

Stephanie Schäfer

“Cashville“

**Dilution of Original Country Music Identity
through Increasing Commercialization**



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Table of Contents

I. Introduction: Country Music as Manifestation of Identity and Cultural Expression	3
II. Stereotypes and Recognition of American Country Music	5
III. Perspectives of Identity and Music: Social Identity Theory.....	9
1. Country Music Identity	10
2. Where I Come From: Southern Working Class Identity and Country Music	13
2.1 Peculiarities of Southern Culture: Sense of Place	14
2.2 Working-Class Culture	17
IV. Generic Themes of Country Music	21
V. History of Country Music: Blending of Cultures vs. Preservation of Identity	28
1. Cowboy Music	28
2. 1930s: Western Swing: Bob Wills	31
3. The 1940s and 1950s.....	32
3.1 Hillbilly/Honky-Tonk	32
3.2 The Bar: An Alternative Home	33
4. Reaching a Broader Audience: The Emergence of Radio Broadcasting.....	35
5. Early 1970s: Cosmic Cowboy/ Outlaw Movement.....	36
6. 1970s: Mainstream Country/Country-Pop	41
7. Late 1970s/1980s: Urban Cowboy	42
8. 1980s: New Traditionalists.....	43
9. 1990s - Today: Young Country.....	45
VI. Musical Hybrids	47
1. Alternative Country	47
2. Country-Rock/Southern Rock/Americana	48
3. Blending of Cultures: Conjunto and Tejano Music.....	49
VII. “Don't Get Above Your Raisin'”: Authentic Regional Identity vs. Commercialization	50
1. Class Identity.....	50
2. Authenticity and Commodification	52

3. Back to the Roots: Country Identity and Regional Pride	60
3.1 Texas Country	60
3.2 Texas Regional Pride	61
3.3 Austin and Lubbock – Lone Star Country Music Arenas	65
3.4 Anti-Nashville Sentiments	66
4. Nashville Country	67
4.1 The (Country)politan) Nashville Sound.....	67
4.2 Commercialization and Performance	69
4.3 Grand Ol' Opry	74
4.4 Cowboy Lifestyle	77
4.5 Back to the Roots: The Story of Willie Nelson	78
4.6 “Gone Country”: The Changing Face of Nashville.....	83
VIII. Preliminary Conclusion	87
IX. Red, White, and Blue: National Expansion of Country Music	89
1. Country Music Goes to War	89
1.1 World War II	89
1.2 United Forces against Communism.....	91
2. Walls came tumbling down: Country Music after 9/11.....	95
2.1 Unity in Crisis: National Identity	96
2.1.1 Toby Keith: “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)”	96
2.1.2 Alan Jackson: “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)”	98
2.2 Country Songs in the Patriotic Tradition	99
2.2.1 Darryl Worley: “Have you Forgotten“	99
2.2.2 Brooks & Dunn: “Holy War“	100
3. Political Campaigns and Country Music	101
4. Country Musicians in Political Battle: Dixie Chicks vs. Toby Keith	103
X. Conclusion.....	107
XI. Bibliography.....	109

I. Introduction: Country Music as Manifestation of Identity and Cultural Expression

All American music reflects the landscape from which it springs – and as that landscape changes, chewed up by the developments and industry and environmental disasters, as the air we heave in and out of our lungs is filled with new particles, as the water we drink gets its fluoride levels regulated and mineral content tweaked, it makes perfect sense that American music becomes slicker, more machinated, less like reality. We are all subject to our environs, fashioned and chiseled and sanded into shapes. We have highways for arteries and clouds for brains and sticks for bones, The sounds we make are Americana (Petrusich 260).

As one of the first musical expressions of the United States, country music represents the values and ideals on which the nation was founded. Country music can be seen as the epitome of the American Dream. It has its origins in the 19th century, when cowboys were working in the fields and riding through the lonely prairie, an image that has been romanticized by numerous Hollywood movies. This thesis focuses on country music as a genre as well as the identity which it represents and by which audience and performers are linked. Country music can be regarded as the music of Southern working class Americans. Since before the Civil War, the South has always been looked down upon as being primitive, simple-minded, and extremely religious. Having its roots in the South, country music has had to face substantial criticism in terms of unsophistication and over-sentimentalization. Due to a shift in national economic power, the United States have become increasingly Southernized, both culturally and musically. Southern culture and identity have become desirable. This phenomenon allowed country music to shed its dubious reputation and gain popularity across the country. This paper will shine a light on the American South as a cultural region that has more to offer than what meets the eye. Southern working culture and its core values is going to be described and put in context with country music as a form of cultural expression. Central themes in American country music are family, love, heartbreak, work, friends, religion, and patriotism. Characteristic for the country music genre are its narrative structures, which by telling a story, enhance its ability to form a collective identity as well as a connection between the narrator, the performer, and the audience. However, country musicians are not solely messengers of the

