" (2005) expresses a disgust with modern capitalist life; more specifically, with suburban traffic jams, overbearing bosses, and workplace burnout. In all of these songs, the cowboy life and the open road are presented as essentially the opposite of the "daily grind" of modern life. These songs, then, serve as a sort of

escapist fantasy for the listener, allowing them to imagine life without the confines and necessities of contemporary capitalist society.

COUNTRY LIFE: I found four songs about country life, which all appeared on the charts in 1993 or later. While these songs rarely explicitly address gender roles or relationships, their portrayal of an idealized rural culture often includes an idealized version of masculine and/or feminine behavior. These songs generally glorify life in small towns and other rural areas, often touting the religiosity (“Red Dirt Road,” “That’s What I Love About Sunday”), slower pace (“Summer’s Comin’”) and relaxed nature (“Chattahoochee,” “Red Dirt Road”) of these areas. These songs seem to have somewhat supplanted the “homesickness” theme found in earlier songs; this could at least partially be due to population shifts in the last two decades, with urban sprawl and exurban living, it is possible for individuals to live in a relatively rural area and commute to a city for work, something that was far less likely in the 1950’s. In most of these songs, conventional gender roles are being upheld alongside other “traditional” ways of life. The narrator of Alan Jackson’s “Chattahoochee” (1993) recounts the good times Jackson had growing up alongside the Chattahoochee River, “talkin’ ‘bout cars and dreamin’ ‘bout women.” The narrator explains that his friends were sometimes reckless and crazy, but they never got caught. Here, the role of the “hell raiser” is presented as part of this rural culture; acting crazy and having fun, but never doing anything so serious as to warrant “getting caught.” The narrator mentions how he and his friends would drive recklessly, spinning their wheels

("we laid rubber on the Georgia asphalt") and drinking ("a pyramid of cans"). The song also briefly addresses the sexual lives of rural inhabitants; one verse discusses how the narrator and a date "fogged up the windows" in his car, and were preparing to have sex; he was "willing, but she wasn't ready." The man is the sexual aggressor, ready to get intimate with a partner; however if the would-be partner is not willing, he can accept it. Instead, they go out for hamburgers and he takes her home "early," thwarted in his quest. While the narrator may be a little wild, he also knows to treat a woman with respect; the implication being that women who reject sexual advances are respectable.

Brooks and Dunn's "Red Dirt Road" (2003) is almost a revisiting of the exact same themes, although less celebratory and more introspective. The narrator describes his childhood "out where the blacktop ends," his religious upbringing, as well as his first love, and how while he left his home for a while, he is glad to return to where he feels he belongs. Similar to "Chattahoochee," the masculine role here involves driving (and wrecking) cars, chasing girls, drinking beer, and finding religion, a relatively complex set of characteristics. Also similarly, the women in these songs are the objects of affection, idealized, but relatively under-characterized.

Craig Morgan's "That's What I Love About Sunday" (2005) also discusses small-town life, specifically Sunday morning church services, followed by afternoon cookouts, football games, and general relaxation. Morgan's song glorifies many of the traditional features of an insular, small-town community;

everybody knows everybody, shared religious beliefs, and a slower pace of life compared to a more complex city. Presumably, with the more traditional way of life come more traditional gender roles, as well. Songs about country life seem to set up an unspoken opposition between rural and urban areas; where the country is religious, easy-going, and good, the city is often rough, violent, and atheistic (or at least agnostic). This image of the city as a dangerous (or at least unpleasant) place reoccurs in songs with other themes as well, and is discussed further below.

RECONCILIATION: Four songs concern reconciliation, the attempt by one (or both) parties to patch up a failed (or failing) relationship. Buck Owens' "Love's Gonna Live Here Again" (1963) is a jubilant declaration that there will be "no more loneliness, only happiness" because love has been renewed. Eddie Rabbitt's "On Second Thought" (1990) concerns a man in the process of leaving his partner who decides at the last minute to give things another chance. This song is particularly interesting because it wears its gender beliefs on its sleeve; the narrator openly admits that he became jealous when he saw his lover dancing with another man. He claims he "called [her] names and said some things that hurt," but rather than leave, he claims he is sorry and it is not his fault that she is "so pretty" that other men cannot help but be attracted to her. In this song, the masculine role is a jealous one, and when another man challenges for the affections of his lover, the narrator becomes angry and possibly even verbally abusive. On the other hand, the woman in the song is sexually charged and

somewhat free-spirited, “dancing” with whomever she pleases, regardless of what her lover may think.

The other two songs are somewhat less hopeful, as they are men asking their former partners to accept their apologies and renew their relationships. Randy Travis’s “Hard Rock Bottom of Your Heart” (1990) is a call for reconciliation; the male narrator admits that he was “led to temptation” and “in weakness did let your love down.” He then asks again for forgiveness, forgiveness that his lover seems unwilling to give, as she says she “can’t even start.” The narrator protests, stating that their relationship is built on “solid ground,” and that it is up to her whether or not they will reconcile and try to patch up their problems or go their separate ways. The narrator explains that he misses his lover, and seeks her forgiveness, which, again, she is still unwilling to give. In this song, the masculine role is to be the one who makes the mistakes, the transgressor, and the feminine role is to offer forgiveness; the fact that the female character in this song is even listening to the narrator’s pleas seems to suggest that she has yet to give up on him entirely.

Finally, Vince Gill’s “One More Last Chance” (1993) is a “hell raiser” plea for reconciliation; the narrator loves his wife, but he also loves to go out drinking and having a good time with his friends. When his wife attempts to curtail his adventures by threatening him with a rolling pin, he proclaims that he’s just a “good ol’ boy, makin’ noise,” and that he is not being unfaithful, he is simply enjoying himself. Later in the song, the narrator notes that his wife has hidden

his glasses and his car keys so he cannot see to drive, but she neglected to hide his “John Deere,” implying that the narrator will go so far as to take a tractor to the bar in order to have a good time. Clearly, the masculine role here is the “hell raiser,” who is positioned more as a comical figure, almost buffoon-like in his dedication to drinking and partying. The image of a determined party animal pulling up to the local watering hole on a tractor is perhaps the ultimate example of country music burlesque (and, perhaps, the ultimate “redneck” stereotype). In all of these songs, the masculine role is the one who slipped up and made the mistake, whether it was jealousy or infidelity or just sheer stupidity. Women are presented as the responsible ones who have to offer their forgiveness.

