

Negotiating Nashville's Norms: Women's Place in Post-9/11 Country Music

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Tobias Stafford (14293498)

Abstract

Whilst much literature exists on significant episodes of country music history such as the Chicks controversy and the emergence of the ‘bro-country’ subgenre, limited attention has been spent exploring how these events may be connected, and what they reveal about Nashville’s understanding of the significance and place of its female stars. By examining the breadth of the country scene since 9/11, from lyrical analyses to understanding prevailing musical trends, this dissertation explores the position and power of Nashville’s female artists. The dissertation is split into three case studies. The first chapter addresses the Chicks controversy, the second bro-country, and the final investigates why some of Nashville’s biggest female stars have recently moved away from country and have instead engaged more with other genres. These case studies reveal a pattern in post-9/11 country music wherein male voices have not just become dominant, but also, oftentimes, speak on behalf of women. Ultimately, the dissertation establishes that the power of Nashville’s female artists has significantly reduced when compared to the late-1990s, a scenario made possible only by a country music culture that values women’s voices less, and thus prioritises male country singers on issues from radio playtime to awards nominations.

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Introduction

The expectation is we're principally a male format with a smaller female component... I play great female records, and we've got some right now; they're just not the lettuce in our salad. The lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban and artists like that. The tomatoes of our salad are the females.

— Keith Hill, *The Tennessean*

In the early twenty-first century, American country music found itself at a familiar crossroads. Throughout the genre's storied history, the fear that country music and its stars must 'sell out,' must lose some quintessential aspect of their identity to achieve widespread commercial success, has reappeared time and time again (Jensen 1998, 3-4). In the 1990s, precisely that had happened. Far from the halcyon days of rhinestone cowboys and women steadfastly standing by their men, the 1990s saw country music (re)enter the mainstream with acts like Garth Brooks, Toby Keith, and Shania Twain dominating the airwaves and releasing hit after hit. In doing so, however, country music had seemed to lose something of its essence, its quintessential cowboy, outsider roots in favour of superstardom. Whilst previous worries had concerned issues such as the crossover of country with pop or rock and roll (how could Elvis' adoring legion of adolescent fans ever be reconciled with hillbilly music?), country's latest identity crisis stemmed from huge commercial success.

According to a March 1992 issue of *Forbes*, the 1990s finally saw country "become the leading American popular music genre" (Ellison 1995, xxii). The highest selling album of 1991 in the United States was Garth Brooks' *Ropin' the Wind* (#1, 1991), raising the question of whether such mass acceptance meant that country music had finally fulfilled its destiny or had

lost its soul.¹ If, as Bill Malone suggests, country is “America’s truest music,” the genre becoming America’s most popular music form need hardly be a cause for concern (2002, 13). Yet such a simplistic reading overlooks country music’s origins and key features of its identity. Malone centres country around the “southern working-class identity” (15), whilst others note the importance to country music culture of the rural experience, a traditional family setting, and “a sense of living in hard times” (Peterson 1997, 210, 219; Ellison, xxviii). To borrow Chris Willman’s summary, academic writing on the genre reveals that country music “gravitates more toward expressing the fears, beliefs, and hopes of conservatives, who occupy a majority of the artist roster as well as fan base” (2007, 3).

To be clear, country music is not a monolithic genre. What can be considered ‘country’ is a contentious issue and one this dissertation does not intend to solve. Any number of musical stylings can be included in this definition, with ‘country-adjacent’ genres like Americana, roots, and folk all overlapping with the country mainstream.² Further, there are also ‘alternative’ country communities such as those from Canada and the growing phenomena in recent years of queer country acts. As such, there are multiple understandings of not just the musical conventions of country, but also the genre’s culture. These contested understandings of the nature of country music have been used to exclude certain groups of people from the country establishment; at other times, these excluded groups have adopted or adapted to

¹ Information next to albums denotes the peak position on *Billboard*’s Top Country Albums chart, followed by the year this was achieved. Information next to songs denotes the peak on *Billboard*’s Hot Country Songs chart (or previous equivalent) for songs released prior to October 20th, 2012, and on the Country Airplay chart thereafter, again followed by the year this achieved. The method for determining chart positions on Hot Country Songs changed on October 20th, 2012; the previous methodology of focusing on data purely from country radio continued on the new Country Airplay chart. All song and album data is taken from www.billboard.com.

Ropin’ the Wind had 4 million sales. Brooks also had the third best-selling album of the year courtesy of *No Fences* (#1, 1990) which sold 3.38 million copies in 1991 (Philips 1992).