country identity, but they also pursue a professional career. In doing so, they commercialize their work in order to make a living. The line between music as a form of art and cultural expression, and as a commercial endeavor is rather thin. This paper sets out to answer the question whether increasing commercialization has become a threat to the original country music identity. It tries to define a country music genre which is true to its roots, while at the same time looking at the production and performance of music as a business. When targeting a broader audience, producers have to create a style of music which caters to the masses while conveying an authentic message that remains true to its original identity. Identity is going to be a key issue in this thesis. The concept of identity will be defined and applied to country music as a cultural product. I will then trace the history of country music and describe the various styles that have emerged since the 1920s. Genres like cowboy music, western swing, honky-tonk, outlaw country, country-pop, and young country will be discussed. As an immigrant nation, the United States hosts various cultural communities which have brought and continue to bring their customs and traditions to their new home. This amalgam of cultures gives life to a new musical landscape. Apart from immigrant influences, Americans seek an alternative to traditional forms of music. One prominent social change came about with World War II, when women started working outside the home. Gender roles suddenly became more complex. With the emergence of blues and rock music, traditional country experiences multiple fusions with these modern genres and expresses the changing social realms.

After informing the reader about the essentials of Southern working class culture and the evolution of country music as a genre, I will discuss my central issue of collective identity threatened by increasing commercialization. This conflict will be exemplified by comparing authentic Texas country to the mainstream sound of commercial Nashville country. I will support my arguments by extracting country lyrics that deal with certain themes or issues and apply these to the biographies of various country singers and songwriters.

While most country narratives are restricted to a particular region, the call for a collective national identity becomes stronger in times of war. In my second part starting with Chapter IX., I will describe how the traditional values of the country music message become important and unify the country in desperate times. I will talk about country music during and after World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, as well as 9/11 and the War on Terror. A particular emphasis is put on 9/11, after which event country music functioned as a catalyst for feelings of anger and fear that

were stirred in the American people. Apart from warfare, country music and its traditional values are also used for political campaigns, especially those of the Grand Old Party (GOP). Country musicians perform at inaugural balls and political fundraisers as well as party conventions. Although strong ties are traditionally formed between country artists and the Republican Party, Democratic supporters can also be found in today's country music scene. Country music may not be as explicitly political as folk music, but the controversy between the Dixie Chicks and Toby Keith shows how the exercise of free speech can lead to a bloody rivalry on the musical platform.

II. Stereotypes and Recognition of American Country Music

Since its beginnings in the 1920s, country music has had to face numerous stereotypes regarding both its musical style and its audience as inferior and socio-economically backward. As most country music originates in the American South, the Southern accent with its nasal vowels has become a distinctive characteristic for country music as a cultural product. Critics of country music call singers and performers “ignorant rednecks who sing through their noses” (Malone 2002a: 11). As one of many, country music scholar Barbara Ching tries to break a lance for country music’s credibility as a popular music genre stating that “it's important to take this music figuratively, to gain its markers the power of figurative and complex speech that is routinely granted to artists and other people we take seriously” (Sanjek xxiii). The neo-Marxist Frankfurt School scorns country music as being “contrived, hokey, and convention-bound” (Ching 231).

The term “redneck” is intrinsically linked with country music. It refers to its working class listeners in a pejorative manner - “rednecks” are often associated with lynching, racism, incest, and “jacked-up pick-up trucks with supercharged stereo systems blasting out Hank Sr. loud enough to wake Hank Jr.”(Cobb 206). However, with the boom of Young Country and the advent of blue-collar comedy in times of a growing Southernization of America, the rednecks’ reputation clearly improved and members of this social group even “embraced the redneck stereotype as part of a countercultural reaction against the homogenizing pressures permeating American mass society” (ibid). Jeff Foxworthy’s books “You may be a redneck if...” and Joe Diffie’s “Leroy, the Redneck Reindeer” became popular all across the country (Feiler 242).