HOMESICKNESS: Three songs address homesickness; all of which charted in 1983 or earlier, this topic seems to mostly have been supplanted by songs glorifying country life, which is its own category. Furthermore, the “homesickness” theme seems to share some surface similarities with songs about the open road and cowboy life, with homesickness being the unpleasant side effect of a life spent on the move, whether it be dusty trails or concrete highways. The homesick songs are generally from the perspective of an individual expressing their desire to return home. Cowboy Copas’ “Alabam” (1960) perhaps best presents the theme; the narrator is far away from home, but cannot wait to return. He longs for the simplicity of rural life, and mentions people who are waiting for him.



Alabama's "Tennessee River" (1980) concerns the desire to return home, as the narrator discusses his childhood in the mountains, and wonders why he ever left home. He then announces that he and his "woman" have decided to return to the mountains to raise their family, because "peace and love can still be found" there. Here, as in many homesickness songs, the country (in this case, the mountains) is positioned as a positive place with old fashioned values, and the city logically is the place where bad things happen. This is one of the last songs about homesickness in my results, and its direct glorification of country life almost seems to predict the country genre's shift from songs where country natives wish they were home again to songs where country dwellers are glad they never left home. These songs are all performed by male artists, suggesting that the sort of wandering that leads to homesickness may be a purely masculine trait, at least within the country milieu.

NOSTALGIA: Similar to the "homesickness" theme, songs about nostalgia express a desire for something that is lost, generally an ideal or a way of life. B. J. Thomas's "Whatever Happened to Old Fashioned Love?" (1983) expresses dismay at how love "is fast like a turning page" in modern society, and friends come and go. He then asks the titular question, and mentions how his "Momma and Daddy knew" a kind of love that "would last through the years," as opposed to the modern (and presumably irresponsible) type of love. Thomas's song is clearly a reactionary work, especially when viewed against its contemporaries; while both West's "Jose Cuervo" (1983) and Fricke's "He's a Heartache" (1983)

glorify short-term relationships based purely on physical attraction and sex, Thomas calls for a more conventional sort of relationship. Presumably, Thomas would like to see conventional sorts of gender arrangements upheld as well.

Ronnie Milsap's "Lost in the Fifties Tonight" (1985) crosses nostalgia for 1950's love ballads with the classic country love themes, stating that while the narrator's relationship may be on the rocks, they can still agree on, and dance to, 1950's music. Finally, Mark Wills' "19 Somethin'" (2003) consists of the narrator recollecting various events from his childhood in the 1970s and 1980s; Star Wars, Pac-Man, along with the death of Elvis and the Challenger disaster, showing that perhaps the "good old days" weren't quite as good as they could have been. Wills mentions Daisy Duke and Farrah Fawcett as examples of ideal femininity, and Roger Staubach and Evel Knievel as his role models as a young boy. Clearly, when Wills wishes he could return to his childhood and the simple life he knew back then, he also wishes for a return to the simpler gender standards of that era as well.

TEMPTATION: Three songs concern temptation; in all of these songs, the temptation is sexual and emotional, the narrator should not get involved in a certain relationship, but cannot help themselves. Hank Locklin's "Please Help Me, I'm Falling" (1960) is the narrator's plea to his would-be lover to stop him from being attracted to her; he notes that falling in love with her would be "a sin," implying possible adultery on one (or both) ends of the relationship. The narrator says outright that he "shouldn't" want her, but he cannot control his desires.

Here, masculinity is incapable of resisting femininity, as female sexuality is simply too powerful to be overcome by rationality. It is up to the woman to reject the man and turn him away.

The other two songs about temptation are both by female artists, and very neatly reverse the gender roles found in Locklin's song. Dolly Parton's "Here You Come Again" (1978) concerns temptation, as the narrator protests the return of a man who has broken her heart in the past. Every time she feels she is finally over him and ready to move on, he returns to her and "shakes her up" with his smooth talk and handsome features. In this song, the female narrator is helpless before the charms of a good-looking man, and continually falls into his snare. Every time the narrator finally gets over him and his charms, he reappears and seduces her all over again.

Janie Fricke's "He's a Heartache (Waiting to Happen)" (1983), however, serves as a sort of warning. The narrator tells the listeners, presumably other women, that this man is handsome and charming, but is only interested in "a little action," rather than a committed relationship. However, Fricke also tells her listeners to consider spending time with this man, as "you won't forget him all your life," but not to get too attached, because he is only good for "temporary satisfaction." This song is remarkably frank in its presentation of female sexuality, as the female narrator openly admits that while this individual is an engaging sexual partner, he should not be trusted with a serious relationship. In

both this song and West's contemporary "Jose Cuervo," women are starting to take their sexuality into their own hands, rather than being "played" by men.

In both these songs, the women are vulnerable and the male plays the role of the "serial heartbreaker," a man who woos women with his good looks and smooth talk, uses them for sexual pleasure, and then abandons them; however, Fricke's song is interesting, as she encourages her listeners to enjoy the affections of the man in question, as he is clearly charming, attractive, and sexually talented; as long as they avoid emotional attachment, he is worth a fling.

AGING: Two songs address the process of getting older; Don Williams' "Amanda" (1973) and Toby Keith's "As Good As I Once Was" (2005). Both songs are by men, and from a masculine perspective. Williams discusses how the strain of constant touring has made him age rapidly, and now, "crowding thirty," he feels considerably older than he should. Williams also addresses his love for his wife, who has often had to remain at home while he was out on the road, touring and making music. Williams wishes that she had married a man who would "treat her right." Note that Williams does not wish that he had been able to treat her better; while he wants something more for his wife, he seems otherwise content with the choices he has made. In this song, the woman is to be cherished and treasured; she deserves better than a cowboy singer who is never home. It is also implied that the woman's role is to remain in the home, waiting for her man to return, rather than touring alongside him or having a career of her own.

On the other hand, Keith's song treats the topic of aging with Keith's trademark machismo. The narrator brags of a sexual encounter with two sisters (presumably at the same time) and his ability to still hold his own in a bar fight. The narrator then boasts that while he may be getting older, he can still occasionally do the rowdy things he has always been capable of. Keith's concept of manhood is predicated upon his ability to "raise hell;" drinking, fighting, cussing, and screwing his way through life seemingly as irresponsibly as humanly possible. Women exist in his worldview primarily as past, present, or future sexual conquests, in an almost self-parodying carnival of misogyny.