² If country is specifically southern and working-class, these other genres too deserve categorization. Folk’s popularity exploded in the 1960s as the sound of protest, associated with countercultural movements, though contemporary folk is now more distinguished through its proclivity for acoustic instruments, such as the mandolin, banjo, and fiddle, which have fallen from favour in country. Americana and roots similarly embrace a broader range of musical and geographical influences than the country mainstream, from Appalachian sounds to bluegrass. Why some artists may be labelled as one rather than another is further discussed in pages 39-40.

establishment attitudes to legitimise their place in Nashville. That said, references to the country music industry and country music audiences in this dissertation refer to the mainstream or Nashville-based aspects of the genre; this includes country artists, radio stations, record labels, and awards bodies, such as the Country Music Association (CMA) and Country Music Television (CMT). As such, this definition typically coincides with those aspects of country music finding success on *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs, Country Airplay, and Top Country Albums charts.

If country, then, is rooted in a specific socio-historical setting, a particular regional and class identity, and a clear set of cultural and ideological values, what does it mean when the genre becomes the nation's favourite? The two most likely explanations for such a scenario are that the nation has embraced the values of the former minority; or that the identity of the genre has been altered or diluted to such an extent that it is distinct from its prior incarnations. However implausible it may have seemed in the 1970s and 1980s, by the early 2000s both these explanations were true of the changing sound, image, and audience of country music. In the 1990s, though, the most significant factor was the changing nature of country's identity. Richard Shusterman, discussing country's understanding of its own identity, explains how the genre can depart significantly from its roots yet still retain authenticity on the basis of "comparative terms of more or less"; that is, "country music can claim an all-American, rustic authenticity despite full recognition of its actual impurities... [by] affirming its contrast to the much greater impurity and commercialization of [pop] music" (1999, 226). Even if country was no longer distinctly southern, or rural, or concerned about the family, it could still claim legitimacy by engaging with enough 'classic' country themes, tropes, and sounds to ward off accusations that it was bordering on pop. Exemplifying this, the best-selling country single of the 1990s was Toby Keith's "Should've Been A Cowboy" (#1, 1993), the chorus of which laments that the singer never learned to "rope and ride" and romanticises the imagery of the

Wild West and outlaws, whilst acknowledging that his reality is far removed from what he sings about (McDonnell 2018).³ The single represents just one song from a subgenre subsequently referred to as ‘stadium country,’ wherein attempts at establishing country authenticity often border dangerously close on parody.⁴

These fundamental changes to the genre’s DNA have been investigated by scholars, notably Robert Van Sichel, whose research into #1 country hits between 1960 and 2000 reveals a distinct trend: a marked decline in country hits featuring “political and ideological content.”⁵ More than 40% of these politically inclined hits from across the forty-year period were released in the 1960s. That overtly ideological songs like Merle Haggard’s “Okie From Muskogee” (#1, 1969), which derides Vietnam protesters and hippie culture, found success at this time is perhaps unsurprising given the decade’s political turmoil. In the 1970s and 1980s, political engagement declined, though one in five hits remained broadly ideological. However, the 1990s ushered in a country milieu seemingly much more averse to political content, with just one in twenty chart-toppers containing political content (Van Sichel 2005, 318).⁶ That this sharp drop in political content coincides with the decade in which country was fully embraced

³ The ‘Wild West’ here acting as an idealized version of today’s South: a place where the ruggedly masculine can thrive and adventure.

⁴ Whilst a fear of country’s inauthenticity was largely an internal discussion, these debates have extended beyond the genre, with country becoming the target of ridicule in popular culture. In his comedy special *Make Happy*, Bo Burnham satirises modern country with a routine entitled “Pandering”; Burnham puts on a southern accent and breaks the fourth wall to reveal “truths” such as “I walk and talk like a field hand / But the boots I’m wearing cost three grand / I write songs about riding tractors / From the comfort of a private jet” (Burnham and Storer 2016).

⁵ Van Sichel characterises “political and ideological content” as including references to freedom, poverty, gender, patriotism, and attitudes towards social change. No distinction is made between conservative or liberal approaches to these topics (317-18).

Focusing on chart-topping country songs raises the question of whether political and ideological content continued to be prevalent in country songs that were less popular. Without further research, this is unclear. Regardless, Van Sichel’s work highlights that if this ideological country content did still exist, it became significantly less commercially successful towards the turn of the century.

⁶ Country music’s long and contradictory history on social issues continued into the 1990s. Garth Brooks was simultaneously the biggest country star of the time, yet openly supportive of same-sex relationships, being quoted in 1992 as saying, “If your parents are black and white, if your parents are same sex, that’s still traditional family values to me.” Such positions put him at odds with the country industry at large. Indeed, the first single off his album *The Chase* (#1, 1992), “We Shall Be Free” (#12, 1992), tackled topics including homophobia and racism. Of the subsequent three singles from *The Chase*, one reached #2 whilst the others topped the charts. This perhaps requires an alternate reading of Van Sichel’s work: it was not that country became less political, but rather that political and social content in country songs became less acceptable to country audiences and radio (Allman 1992).

by the American mainstream perhaps reveals something about the consumption habits of the mass audience. It also suggests that the romanticised versions of regional identity, rural values, and conservatism with which country had long been associated were possibly less significant to the genre's identity and popularity than may have previously been assumed. Approaching the millennium, country music found itself more popular than ever with the American public at large, but conceivably at the cost of what traditional fans would consider the genre's authenticity.⁷