After three decades, country music finally received some scholarly recognition in the 1950s (Horstman xv), but still lagged behind jazz as a form of art, which had always been “an object of interest, sympathy, and compassionate study” (ibid). As Ching argues, critics want to preserve the image of “the rural unsophisticate” on both the performing and the receiving end of country music (232). Charles F. Gritzner lists four major reasons why country music is being criticized (Rogers 214). First, he claims that some critics may want to deny their own country roots. Secondly, country music does not adhere to the standardized notion of “good music” as set by the forefathers of the American nation. As a third aspect Gritzner makes note of the “negative geographical and cultural associations” (ibid) mentioned above. Last but not least, he admits that, from an aesthetic perspective, it is nothing but a matter of taste whether or not one likes country as a musical genre. Gritzner proceeds with criticism from within. He brings forward that country music fans themselves oftentimes object against an increasing commercialization of their favorite music and want to keep its audience as small as possible and within its socioeconomic frame (ibid). They fear that a nationwide expansion and class stratification will dilute country’s original message to the rural folk. They want people to accept country music as it is and “take it or leave it” rather than have country music adapt to a broader audience.

In her essay “Acting Naturally”, Barbara Ching criticizes country music fans in their preservation of “a pre-packed idyllic past that never existed” (232), while Aaron Fox attempts to prove the contrary with his study about a working-class community in Lockhart, Texas, a small town south of Austin. Lockhart was founded in 1847 and has been bisected by the U.S. HWY 183 since the 1950s (Fox, A. 2004a: 62). As the city of Austin continues to grow, Lockhart finds itself on the edges of its city limits (63) while remaining semirural. Living in Lockhart allows people to profit from urban economy at a minimum cost while at the same time maintaining a rustic cultural identity (64). Most scholarly writing on country music has been conducted on the issue of country music as a commodity, “a mass-mediated genre of popular music” (30). In his study, Aaron Fox explores the central place of country music in working-class culture (31).¹

Country music is often scorned as “bad” music because it is seen as amateur and naive (Fox, A. 2004b: 33). But it is this very nature that evokes the original message of country music as “a

¹ For details on Fox’s findings and conclusions see chapters on Working Class Culture/ Identity and Music.

vernacular expression”. In addition to that, country music is often criticized as being too white and inherently racist. George W. Bush spoke against said accusations when he declared October 1990 “Country Music Month” proclaiming the following:

Encompassing a wide range of musical genres, from folk songs and religious hymns to rhythm and blues, country music reflects our Nation’s cultural diversity as well as the aspirations and ideals that unite us. It springs from the heart of America and speaks eloquently of our history, our faith in God, our devotion to family, and our appreciation for the value of freedom and hard work. With its simple melodies and timeless, universal themes, country music appeals to listeners of all ages and from all walks of life (cited in Fox, A. 2004b: 34).

Fox lists a number of country music lyrics which seem to support the argument of a racist ideology in the genre, for instance David Allan Coe’s “If That Ain’t Country” of 1977, in which his narrator talks about “working like a nigger for (his) room and board” (37), or Stoney Edwards’ “Blackbird” of 1975 with the frequent line “just a couple of country niggers”. Yet, Fox specifies that both songs convey a more complex meaning than meets the eye depicting the ambivalent character of working-class poverty and relating to the suffering of Blacks (38). Other stereotypes of rural working class people, such as incestuous behavior, are treated with an ironic twist in country lyrics (38). Examples of this are Homer and Jethro’s “I’m My Own Grandpa” or Billy C. Wurtz’s “Inbred in the U.S.A.”. The same is true for the seemingly evident right-wing sentiments in Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee”. All songs mentioned above share a form of irony and exaggeration also known as camp (for details see Sontag, Susan “Notes on Camp”).

As Tom T. Hall’s song below suggests, the message of country music lyrics as well as the country music identity are subject to interpretation. Many of them depict life in rural areas of the American South as presented in the first stanza. Southern culture is known for its hospitality and politeness as well as its emphasis on locality and community. According to this song, there is no one true country identity - it is “all in your mind”, and it is “all in your heart”.

Tom T. Hall: "Country Is '...all in your mind'"

Country is sittin' on the back porch listen to the whippoorwills late in the day
Country is mindin' your business **helpin' a stranger if he comes your way**
Country **is livin' in the city knowin' your people knowin' your kind**
Country is what you make it country is **all in your mind**

Country is workin' for a livin' thinkin' your own thoughts **lovin' your town**
Country is **teachin' your children find out what's right and stand your ground**
Country is havin' the good times **listen to the music** singin' your heart
Country is walkin' in the moonlight, country is **all in your heart.**

Country music as a term did not exist before 1953 (Peterson 195). Earlier forms of folk and mountain music were known as "hillbilly" music. Senator McCarthy associated folk music with Communism and rated it Un-American (198). Country music was being "criticized for being too vacuous and too reactionary" and was believed to "transmit rural conservatism" (Buckley 24).