It is interesting to note that there were no songs concerning aging by female artists in my sample. It is also interesting to note that while some male artists appeared on the charts in multiple decades (indeed, the gap between Johnny Cash's first and last appearances is almost thirty years), female artists, when they appeared multiple times, generally disappeared from my sample after about five years (with Dolly Parton being the only exception). My sample would seem to imply that female artists lack the career longevity of male artists, although there are always exceptions (Dolly Parton still tours and records, while Loretta Lynn released an album of new material in 2004, winning two Grammy awards). Perhaps the reason there are no hit country songs about women aging is because the country music establishment doesn't allow older women to even enter the charts.

FAMILY: The two songs concerning the importance of family are both performed by male artists; George Strait's "Love Without End, Amen" (1990) is a paean to the bond between fathers and sons, while Lonestar's "My Front Porch Looking In" (2003) is performed from the perspective of a father who can find no greater joy in the world than spending time with his wife and children.

Strait's song specifically recounts examples from the narrator's life where a father tells a son about the strength of a father's love, presenting a very masculine view of family (despite the use of the gender-neutral "children" in the chorus, every individual in the song is male). Fathers are presented here as loving their children no matter what sort of trouble they get into, and the theme is carried over into a metaphor for God's love for mankind. The Lonestar song is also from a fatherly perspective, although it is much more specific. The narrator travels for work, but above all the magnificent vistas and sights he has seen, his family at home is the most beautiful vision of all.

Both these songs glorify fatherhood specifically, and family life more generally. Fatherhood is presented as the ultimate masculine ideal, and the family supercedes all other aspects of life. Fathers are covered in more depth in the discussion section.

LIQUOR: Two songs primarily concerned alcohol and drinking; Shelly West's "Jose Cuervo" (1983) and Alan Jackson's "It's Five O'Clock Somewhere" (2003), featuring Jimmy Buffett. "It's Five O'Clock Somewhere" is a call to

abandon the drudgery of the 9 to 5 work week and relax with a nice alcoholic beverage. Buffett plays the 'beach bum' role that made him famous, extolling the virtues of the easy life and liquor on the beach. The lyrics clearly target a blue-collar "working man" audience, as the narrator complains about the heat of the sun and hourly wages. The masculine role here is implicitly an employed, hard working individual, who is likely overworked and underappreciated. The song, then, serves as an escapist fantasy, neglecting responsibility to have a good time.

West's "Jose Cuervo" is an unusual song, as it not only glorifies drunkenness, but sexual promiscuity as well. The narrator discusses how she spent the evening drinking tequila, and cannot recall precisely what she did. The next verse concerns the narrator waking up in bed next to a man she does not recognize. The implication is clear: the narrator was so drunk that she cannot recall having sex with a total stranger. This sort of behavior would likely be considered irresponsible and possibly dangerous today (especially in light of AIDS, which was virtually unknown at the time the song was released). It also sends mixed messages about female sexuality, in that while the narrator is unashamed of her sexual freedom, she also can barely remember what she has done. At the end of the song, the narrator returns to the bar and to drinking, announcing that while she may regret what she has done in the morning, she will spend her evenings having fun. This is a decided shift from earlier female-fronted songs, where women generally seem to be at the mercies of men who

use them solely for their own gratification; the narrator of “Jose Cuervo” appears to be enjoying herself as much as the “cowboys” with whom she spends her nights.

PRISON/CRIME: Only two songs about prison and the criminal life appeared in my results; Johnny Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues” (1968) and Merle Haggard’s “Mama Tried” (1968). Of the two, Haggard is the only one who actually served any time in prison, although Cash spent the occasional night in a holding cell during his battle with prescription drugs. Both songs are written from the perspective of a (presumably) male inmate, and both express regret for the crimes they have committed. The narrator of “Folsom” “shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die,” and while it is never specified what the narrator of “Mama Tried”’s crime was, he is serving life without parole at a young age. More interestingly, both songs explicitly mention that “mama” tried to teach them right from wrong, and that their own decisions led them to their fate. Indeed, the majority of the lyrics for “Mama Tried” reflect this theme, as the narrator describes how he was the “rebel child” from his family, and despite his mother’s best efforts, he found himself drawn to a life of wandering and violence. The narrator of “Folsom” finds himself stricken with wanderlust as well, expressing a desire to hop a train and get as far from Folsom Prison as possible. It seems that the convict character is the dark side of the cowboy; both wander from town to town, getting by as best they can, but the convict lacks the moral fortitude of the cowboy, and turns to crime to make ends meet. However, in the country



music milieu, these crimes do not go unpunished, and the convict winds up in prison, where he can warn others of attempting to follow in his footsteps.

In these songs, the masculine role is essentially the outlaw/cowboy, although in this case, the dark side of the cowboy role, the rough, violent drifter, is being portrayed. On the other hand, the female role is “Mama,” who tries her best to steer her children in the right direction and offer guidance to no avail, but should not be held responsible for the actions of her offspring.

RELIGION: The two songs concerning religion, Ferlin Husky’s “Wings of a Dove” (1960) and Cristy Lane’s “One Day at a Time” (1980) are anthems of Protestant Christian belief. Husky’s concerns God’s love, which can be relied on in times of trouble or sadness, while Lane’s song is a request for Jesus to provide the narrator enough strength to live day to day in a world filled with “violence and crime.” Lane’s song expressly mentions her gender, as she explains that she is “just a woman,” and needs divine guidance in a troubled world. Both songs cite specific Biblical events, with “Wings of a Dove” recalling the story of Noah’s Ark, and how God sent a dove to guide Noah to dry land and “One Day at a Time” discussing the time Jesus spent on Earth. Both songs present God and Jesus as patriarchal figures, providing divine insight and guidance to mere mortals.

Several other songs in my research discuss religion in passing or as a secondary theme; especially those pertaining to country life. Rural folk are

generally in these songs as strongly religious, and this is often a point of pride in said songs.