For decades, country had been a popular — albeit non-mainstream — genre with a loyal audience; this core fanbase played a key role as arbiter of quality and authenticity. But with the explosion in popularity associated with stadium country, the expanding fanbase was now pulling the country industry in two directions: one embracing new sounds, styles and themes, for redefining what country *could* be; the other willing country back to what it had known for so long, desperately clinging to (neo)tradition, and rejecting anything else as inauthentic. For the more established fans, country had always been — and should remain — rooted in traditional family values and a southern, rural, working-class identity.⁸ This nostalgic longing for country to remain rooted in its past and core values was acknowledged by some of Nashville's biggest stars, notably by neotraditional artists Alan Jackson and George Strait.⁹

⁷ In 2012, *Billboard* revised its country chart, with Hot Country Songs updated to combine streaming and radio airplay, including airplay not on specific country stations, in its methodology for chart placements. The Country Airplay chart was created to continue the previous methodology of purely country radio airplay. The change has meant that crossover hits have remained atop the Hot Country Songs charts long after their airplay on country radio has dwindled due to the proportionally greater amount of pop radio stations and audiences.

⁸ These values mirrored the demographics of country audiences. With country's increasing popularity, though, came demographic change. Analysis of country fans between 1979 and 1992 reveals that, by the 1990s, the typical country listener was more likely to have attended college; to work in a professional position; and to live in the suburbs.

However, certain demographics went unchanged: the average country listener remaining more likely to be white and married than the average American. Whilst country music gained new audiences, it is important to remember that these were in addition to, not in place of, existing country fans (Grabe 1997, 72–74).

⁹ Though the South is home to many musical genres, and country itself need not intrinsically be southern, fans have long linked the two, and artists who perform “country-ness” do so in ways evoking southern working-class life, such as acting the fieldhand or cowboy. However, given the South is also home to acts and genres besides country, it may be more accurate to suggest country is of the white rural American heartland, from Texas to the rust belt.

Jackson's "Gone Country" (#1, 1994) details the unhappiness of three non-country singers in various U.S. locales and suggests that this stems from their respective genres' inauthenticity. Ultimately, each turns to country to find success and happiness, with Jackson noting how one after the other has "gone country" and "back to [their] roots," a pointed comment on country music as the paragon of purity, the most authentic genre.¹⁰ "Murder on Music Row" (#38, 2000) acts as a reflective final stanza to "Gone Country," as Strait and Jackson mourn the loss of country music's "heart and soul."¹¹ The duo complain that fiddles are "barely played" any longer, having been replaced by "rock and roll guitars," and lament that country heroes from Merle Haggard to Hank Williams would no longer receive airplay on country radio. For neotraditionalists, there seemed a real fear that country was becoming a sub-genre of pop or rock. Music they considered authentic was becoming less popular, and the standards by which country had defined itself (a conservative attitude, being male-led, a rural locale) were coming increasingly under threat.¹²

From its earliest days, country has been centred around the masculine. The genre's roots lie firmly in the southern working-class. Amanda Edgar and Holly Holladay note the historic centrality of manual labour in country music narratives and, whilst not dismissing the history of female labourers, such spaces have typically been occupied by men (2019, 134). Edgar and Holladay's work on white masculine precarity suggests that in the idealised country life, as depicted in decades of music and performance, the archetypal, usually male, country figure succeeds in the face of adversity and hardship, making a simple living to provide "a good life"

¹⁰ The artists reckoning with their "inauthenticity" are: a Las Vegas resident, a folk artist, and a "serious composer." The song openly inviting these performers from other genres is representative of the early- to mid-1990s trend of country engaging with other genres, notably pop and rock. The subtle difference between this attitude, and the one espoused in "Murder on Music Row" (also Jackson, see below), reveals the rapidly changing nature of country music in the 1990s.

¹¹ Although never released as a single and thus having limited success on the country charts, it was well-known within country circles. Strait and Jackson first performed the song at the 1999 CMA Awards, a performance which won the "Vocal Event of the Year" award at the 2000 CMA Awards. In 2001, it won the CMA award for "Song of the Year."

¹² Whilst country music audiences have often been near-evenly split between men and women, the majority of country music's biggest hits have long been by men. See Appendix A.

for his family (124, 130-33). Taking into account that country has been built on a foundation of “masculine precarity,” the fears of neotraditionalists when the emergence of a new wave of female acts appeared in the 1990s are better understood. These new artists were hardly the first female country stars: celebrated country women already included the likes of Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, and Dolly Parton. These women, however, negotiated the country milieu carefully and in a way that allowed for them to be strong, influential, and outspoken performers without being at odds with Nashville’s established gender norms. Willman acknowledges that, since at least the mid-century, country has had a “soft spot” for strong female performers (2007, 164). Typically, however, empowering narratives for women focused on issues concerning unjust relationships, especially ones addressing abuse or infidelity. This quickly became a country standard, with female artists decades later releasing singles based on the trope, notably the Chicks’ “Goodbye Earl” (#13, 2000) and Carrie Underwood’s “Before He Cheats” (#1, 2006).¹³ These strong, female artists thus did not present challenge the genre’s ideals of masculinity in the same way as later acts, if anything highlighting that ‘real’ country men were demonstrably different to these abusive figures.