One of country music's generic characteristics is the emphasis on lyrics and the subordination of melody and musical elaboration (25). Country music lyrics display narrative structures. They tell stories to which their listeners can relate. Buckley claims that the early country songs did not have any allegories or double meanings. This is simply not true; as many comedic songs draw on exactly this ambiguity to convey a certain sexual undertone. When asked to define country or "western music", Johnson described it as being "essentially the music of men, their work, their land, and their death – outside the pale of civilized society" (cited in Peterson 83). Historian Bill Malone attempts to decipher the origins of country music criticism drawing one of his conclusions from Americans love-hate relationship with rural life. He relates:

Out of the long process of American urbanization-industrialization there has evolved a joint pattern of rejection as well as sentimentalization of rural mores. We flee the eroded land with its rotting cabin; at the same time we cover it in rose vines of memory. This national dualism created the need for a handle of laughter and ridicule to unite under one rubric the songs and culture of the yeoman and the varmint, the pioneer and the poor white (Malone 2002a: 40).

III. Perspectives of Identity and Music: Social Identity Theory

This thesis sets out to define country music's social and cultural identity and reflect on both authentic and constructed representations of said identity. In order to fully understand how country music unites communities and regions with the help of the inherent values represented by popular culture, the term identity, and more specifically social identity, must be defined. The Social Identity Theory was developed by the psychologists Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner in the late 1970s. It describes the membership in social groups as a means of expressing one's personal identity (Carrville 16). What is a social group? According to Hogg and Abrams, "a group exists when two or more people define themselves as members of it and when its existence is recognized by at least one other" (407). Tajfel (1981) then defined social identity as "an awareness of one's objective membership in the group and a psychological sense of group attachment" (254). Hogg and Cooper further explain how "the social world is divided in in- and out-groups" (16) and people distinguish themselves from the out-groups by forming an in-group. Tajfel calls this process "social categorization" (1978: 61). Social groups can be formed on the basis of religion, gender, age, education, music preferences, among others, while the degree of attachment to that group varies (Carrville 17). With the formation of in- and out-groups stereotypes come into play because one group distances itself from its environment. This in turn strengthens the in-group identity in opposition to others (18). Tajfel's Social Identity Theory can also be applied to music "as a form of self-expression" (19). Giles, Hajda, and Hamilton state, "Music...is a significant dimension of personal and particularly social identity, relating as it does to nationalities, ethnicities, religions, politics, age groups, and generations, genders, and sexual orientations" (1).

1. Country Music Identity

“The use of music...can vary as to how important it is in defining one’s social identity, how significant it is in determining one’s friendships, how special it is in forming one’s sense of self” (Firth 90). Different genres of music convey meaning in a different manner (95). The formation of social identity is particularly important in country music because its lyrics tell universal stories which can be transposed onto individual lives and may thus give the listener comfort and advice in times of suffering. Dana Jennings, who grew up in a rural town in New Hampshire, describes his personal relationship with country music as follows:

Twin fiddles saw open my chest and show me my hick heart, red, raw, and bitter. Between the silvered notes a mournful tale still lives and breathes. When twin fiddles kick off a country song – no big bang here, but a grief-stricken whisper – creation is made new. The world is conjured once again as every goddamn sad story you’ve ever heard is told once more, as every bit of melancholy you’ve inherited is invited to come ghosting back from the past and two-step into your heart (Jennings 218).

Country songs function as texts and contain a clear narrative structure (Firth 158); therefore, lyrics can be analyzed separately from the music. Musical performance often enhances the personality of the narrator and brings his tale on stage. Country music scholarship focuses on the lyrical content of songs because they are easier to grasp and interpret (159). Songs can serve as mini-musicals, whose plots are a matter of interpretation (211). Performers put themselves in the stories and listeners identify with them and apply their own emotions and experiences to the narrative. As Firth says, “music constructs our sense of identity through the experiences it offers of the body, time, and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (275). A song can evoke personal memories of situations as well as relationships with other people which in turn will create an emotional response in the listener. Country music is more about association and interpretation of the lyrics than about the literal experiences described in the song (Ching 240). Their stories are not designed to be “mindlessly imitated” and are in that comparable to psalms and stories in the Bible, which were meant to serve as guidance. (Fox, A. 2004a: 173). Some people have repetitive associations with songs, such as the narrator in Alabama’s