SEXUALITY: Two songs, both from 1973, are open discussions of romantic sexuality; Conway Twitty's "You've Never Been This Far Before" and "Behind Closed Doors" by Charlie Rich. Both songs could arguably be subsets of larger categories, with "You've Never Been This Far Before" concerning a new relationship and "Behind Closed Doors" concerning a strong and healthy relationship, but the overwhelming sexual frankness of both songs prompted me to categorize them separately.

Conway Twitty's "You've Never Been This Far Before" is sung from the perspective of a man about to consummate his relationship with a new lover. His new lover has abandoned her previous partner for the narrator, and is extremely nervous. In this song, the male takes a strong sexual lead over the female. He is experienced, she is not. He knows what to do, while she has "never been this far before." Exactly what "this far" means is never really explained, which is perhaps part of what makes the song memorable, as exactly what is happening is left up to the listener's imagination.

Charlie Rich's "Behind Closed Doors" glorifies the sexual qualities of his lover; specifically, the fact that she keeps her sexuality constrained in public, appearing "like a lady should" when she is out and about, but when the couple are "behind closed doors," she "lets her hair down" and becomes sexually

uninhibited. The classic virgin/whore duality is further complicated as the ideal woman must be both at once; demure and ladylike in public, but ready and willing in the bedroom. Indeed, Rich specifically states that his partner never rejects his advances. In this song, a woman's sexuality is something for a man to possess and control, to be hidden until he is ready to utilize it, locked up and contained "behind closed doors."

In both songs, men are the leaders, sexually, while women's sexuality is constrained and only allowed to be brought into play when a male deems it appropriate. Both songs present sexuality as something to be experienced within the confines of a relationship, as opposed to promoting a more free-spirited sexuality. While these songs may be progressive in their open discussion of the topic, they are fairly conservative in their overall message.

**SOCIAL PROBLEMS:** Two songs were grouped into this loosely-defined category (essentially, songs that addressed any sort of community or global issue), Henson Cargill's "Skip A Rope" (1968) and Toby Keith's duet with Willie Nelson, "Beer For My Horses" (2003). Both songs promote some form of social change, although the two ideals could not be farther removed; "Skip A Rope" is a call for parents to stop teaching their children violence, racism, and other negative character traits, while "Beer For My Horses" is a call for brutal vigilante justice.

“Skip A Rope” is almost a folk protest song, grouping racism (defined lyrically as “(hating) your neighbor for the shade of his skin”) in with lying and cheating on your taxes. In this song, the children are presented as innocent, and it is the parents’ ill deeds that directly shape young minds. Parents’ fighting leads small children (specifically, “little sister”) to have terrible nightmares, and children quickly learn and copy their parents’ lesser traits. Cargill explicitly directs his message towards mothers and fathers, a move that is alternately progressive (i.e., both parents are responsible for rearing children, not just mothers) and reinforcing of the status quo (a household consists of two parents).

On the other hand, “Beer For My Horses” does not explicitly mention the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, but it is clearly intended to remind listeners of those events (“somebody blew up a building” in a list of crimes, for instance). The song then exhorts the listeners to “round up all of them bad boys, hang them high in the street for all the people to see.” The song also suggests that police officers should “put a few more in the ground.” Following these vigilante exploits, just men should retire to “the saloon” and “sing a victory tune.” Keith’s conception of manhood is tied into alcohol, aggression, and a hard and fast sense of right and wrong. Men should take charge when it comes to defending their property, and those that prey on others should be removed from society, permanently. This song also furthers the “city vs. country” dynamic found in several songs; Keith presents the modern city as a seething hive of violence and crime, unfit for human habitation, and even suggests that police and other authorities should

exercise lethal force at all times when dealing with criminals. Women are absent from the song entirely; presumably they lack the moral fortitude to carry out the violent tasks Keith glorifies (or perhaps they are considered part of the property to be defended).

FAME: One song, Glen Campbell's "Rhinestone Cowboy" (1975), directly addresses the quest for fame. The narrator discusses at length walking up and down the street, trying to make connections, "hustling" to make ends meet, and points out that compromises must be made in order to become successful. However, the song ends relatively neutrally, it is never revealed if the narrator finds his fortune, or if he eventually abandons his quest. While this song is performed by a male artist and presumably from a male point of view, the general theme of struggling to reach the top can be considered relatively gender neutral, at least in a contemporary context.

INFIDELITY: One song primarily concerns the topic of infidelity, Jim Reeves' "He'll Have To Go" (1960). The narrator is a man who is away from home at a honky tonk or bar (as established by repeated mentions of a jukebox), and whose wife is seeing another man. The narrator tells his wife that she must choose between him or her lover. The narrator presents himself as virtually impotent in this situation, with all the power contained in the woman. He says that if she chooses another man, he will hang up, and presumably leave her, but if she chooses him, she must tell her lover to leave and never return. The situation in this particular song is rather vague, it is never explained why the

narrator is not at home, and the only explanation of the infidelity is that “love is blind.” In this song, the female has all the power; it is up to her to decide which man receives her affections, and the narrator can do nothing but cross his fingers and hope for the best.

RELATIONSHIP DEMANDS: Only one song, Shania Twain’s “Any Man of Mine” (1995) fell into this category. In the song, Twain delivers a long list of requirements that any would-be suitor has to meet. Twain’s list is generally presented humorously, with a degree of aggression that is somewhat surprising: an ideal man must be subservient, should sexually satisfy her, cannot complain, must be punctual no matter how late she is, and must remain faithful even if she becomes unattractive. Twain is taking an extremely aggressive role in the mate selection process, despite the humorous nature of some of her comments, which are often phrased in such a manner to suggest that while she is allowed to be fallible, her partner must accept her various errors without comment, and furthermore, should be glad simply to have her. However, Twain does occasionally mention more conventional feminine behavior, such as stating that if she cooks a meal for her lover, he must say he enjoys it even if she “burn[s] it black.” This idea that she may burn dinner in and of itself suggests a rejection of the traditional homemaker stereotype. In this song, the gender roles are succinctly defined: the ideal man has all the qualities listed above, while women are free to be as flawed as they desire. It is interesting, however, that Twain makes no direct reference to an ideal masculine body image; perhaps due to the

long history of men making demands of the feminine body, or perhaps due to an assumption that such demands would alienate male listeners who failed to meet whatever ideal was set forth.