This space created for female country artists was viable in periods of country music history when conservative voices were not just dominant, but omnipresent. Van Sickel has assessed that whilst discussions of gender were rare in country hits before the millennium, when they occurred, they were positive over two-thirds of the time (2005, 317).¹⁴ Notably, such depictions were only conservative in ideology 61.5% of the time (325). Whilst widely accepted

¹³ The topic has also been addressed by male artists, notably in Garth Brooks’ “The Thunder Rolls” (#1, 1991). The song’s female character worries for her husband’s safety on a stormy night, only for him to return smelling of another woman’s perfume. In live performances of the song, Brooks performs an additional verse in which the woman retrieves a gun with which to murder her adulterous husband (Nicholson and Newman 2022).

¹⁴ Van Sickel does not denote the meaning behind ‘positive’ besides “whether a song’s general orientation towards the concept was *mostly* positive or negative.” Positivity towards a topic is subjective: some may find a song stereotyping a woman as a good mother as endearing and a positive for the promotion of conservative family values; others may view it as dismissive and sexist. It can be presumed that numerous attitudes towards women were explored in this period of country music, and though these differed, most sought to highlight the value of gender, rather than attack it.

as America's most ideologically conservative music genre, country was used to provide a platform for conversations about gender — and in a manner that sought to legitimise the contexts where women were right to revolt against their partners — revealing the long history of female country stars asserting their voices without having to blindly accept conservative attitudes.

As country became less politically contested into the 1990s, an increasing number of female country artists and groups emerged, perhaps encouraged by the genre's apparent embrace of the mainstream. Neotraditionalists were less concerned about the arrival of these female acts than by the fact that these new performers did not conform to the conventional norms of acceptability in the country scene. Just as mainstream rock and pop trends influenced the sound of country in the 1990s, so too did political and ideological developments such as the rise of Third Wave feminism. The Third Wave and girl-positive popular music went hand in hand, from the extreme of Bikini Kill's *Revolution Girl Style Now* to the Spice Girls' mantra of "Girl Power!" As such, whilst a quick look through the 1990s discographies of country stars Faith Hill and Trisha Yearwood reveals the expected collection of love songs, these and other female acts also embraced female empowerment. Songs including LeAnn Rimes' "One Way Ticket (Because I Can)" (#1, 1996) praised the strength and independence of women, whilst Shania Twain's "Man! I Feel Like A Woman!" (#4, 1999) highlighted and celebrated the multiple ways of "[feeling] like a woman." These ranged from going "totally crazy" to wearing "men's shirts, short skirts" and — most troublingly to Nashville's longstanding gender norms — "forgetting" about the standards of being a lady, although few would consider Twain to truly queer gender norms.¹⁵ Similar songs by female artists flooded country music in the 1990s,

¹⁵ That Twain is Canadian and challenged the norms of Nashville femininity was unlikely to win her plaudits amongst American audiences and industry figures already increasingly concerned with the erosion of the genre's conservatism.

suggesting it was possible to be commercially successful whilst posing a gentle challenge to country music's traditions of mild-mannered womanhood.

This rise of women in country music did not prove to be a fad. By the end of the century, women were achieving unprecedented levels of success, with female artists recording 50% of all #1 hits on *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs in 1998, and 42% in 1999 (see Appendix A). However, this should not obscure the precariousness of women's position at the time: Jada Watson has noted that female artists had to "navigate spoken and unspoken parameters" to ensure they maintained good relationships with those in the industry who controlled airplay on country radio (2019, 1). Similarly, Beverly Keel noted in 2004 that every major country record label was run by men, whilst Nashville's music producers, radio programmers, and managers were also predominantly male (141). Challenging country's image as male-dominated, the genre's female artists rejected a subsidiary role; by the early 2000s, the best-selling female group of all time in the U.S. were country trio The Chicks, who performed the national anthem at Superbowl XXXVII in 2003 (Light 2016).¹⁶

These developments in the market position of country music, along with the decline in ideological conservatism and rise of female acts, set the scene for the genre at the start of the twenty-first century. The 1990s had seen the genre become a national mainstream popular music, the change bringing with it altered attitudes towards what it meant to be authentically country. No longer did it seem necessary to play a steel guitar and to have lived on the range, or to be a woman who loved only God more than her own family. Throughout the decade, country's identity had been treated as something akin to an elastic band: stretched, pulled in different directions. The tension was ramped up further following 9/11. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, country music reverted, as if for comfort and reassurance, to traditional values, becoming the sound of — and a safe space for — a wounded but defiant patriotism.

¹⁶ The Chicks were previously known as the Dixie Chicks before June 2020.

