

MA-Thesis / Master

Stephanie Schäfer

**Manifestations of Collective Identity
in Country Music**

Cultural, Regional, National



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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 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

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