## Discussion

### Gender Roles for Men

Over the fifty years covered in my sample, I found relatively little change in the roles available to men. Men in country songs performed by men must be either rugged individuals in the cowboy vein, or broken-hearted fellows who spend their nights crying into their beer over the woman who “done them wrong.” When featured in songs by women, men are generally presented either as ruthless heartbreakers or as idealized knights in shining armor (or cowboys with shining six-guns, perhaps).

**THE HEARTBROKEN FOOL:** In many a country song, especially those from the “lost love” category, the masculine role is a heart-broken wreck, abandoned by the woman he loves, and incapable of putting her memories aside and moving on with his life. Sonny James’ “Don’t Keep Me Hanging On” (1970) concerns the narrator’s attempts to get out of a bad relationship, but every time he tries to leave, his lover begs for him to stay. However, as soon as he returns, she begins treating him poorly again, making him feel like a “clown.” In this song, the female role is almost malevolent, an irresistible siren whose clutches the narrator cannot escape. The logical solution would be for the narrator to simply

leave the relationship, but, of course, the pull of love, even painful love, is too powerful.

George Strait's "A Fire I Can't Put Out" (1983) compares the pain the narrator feels at the loss of his lover to a fire that constantly torments him. While he has spent his time crying and trying to forget, he finally realizes that he will never get over her memory. This song plays fairly close to the traditional "come back, baby" trope; the narrator tells the audience how miserable he is, and claims he will never forget his lover/never love again. Here, as above, the woman is the mysterious heartbreaker, who leaves for whatever reason, utterly destroying the fragile psyche of the narrator, leaving him emotionally shattered.

The men in these songs are almost hyperbolic in their self-pity, as per Ching (2000, discussed above). They wail and moan and cry and almost seem to be engaged in a contest to see who is the most miserable. This exaggeration is sometimes presented in a comical manner, as in Buck Owens' "Act Naturally," where the narrator claims he deserves an Oscar for his ability to "play the part" of "a man that's sad and lonely." However, it is more common for the songs to be almost completely straightforward and seemingly free of any irony or artifice. While the heartbroken fool may be exaggerating his sorrow, it is not played for laughs as Ching might suggest; instead, it is as serious a matter as it can possibly be, and the serious nature of the topic sometimes requires a little hyperbole to drive the point home. This exaggeration does not mean the men are wimps or sissies, it is simply part of the life course for men in country music.



There is no reason to fight it, because (despite efforts to the contrary) liquor and lust will not cure a broken heart, as only time can heal those wounds. While it is not an ideal role for men in the world of country music, the heartbroken fool is an all-too common one.

THE COWBOY AND THE COUNTRY SINGER: The cowboy is an idealized figure in the country music milieu, and many times, country singers present themselves as cowboys of a sort. Lee Greenwood's "Dixie Road" (1985) presents the country singer's lifestyle as nomadic, with the song revolving around how the narrator had to abandon true love in order to seek fame via music (i.e., leaving home for the cowboy life), although the narrator regrets this choice, watching the crowd at every show, hoping his lost love would be there to see him.

Cowboys are also presented as a romantic ideal for several female performers; the Dixie Chicks' "Cowboy Take Me Away" (2000) is entirely predicated on abandoning a boring existence and running away to enjoy the cowboy life; while the narrator of Shelly West's "Jose Cuervo" (1980) enjoys a drunken fling with a "handsome cowboy." Cowboys, then, are overwhelmingly male, and, as The Highwaymen's "Highwayman" (1985) explains, the "cowboy" spirit is not necessarily limited to cowboys themselves, as bandits, sailors, astronauts, and anyone else who shows bravery and risks his life in the face of the unknown could be considered a cowboy as well. Again, the cowboy is an

overwhelmingly male role, with only one song (Messina, "I'm Alright") even implying that a female could lead the cowboy life.

Cowboys are at home in the wild, they cannot be contained by the structures of modern life (which may be part of their appeal), they fight hard, drink hard, and love hard. In country music lore, the cowboy is perhaps the ultimate masculine ideal. A full in-depth study of the cowboy identity and the cowboy role in country music is beyond the scope of this thesis, however, future research into the topic would undoubtedly prove interesting.

DADDY: Fathers did not appear in my results until 1990. Prior to that, the only mention of a father in my sample was Haggard's "Mama Tried" (1963), where the narrator mentions that his father "left my mama a heavy load," implying that the father either died or abandoned his children. According to Strait's "Love Without End, Amen" (1990), a father's love for his children (ostensibly of all genders, as the word "children" is used in the chorus, but all the relationships depicted in the song are between fathers and sons) is a timeless bond that cannot be broken. No matter how irresponsibly or badly they may act, a father will always love his children. Mothers are entirely absent from this song. The song idealizes and glorifies fatherhood, neglecting to mention the very real situations in which a father might not be present, for a variety of reasons.

Lonestar's "My Front Porch Looking In" (2003) is written from the perspective of a working man who travels cross-country and as such, has seen

many magnificent vistas in his adventures. However, none of those natural wonders compare to the joy he feels when he sees his family. In these songs, fatherhood, defined both by providing for a family and offering forgiveness and love (in an obvious metaphor for Christian depictions of God as a father figure) is essentialized as the most important role a man can fulfill. Furthermore, while the male narrator of “My Front Porch Looking In” is out traveling and working, his wife remains home, caring for the children. This would seem to be something of a regression after several songs touting women’s agency and strength.

A grandfather appears in Toby Keith’s “Beer For My Horses” (2003), serving as a representative of “old-fashioned” justice; telling the narrator that the proper way to deal with “bad men” was to “hang them high,” as a form of vigilante justice. Here, the fact that it is a revered elder offering this advice serves to somewhat legitimate Keith’s claim that criminals should be executed by roving posses.

**THE HELL-RAISER:** The hell-raiser is a different sort of character; almost as idealized as the cowboy (and seen, perhaps, as a variation on the cowboy). The hell-raiser loves nothing more than having a good time. He drinks and parties to excess, may be sexually promiscuous (although several songs, most notably Gill’s “One More Last Chance” feature a monogamous hell-raiser), and is often in trouble with the law for minor scrapes.