Nationalistic, often jingoistic, songs dominated the airwaves, with Alan Jackson's "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" (#1, 2001) arguably the most successful of a line of 9/11 hits.¹⁷ Other releases of the era went further, including: Toby Keith's album *Shock'n Y'all* (#1, 2003) — the title a pun on the U.S. military tactic of "shock and awe" — which spawned the single "American Soldier" (#1, 2003); Darryl Worley's "Have You Forgotten?" (#1, 2003) which chastised those preaching anti-war sentiments, questioning whether they remembered 9/11; and Charlie Daniels' hymn to the Stars and Stripes, "This Ain't No Rag, It's A Flag" (#33, 2001), once described in *Billboard* as "far more rousing than racist" (Taylor 2001).

But this conservative, patriotic consensus in the genre was not unchallenged for long. The resulting 'twang' of country's elastic band came in March 2003 as the U.S. commenced its invasion of Iraq, ostensibly as part of its 'War on Terror' in response to 9/11. Natalie Maines, lead singer of Texan group the Chicks, remarked during a live show in Europe that she was "ashamed that the President of the United States [was] from Texas" (Kopple and Peck 2006). The backlash was swift and total: seventy-four country radio stations blacklisted the group, and the group's association with Nashville effectively ended overnight (Garofalo 2013, 12).¹⁸ The country establishment responded with a heavy-handedness that reasserted the genre's earlier, pre-mainstream proclivity for conservatism — in gender roles as well as in foreign policy. The abrupt excommunication of the Chicks from Nashville suggests that the increasing acceptance of women as authentic country stars in their own right, with all the ability and acclaim of their male counterparts, was little more than something country audiences and industry leaders indulged whilst the genre benefitted financially from the situation. As soon as

¹⁷ The song helped Jackson earn a record ten nominations for the following year's CMA Awards (*Billboard* 2002).

¹⁸ The Chicks' *Taking the Long Way* (#1, 2006) responded to the 2003 controversy. Despite being a country album, its lead single "Not Ready to Make Nice" (#36, 2006) peaked at #4 on the *Billboard* Hot 100, more than thirty places higher than it did on *Billboard*'s dedicated country chart.

female country acts made too much noise, caused too many issues, the country establishment, particularly country radio which had lauded their hits, cut them loose and resorted to the tried and tested methods of prior decades. “Girl-positive” messages and feminist-inspired acts had been a comparatively moderate challenge to country’s conservatism, but outright criticism of the U.S. government, its policies, and its president, was another matter altogether.

The Chicks subsequently became embroiled in controversies with Toby Keith, who took to touring with a backdrop featuring a doctored photo of Maines and Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein; Maines responded by wearing a shirt emblazoned with the letters “F.U.T.K.,” initially proclaiming they represented the phrase “Friends United Together in Kindness,” before later admitting they stood for “Fuck You Toby Keith” (Shelbourne 2018). The Chicks controversy and its aftermath revealed the extent to which country, even when it had outwardly appeared to be increasingly tolerant and inclusive of acts and themes which might have previously been marginalised, was quick to revert to a norm of conservatism in response to a national crisis that coincided with a period of flux and change regarding the genre’s identity and authenticity. Whilst the Chicks episode has been analysed in scholarship as a cultural chapter in the War on Terror, specifically related to American patriotism, it should also be considered as a turning point in the history of contemporary country music that ushered in a revival of conservative attitudes towards gender that has dominated the politics of the genre in the subsequent decades (Adolphson 2013, 47-48). This is borne out in developments in the genre since the dominance of patriotic songs in the early 2000s.

Coexistent with the post-9/11 popularity of patriotic themes in country music, a nostalgia for traditional values re-emerged. Lonestar had chart-topping hits with “My Front Porch Looking In” (#1, 2003) and “Mr. Mom” (#1, 2004), both of which praised the value of family, particularly the primary role of women as mothers and caregivers. This emphasis on traditional gender roles and simpler times can also be found in country hits including: Gretchen

Wilson's "Redneck Woman" (#1, 2004), which rejects metropolitan liberal excess; "Automatic" by Miranda Lambert (#3, 2014), a song romanticising the good old days of cassette tapes, written letters, and manual transmission; and Jason Aldean's "She's Country" (#1, 2009) which uplifts women who are "born and raised" and "ain't afraid to stay" country. The re-emergence of family values and traditional country femininity in the first decade of the 2000s might be seen as complementing the trend toward nationalistic songs in the period.

By the late 2000s, however, came the emergence of 'bro-country,' a style heavily influenced by hip-hop, with its name referring to the male "bros" who performed it and the kind of assertively masculine culture they often celebrated in their lyrics, videos, and performances. Bro-country songs shared some of their themes with earlier 2000s music, with traditional American country topics like farm life, trucks, and alcohol still significant. However, these were overshadowed by references to partying and the pursuit of women. Rather than the often traditional, loving depictions of women found in earlier music, a combination of conservative nostalgia with often hypermasculine characters and sexualised representations of women created a hostile environment for women in country music.