Waylon Jennings' "I've Always Been Crazy" (1975) is perhaps the defining song for the hell-raiser; Jennings says he has lived with "one foot over the line," and warns a potential lover that he is "free living" and reckless, but he has never "intentionally hurt anyone." However, while he may be "crazy," Jennings argues that this lifestyle has "kept him from going insane." In other words, living outside of society's standards of acceptability is better than conforming to the drudgery of everyday life. The hell-raiser, like the cowboy, lives by his own rules, but is not out to harm others; rather, he simply wishes to exist free of staid societal constraints.

THE (SERIAL) HEARTBREAKER: The serial heartbreaker is never seen in songs performed by male artists; he exists only in the world of country songs by women. The serial heartbreaker is handsome and charming, described in Parton's "Here You Come Again" (1978) as "lookin' better than a body has a right to." The serial heartbreaker keeps a string of women under his wiles at all times, and each one of them believes that she is the only one he is interested in. The serial heartbreaker is extremely canny, as well; Fricke's "He's a Heartache (Waiting to Happen)" (1983) describes one as "clever as the devil and just as wild." Getting involved with a serial heartbreaker is almost certainly a guaranteed heartbreak. However, the heartbreaker has his advantages; Fricke's song describes at length how seductive and handsome he is, but then encourages listeners not to "pass up the opportunity/ to know him/ you won't forget him... but whatever you do/ be wise enough/ not to fall in love."

## Gender Roles for Women

Gender roles for women varied to a fair degree in my sample; although in almost every single song, even those performed by women, women are defined by their relationships to men. Only the narrator of Messina's "I'm Alright" is free from this, and even then, her unique position as the only woman not involved in some form of relationship provides a degree of definition. The vast majority of women in the remaining songs easily fit into one of three categories.

**THE GOOD WOMAN:** As the title suggests, these are the ideal women, the ones who are loyal and faithful in songs about strong love and who are exciting and enchanting in songs about new love. Ronnie Milsap's "Only One Love" (1978) is a testament to a good woman, as the narrator praises his partner for helping him achieve his dreams. Indeed, the narrator (presumably Milsap himself, as the narrator discusses his music career) says that he "never could have made it alone." In this song, the "good woman" is a support and a guide for the man. The song essentially lionizes committed relationships, as the narrator openly admits he could never have achieved his dreams without a good partner by his side.

The majority of female artists in country position themselves as "good women," even in songs as sexually charged as Twain's "Any Man of Mine" (1995), where the narrator consistently refers to her ideal man in the singular. She needs "a man," not "men." The implication here is that "what a woman

wants” is a monogamous relationship. While that relationship can be “wild and unruly” (“Cowboy Take Me Away”), it is almost assuredly a committed one.

THE (MONOGAMOUS) HEARTBREAKER: The heartbreaker role in male-fronted country songs is generally played by a woman who, for whatever reason, departs a committed monogamous relationship. The Heartbreaker is often a mysterious figure, defined only by their absence and the pain it inflicts on the unlucky male. Sometimes, she leaves for another man, sometimes, she leaves because of some failing on the narrator’s part, and sometimes, she leaves for no discernable reason. Regardless, the men they leave behind often fit into the Heartbroken Fool category, as the departure of the Heartbreaker is portrayed as a world-shattering event.

Sometimes, the Heartbreaker strings a man along, as in Ray Price’s “One More Time” (1960), where the narrator swears every time his lover leaves that “this will draw the line” but then, she returns and he finds himself “falling one more time.” This is the case in Hank Locklin’s “Please Help Me, I’m Falling” (1960), where the narrator is incapable of resisting the charms of a woman he knows he should not love. In this case, being with her would be a “sin,” implying that either the narrator or his temptress (or both) are married to other people; still, it is up to the woman to keep him from falling in love with her. Like her masculine counterpart, men are helpless to resist the Heartbreaker.

MAMA: Mothers appear in quite a few of the songs in my sample; most notably in the two songs concerning prison (Haggard, "Mama Tried", 1968 and Cash, "Folsom Prison Blues," 1968). In both of those songs, the maternal role is to teach children the difference between right and wrong. However, when children go astray, it is not the mother's fault, as she has done everything she can to guide her children properly. In a later song, Sawyer Brown's "Thank God For You" (1993), the narrator thanks his mother for her "teachin'" and her "cookin'," suggesting that the maternal role is still the education and moral upbringing of a child, in addition to domestic duties such as providing meals.

One song, Lonestar's "My Front Porch Looking In" (2003) positions the narrator's partner as both lover and mother, identifying her as "the most beautiful girl," suggesting that within the confines of a relationship, there is some opportunity for holding multiple roles; a mama can also be a good woman, or, perhaps a mama is inherently a good woman, just as a cowboy seems almost by definition to be a hell-raiser. This would seem to tie in to some degree with Lewis's (1989) perception that women in country music cannot choose between "mama" and "baby", instead they must be both at once.

### **Conclusion**

True to my hypothesis, I believe that during the late 1980's and early 1990's, there was a major shift in the themes of country music. While the popular generic tropes (broken hearts, home, desire) remained popular, the ways

in which these tropes were presented altered dramatically. The “lost love” category changed its focus from the classical “broken heart” to themes of empowerment, survival, and “moving on.” These new “positive” themes provide for a drastically different presentation of relationships; whereas in the past both genders presented heartbreak as a nigh-crippling event that destroyed lives, now it is simply another obstacle to be overcome.

The female role expanded, as female artists openly expressed their sexual desires and tried the cowboy role on for size. Songs like West’s “Jose Cuervo” and Twain’s “Any Man of Mine” allow women a remarkable degree of frankness and sexual agency when compared with their predecessors. Women tell men exactly what they want in a partner and, as above, have the agency to make changes in their relationships and their lives. They can follow their dreams wherever they may lead, even if it is down a non-traditional path.

The masculine roles remained generally unchanged; hell-raisers and cowboys are still idealized, fatherhood is still the ultimate definition of manhood, and country artists still present themselves as rural and working-class, lyrically, to connect with their audiences. The heartbreaks can still happen, but are handled with less hyperbole and possibly more stoic machismo than in the past.

None of these themes (not even the cowboy) are completely unique to country music. What sets country music apart is a combination of the performative aspect (i.e., the aforementioned exaggeration), the moral aspect



(i.e., heteronormativity, the insistence upon committed relationships), and the audience itself (country fans skewing older and more rural than other genres as discussed above). There is no David Bowie or Prince in country music, nor is it likely there ever will be<sup>2</sup>. There is precious little room for gender-bending or even androgyny within the mainstream country music establishment.

Relationships between men and women were, from the beginning of my sample to the very end, almost unilaterally presented as heterosexual and monogamous. Only a handful of songs suggested having multiple sexual partners (and of those, only “Jose Cuervo” was performed by a female artist), and even in the songs about infidelity and cheating, the characters often moved from one committed relationship into another. While women may have more sexual agency in contemporary country music, they are still expected to express that freedom only within the confines of a dedicated heterosexual partnership. No explicit discussion of homosexuality occurred, and the closest any of the songs came to even suggesting a homosexual relationship would be the use of the gender-neutral second-person pronoun, i.e., the narrator singing about “you” instead of “him” or “her.”

Overall, while country music seems to have made some dramatic shifts in how gender roles can be expressed, the actual roles themselves have not changed much since 1958. Women can be more aggressive and men can be

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<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, k.d. lang began her career as a country singer, but seems to have all but abandoned that style of music within a few years of outing herself, as her work since then has skewed more towards pop and adult contemporary styles.

more sensitive, as long as they remain inside the archetypical roles allowed for their gender. Songs about aggressive cowgirls, female hell raisers, or tender, nurturing men were extremely rare or non-existent in my sample. That does not mean they do not exist, however. Indeed, much future research could be done in this field, including more longitudinal studies and in-depth research into the more popular character types (the cowboy, mama, etc.). With decades of history behind it, and the open road in front of it, the field of country music studies is wide open for further scholarship.

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**APPENDIX: *Billboard* Country Single Charts, 1958-2005, w/Primary Theme**

- 1958: 1: Ray Price, "City Lights" (B. Anderson) – Lost love  
 2: Faron Young, "Alone With You" (R. Drusky, L. Vanadore, F. Young) –  
 New love/Hopeful love  
 3: Johnny Cash, "Ballad of a Teenage Queen" (J. Clement) – Strong love  
 4: Don Gibson, "Oh, Lonesome Me" (D. Gibson) – Lost love  
 5: Johnny Cash, "I Guess Things Happen That Way" (J. Clement) – Lost  
 Love
- 1960: 1: Hank Locklin, "Please Help Me, I'm Falling" (D. Robertson, H. Blair) -  
 Temptation  
 2: Jim Reeves, "He'll Have To Go" (A. Allison, J. Allison) - Infidelity  
 3: Cowboy Copas, "Alabam" (L. Copas) - Homesickness  
 4: Ferlin Husky, "Wings of a Dove" (B. Ferguson, B. Ferguson) - Religion  
 5: Mel Tillis, "One More Time" (M. Tillis) – Lost love
- 1963: 1: Buck Owens, "Love's Gonna Live Here" (B. Owens) - Reconciliation  
 2: Bill Anderson, "Still" (B. Anderson) – Lost love  
 3: Johnny Cash, "Ring of Fire" (J. Carter, M. Kilgore) – Strong love  
 4: Buck Owens, "Act Naturally" (V. Morrison, J. Russell) – Lost love  
 5: George Hamilton IV, "Abilene" (L. Brown, B. Gibson, J.D. Loudermilk, L.  
 Stanton) - Homesickness
- 1965: 1: Buck Owens, "Before You Go" (B. Owens) – Lost love  
 2: Roger Miller, "King of the Road" (R. Miller) – Open road/Cowboy life  
 3: Buck Owens, "I've Got a Tiger by the Tail" (H. Howard, B. Owens) –  
 Strong love  
 4: Sonny James, "You're the Only World I Know" (S. James, R. Tubert) –  
 Strong love  
 5: Jim Reeves, "This is It" (C. Walker) – Lost love
- 1968: 1: Henson Cargill, "Skip a Rope" (J. Moran, G. Tubb) – Social problems  
 2: Johnny Cash, "Folsom Prison Blues" (J.R. Cash) - Prison  
 3: Merle Haggard, "Mama Tried" (M. Haggard) - Prison  
 4: Tammy Wynette, "D-I-V-O-R-C-E" (B. Braddock, C. Putnam) – Lost love  
 5: Sonny James, "A World of Our Own" (D. O'Brien) – Strong love
- 1970: 1: Conway Twitty, "Hello, Darlin'" (C. Twitty) – Lost love  
 2: Ray Price, "For the Good Times" (K. Kristofferson) – Lost love  
 3: Jack Blanchard & Misty Morgan, "Tennessee Birdwalk" (J. Blanchard) -  
 Novelty  
 4: Sonny James, "Don't Keep Me Hangin' On" (S. James, C. Smith) – Lost  
 love

5: Charley Pride, "Is Anybody Going to San Antone?" (D. Kirby, G. Martin) – Lost love

1973: 1: Conway Twitty, "You've Never Been This Far Before" (C. Twitty, L.E. White) – Sexuality

2: Charlie Rich, "Behind Closed Doors" (K. O'Dell) - Sexuality

3: Jeanne Pruett, "Satin Sheets" (J. Volinkaty) – Lost love

4: Barbara Fairchild, "Teddy Bear Song" (D. Earl, N. Nixon) – Lost love

5: Don Williams, "Amanda" (B. McDill) – Aging

1975: 1: C.W. McCall, "Convoy" (C. Davis, B. Fries, C.W. McCall) – Open road/Cowboy life

2: Glen Campbell, "Rhinestone Cowboy" (L. Weiss) - Fame

3: Willie Nelson, "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain" (F. Rose) – Lost love

4: Conway Twitty, "Touch the Hand" (C. Twitty) – Lost love

5: Freddie Fender, "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" (F. Fender) – Lost love

1978: 1: Waylon Jennings & Willie Nelson, "Mammas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys" (E. Bruce) – Cowboy life/Open road

2: Dolly Parton, "Here You Come Again" (B. Mann, C. Weil) - Temptation

3: Ronnie Milsap, "Only One Love in My Life" (R.C. Bannon, J. Bettis) – Strong love

4: Waylon Jennings, "I've Always Been Crazy" (W. Jennings) – Cowboy life/Open road