Bro-country's fixation on partying and objectifying women as sexual playthings suggests that a different type of conservatism became prominent in country music during this time, one more concerned with hedonism and self-indulgence than reasserting traditional values. With these sexist depictions being commonplace in songs by male country artists, and unsurprisingly absent in those of female artists, women's voices became increasingly marginalised. As a result of these developments, the nature of the industry's relationship with its female stars changed significantly over the first two decades of the millennium. As the value of women was diminished and undermined, some of the genre's biggest female performers sought to extricate themselves from their relationship with Nashville. The most notable of these was Taylor Swift, whose meteoric rise to superstardom started in country, but who has since

crossed over into the pop mainstream, becoming one of the most recognisable and successful artists of the twenty-first century. After earning her first CMA nomination in 2007, aged 17, Swift's emergence as a country star was carefully managed (both by herself and by others in Nashville) to ensure that she met the expectations of a woman in the post-Chicks country scene. Yet, as she matured, Swift found these expectations increasingly stifling, causing her to distance herself from the country music establishment and shift towards the pop industry, a move she attributed to the restrictions placed upon female country stars (Wilson 2020).

The following chapters seek to address how country music since 9/11 has marginalised the role of women, and how female country stars have responded to this. Three case studies provide detailed exploration of the issues concerned: first, the Chicks controversy and the War on Terror; second, the rise of bro-country; and third, the growing number of female acts who leave Nashville and country music behind. The first chapter, focusing on country music after 9/11 and the Chicks controversy, explores the place of women in country music as they became increasingly marginalised and, in the case of the Chicks, discriminated against because of their failure to abide by the expected, patriotic norms of not just Nashville, but the nation at large. The second chapter investigates the dominance of bro-country in the early 2010s, exploring how artists negotiated country tradition by ensuring thematic continuity in a period of stylistically different music. It also addresses the pushback against the subgenre, from both male and female country acts, analysing the lyrics of bro-country hits and how the subgenre's sexism placed women in a subordinate position socially and within country music. The final chapter addresses the now well-established phenomena of female country acts leaving the genre, or otherwise re-negotiating their space within it, as a result of the perceived incompatibility between their values and ambitions and the prevailing conservatism of the country music industry. It also discusses the increased politicisation of the genre in recent years

— in which debates about gender have been central — and how the legacy of the Chicks controversy still casts a shadow over female country acts.

This dissertation argues that the country music establishment in the twenty-first century has policed and marginalised the genre's women as it has become decidedly more conservative and generally less tolerant of liberal voices. It analyses the ways in which female country acts have navigated this increasingly hostile country music landscape, often pushing back against it, sometimes abandoning it completely. Further, it examines a country music culture that, since 9/11, has become more overtly ideological in its messaging, as demonstrated by many of the era's biggest chart hits, which perhaps best reflect the prevailing attitudes of the country music establishment and the genre's core audience.

1. Country Goes to War: Country Music and Patriotism After 9/11

Just so you know, we're on the good side with y'all. We do not want this war, this violence. And we're ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas.

— Natalie Maines, *Shut Up and Sing*

In the aftermath of 9/11, many turned to country music for comfort. Its long-established themes of regional and national pride, and its perception as a specifically American sound, saw it recognised as a genre that could provide comfort to a people whose nation had come under attack. The country industry gladly embraced this. As Americans turned to country for a sense of patriotic unity, Nashville produced song after song extolling the virtues of the U.S. and its people. This was not a phenomenon unique to country music, with other genres engaging with themes of grieving and healing (Jones and Smith 2021, 4). What was significant about the response to 9/11 in country music was the genre's articulation of these feelings. The most acclaimed non-country responses included several songs from Bruce Springsteen's *The Rising* (#1, 2002), including "Lonesome Day" (#3, 2002), which were typified by a reflective outlook on the attacks.¹ The most widely celebrated of country's hits memorialising 9/11, Alan Jackson's "Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)" (#1, 2001), took a similar approach, acknowledging the overwhelming sense of loss shared by so many Americans that day. However, most of country's initial musical responses to 9/11 did not resemble Jackson's; instead being unapologetic in their desire for retribution. Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)" (#1, 2002) promised to "put a boot in [the] ass" of America's enemies, whilst in "This Ain't No Rag, It's A Flag" (#33, 2001) the Charlie Daniels Band proclaimed that these enemies would be "hunted" down and made to "pay for the lives

¹ Positions on *Billboard's* 200 album and Adult Alternative Airplay charts.

[they] stole”. For country performers, the message seemed clear: get on board, stay in your lane, and do not rock the boat.

Though country songs articulated their feelings differently to those from other genres, the biggest difference between country music’s and other genres’ responses to 9/11 was the longevity of this patriotic fervour. By 2003, the pop mainstream had seen its post-9/11 consensus begin to deteriorate (Jones and Smith 2021, 6-7). In country music, this culture that uplifted patriotism and American values reigned for the best part of the decade; Todd Decker has acknowledged that songs inspired by and similar in content to “American Soldier” (#1, 2003), in which Keith pairs his national pride with masculinity and Christian themes and imagery, persisted until at least 2008, although songs addressing themes of military loss and grieving continued to achieve chart success into the 2010s (2019, 88-89, 105). The 2000s as a decade thus saw the emergence of a hegemonic nationalism in the country music industry that was not replicated in other genres. Jeremy Adolphson has suggested that this was the result of an American society that, after 9/11, favoured a “like-minded mentality” over discourse and debate (Adolphson 2014, 54). Country norms were thus rearticulated for a new century and a post-9/11 world. A renewed stress was placed on the value of American patriotism and principles such as Christian faith and traditional gender roles; this signalled a fundamental shift from the ethos of a Nashville which had seen the rise of empowered women and increased musical diversity in the 1990s. By the time that Natalie Maines remarked onstage at Shepherd’s Bush in March 2003 that she was “ashamed that the president of the United States [was] from Texas,” country music’s post-9/11 transformation was well underway. Maines’ comments spurred the country establishment into action; the industry’s response was one of hurriedly reasserting its conservatism, given that one of its biggest stars had criticised not just the president himself, but the aggressive, nationalistic militarism of the Bush administration’s response to 9/11.

However, it should be noted that scholarly debate remains about whether this post-9/11 country music scene was truly different to what came before. Andrew Boulton has highlighted the genre's history of responding to military conflicts by going through periods of increased patriotism (Vietnam, Gulf War), and has suggested that the embracing of nationalism by country music after 9/11 was merely an evolution of country tropes in which singers position themselves as outsiders (2008, 374-75).² Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A" exemplifies this conflict-fuelled patriotism. A 1984 #7 hit written after the downing of Korean Air Lines 007 and subsequently used at the 1984 Republican National Convention, it has since appeared on Greenwood's 1992 album *American Patriot* following its revival in popularity during the Gulf War, been re-released following 9/11, and topped *Billboard's* Digital Song Sales chart in 2020 after its use at Donald Trump's presidential campaign rallies.

Similarly, Jocelyn Neal identifies the impact of the 2008 financial crisis and its impact on the white masculine psyche — of fundamental importance to country music's identity — as causing more significant change to contemporary country music culture (2016, 3-4). Conversely, Reebee Garofalo has argued that whilst country singers' accepting of patriotism was unsurprising, the industry's rejection of dissenting and alternative perspectives represented a fundamental shift (2013, 12). This dissertation reiterates Garofalo's claims: the manner and firmness of country music's pivot to conservative values after 9/11 reflects a fundamental turning point in the identity of the genre.

Whilst country music remained invested in its patriotic identity longer than other genres, the articulation of this patriotism changed over time. Immediately after September 11th through the U.S. invasion of Iraq, much of the patriotic country music was jingoistic and hawkish in its approach, best typified by Toby Keith's album *Shock'n Y'all* (#1, 2003). The

² Boulton argues that, historically, country considered itself in opposition to the "liberal elite". After 9/11, country expanded its definition of self to include America in its totality, with "them" instead being attributed to anybody considered anti-American.

articulation of this patriotism changed as the reality of war began to resonate with the American public and Nashville, a raft of hits reflecting the losses of war appearing between 2003 and 2008. Underpinning both eras, however, was a third trend in 2000s country music: a series of songs extolling the virtue of traditional American family values, from homemaking mothers to attending church on Sundays. Country music's resurgent nationalism therefore became entwined with traditionalist views of family and gender. In song and in performance, embodiments of Americanness were predominantly male, from the soldier to the family man. Meanwhile, the space for women in post-9/11 country music vastly diminished compared to the 1990s, and whilst women remained a part of Nashville's depictions of the idealised American life, they were increasingly depicted as ornamental or secondary to their male counterparts. This chapter seeks to explore the articulation of patriotism in country music in the 2000s, and women's place in it, particularly after the Chicks controversy in 2003.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the country industry in Nashville reflected American society more broadly. Supporting American values, and finding solace in national identity, was not a distinctly conservative phenomenon. The patriotic unity best encapsulated in Jackson's "Where Were You" was also seen in a rallying around national symbols, including the president: President Bush ended his second year with a 71.4% approval rating, the eighth highest figure in U.S. history (Jones 2003). 9/11 accounted for a cultural reset of sorts in country music, allowing those within the genre to reassert country music "ideals" in line with the revival of American patriotism and desire for songs about American life, values, and greatness. Hits released before 9/11 soon became co-opted as 9/11 anthems. Brooks & Dunn's "Only in America" (#1, 2001) was the first country #1 after the attacks that reflected this rediscovered patriotic fervour, the song's apparent statement of American exceptionalism resonating with a nation in a time of crisis. Singer Kix Brooks later professed that "the song all of a sudden became sacred ground. The events that transpired defined the music and made it

bigger than it was intended to be” (Chermayeff et al. 2017). Meanwhile, co-lead singer Ronnie Dunn commented that “Only in America” became “apolitical,” appealing to everyone seeking solace (Chermayeff et al. 2017). Both singers’ comments suggest that 9/11 caused a change in country music, that the genre grew beyond its typical audience to become something greater, a particularly American arena that offered comfort to U.S. citizens. 9/11 and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’ provided Nashville with something it had been longing for during the 1990s: unity, from its artists, from its audiences.