5: Dolly Parton, "Heartbreaker" (C.B. Sager, D. Wolfert) – Lost love

1980: 1: Ronnie Milsap, "My Heart" (D. Pfrimmer, C. Quillen) – Lost love

2: Cristy Lane, "One Day at a Time" (K. Kristofferson, M. Wilkin) - Religion

3: George Jones, "He Stopped Loving Her Today" (C. Putnam, B. Braddock) – Lost love

4: Bellamy Brothers, "Dancin' Cowboys" (D. Bellamy) – Cowboy life/Open road

5: Alabama, "Tennessee River" (R. Owen) - Homesickness

1983: 1: Shelly West, "Jose Cuervo" (C. Jordan) - Liquor

2: Ronnie McDowell, "You're Gonna Ruin My Bad Reputation" (J. Crossan) – New love

3: B.J. Thomas, "Whatever Happened to Old Fashioned Love?" (L. Anderson) - Nostalgia

4: Janie Fricke, "He's a Heartache (Waiting to Happen)" (L. Henley, J. Sibar) - Temptation

5: George Strait, "Fire I Can't Put Out" (D. Staedtler) – Lost love

- 1985: 1: Ronnie Milsap, "Lost in the Fifties Tonight" (F. Parris, M. Reid, T. Sills) - Nostalgia  
 2: Lee Greenwood, "Dixie Road" (D. Goodman, M. Kennedy, P. Rose) – Lost love  
 3: Dolly Parton & Kenny Rogers, "Real Love" (R. Brannon, D. Malloy, R. McCormick) – Strong love  
 4: Charly McClain, "Radio Heart" (S. Davis, D. Morgan) – Lost love  
 5: The Highwaymen, "The Highwayman" (J. Webb) – Cowboy life/Open road
- 1988: 1: Keith Whitley, "Don't Close Your Eyes" (B. McDill) – New love  
 2: Roseanne Cash, "If You Change Your Mind" (R. Cash, H. DeVito) – New love  
 3: Vern Gosdin, "Set 'Em Up, Joe" (B. Cannon, H. Cochran, D. Dillon, V. Gosdin) – Lost love  
 4: Tanya Tucker, "Strong Enough to Bend" (D. Schlitz, B. Chapman) – Strong love  
 5: Restless Heart, "Bluest Eyes in Texas" (T. DuBois, D. Robbins, W. Stephenson) – Lost love
- 1990: 1: Clint Black, "Nobody's Home" (C. Black) – Lost love  
 2: Randy Travis, "Hard Rock Bottom of Your Heart" (H. Prestwood) - Reconciliation  
 3: Eddie Rabbitt, "On Second Thought" (E. Rabbitt) - Reconciliation  
 4: George Strait, "Love Without End, Amen" (A. Barker) - Family  
 5: Clint Black, "Walkin' Away" (C. Black, D. Gay, H. Nicholas) – New love
- 1993: 1: Alan Jackson, "Chattahoochee" (A. Jackson, J. McBride) – Country life  
 2: Clay Walker, "What's It To You?" (R. Orrall, C. Wright) – New love  
 3: Tracy Lawrence, "Can't Break it to My Heart" (K. Roth, T. Lawrence, E. Clark, E. West) – Lost love  
 4: Sawyer Brown, "Thank God For You" (M. McAnally, M. Miller) – Strong love  
 5: Vince Gill, "One More Last Chance" (V. Gill, G. Nicholson) - Reconciliation
- 1995: 1: John Michael Montgomery, "Sold (The Grundy County Auction Incident)" (R. Fagan, R. Royer) – New love  
 2: Shania Twain, "Any Man of Mine" ("Mutt" Lange, S. Twain) – Relationship demands  
 3: Tim McGraw, "I Like It, I Love It" (J. Anderson, S. Dukes, J. Hall) – New love  
 4: Clint Black, "Summer's Comin'" (C. Black, H. Nicholas) – Country life  
 5: John Michael Montgomery, "I Can Love You Like That" (M. Derry, S. Diamond, J.D. Kimball) – Strong love



- 1998: 1: Tim McGraw, "Just to See You Smile" (T. Martin, M. Nesler) – Lost love  
 2: Jo Dee Messina, "Bye Bye" (R.M. Bourke, P. Vassar) – Lost love  
 3: Faith Hill, "This Kiss" (B.N. Chapman, R. Lerner, A. Roboff) – Strong love  
 4: Jo Dee Messina, "I'm Alright" (P. Vassar) – Cowboy life/Open road  
 5: Dixie Chicks, "There's Your Trouble" (M. Selby, T. Siller) – New love
- 2000: 1: Toby Keith, "How Do You Like Me Now?!" (T. Keith, C. Cannon) – Lost love  
 2: Chad Brock, "Yes!" (C. Brock, J. Collins, S. Smith) – New love  
 3: Lonestar, "What About Now" (A. Barker, R. Harbin, A. Smith) – Strong love  
 4: Dixie Chicks, "Cowboy Take Me Away" (M. Seidel) – New love  
 5: Faith Hill, "The Way You Love Me" (M. Dulane, A. Follse) – Strong love
- 2003: 1: Lonestar, "My Front Porch Looking In" (R. McDonald, F. Myers, D. Pfrimmer) - Family  
 2: Toby Keith featuring Willie Nelson, "Beer For My Horses" (S. Emerick, T. Keith) – Social problems  
 3: Mark Wills, "Nineteen Somethin'" (C. Dubois, D. Lee) - Nostalgia  
 4: Alan Jackson & Jimmy Buffett, "It's Five O'Clock Somewhere" (J. Brown, D. Rollins) - Liquor  
 5: Brooks & Dunn, "Red Dirt Road" (K. Brooks, R. Dunn) – Country life
- 2005: 1: Craig Morgan, "That's What I Love About Sunday" (A. Dorsey, M. Narmore) – Country life  
 2: Toby Keith, "As Good as I Once Was" (S. Emerick, T. Keith) - Aging  
 3: Rascal Flatts, "Bless the Broken Road" (B. Boyd, J. Hanna, M. Hummon) – Strong love  
 4: Sugarland, "Something More" (K. Bush, K. Hall, J. Nettles) – Open road/Cowboy life  
 5: Rascal Flatts, "Fast Cars and Freedom" (G. Levox, W. Mobley, N. Thrasher) – Strong love