What followed “Only in America” was a raft of country hits exploring American-ness, which taken as a whole, contributed to a nationalistic culture in Nashville that grew increasingly hegemonic. Many of these songs were coded for country audiences, rooted in a renewed desire for tradition after the American way of life was attacked. Keith’s Christopatriotic “American Soldier” acknowledged his readiness to die for his countrymen as the sacrificial Christ, a comparison furthered by his acknowledgement that he will “bear that cross with honor” (Decker 2019, 88-89). Decker highlights 24 songs released between 2003 and 2014 that embrace the identity of U.S. service members or their families (2019, 89). These 24 songs represent only those focusing on soldiers, and not the full spread of country songs which could be considered patriotic, or otherwise reflect traditional American values. Some of these other songs revered country history. Lee Greenwood’s aforementioned “God Bless the U.S.A” was re-released, reaching #16. Likewise, Hank Williams Jr. released a re-written version of his “A Country Boy Can Survive” (#2, 1982), which reached #45 in 2001. In the 2001 version, Williams replaces the “country boy” identity with the “American”; implicit here is the maleness of this wounded, now aggravated, America. This early post-9/11 Nashville patriotic sound was fuelled by frustration and a sense of national loss; typically, it was nationalistic as much as overtly patriotic.

For the most part, this correlated with an increasingly masculine country scene, wherein the most prominent feature was male voices often singing about retributive violence; of the 24 songs in Decker's sample following the soldier story type, only 8 are by solo women, and none of these fall into the category of this initial, aggressive response. Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" (#1, 2002) threatens America's enemies with physical violence, from the "boot in [their] ass," to lighting up their world "like the Fourth of July," to being atop Uncle Sam's "[hit]list." Indeed, Keith asserts that responding with overwhelming physical might is "the American way." Given the gender composition of U.S. armed forces, these threats are distinctly masculine. The final hit representative of this early style of country patriotism was Darryl Worley's "Have You Forgotten?" (#1, 2003). The song was perhaps the first glimpse of a changing tide, its anger turned almost inward on the American public, questioning their resolve and whether they had forgotten the losses of 9/11. Nonetheless, it features the same style of aggression and hints toward violence, stating that "there's some things worth fighting for," and that freedom is not kept by "backing down," before Worley openly acknowledges the idea of finding comfort in attacking those perceived as responsible for the attacks: "Some say this country's just out lookin' for a fight / Well after 9/11 man I'd have to say that's right." The song remained atop the country charts for a then-record seven weeks, its success coinciding with the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. This suggests a link between patriotism amongst country audiences and retributive, American military action, with the song bringing renewed attention to the reasons why the U.S. invaded Iraq, ostensibly including preventing Saddam Hussein's further support of terrorist actions.

These developments in country music, from the increasing tolerance in the 1990s to the hyper-masculine aggression and patriotism of the early 2000s, were well-established by the time Maines criticised Bush during a performance in London (Light 2016). The Chicks were performing the first promotional concert for their upcoming tour, which had achieved the

highest ever box-office sales at the time for a country music tour (Leeds 2006). Christian Griffiths has acknowledged that potentially as a result of this unprecedented level of popularity, most studies into the Chicks controversy have tended to overlook the group's liberal tendencies and outspokenness before their comments at Shepherd's Bush (2015, 230). The group had been openly critical of the trend in early 2000s country music which saw hyper-masculine and, as they considered, artistically poor music such as Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue" dominate and become synonymous with broader understandings of what Nashville was. In August 2002, Maines described Keith's song as "ignorant," detrimental to perceptions of country music, and said that anybody could write "put a boot in your ass" (Griffiths, 236). At the same time as criticising one of country's brightest stars, the group also enjoyed crossover success with their cover of Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide," with the single reaching #2 on the country charts in 2002, before topping the Adult Contemporary chart in 2003. Even at a time of near-unanimous harmony in country music, the Chicks embraced difference and defiance. Given country music's long-established sensitivity over genre and definition, the group's success outside of Nashville, paired with their rebuke of prevailing country trends, suggests they might not have been the idealised country heroines they have since often been interpreted as.

When the group did address the inescapable country obsession with war songs, their music continued to test what was acceptable as a country artist largely rooted in the Nashville mainstream. The single "Travelin' Soldier" (#1, 2003) was initially considered to fit the broad themes of the early 2000s country scene, being a love song featuring civilian and soldier which ultimately highlights the patriotic soldier's sacrifice as he dies fighting for his country. The song is a ballad featuring the traditional country instrumentation that helped popularise the group. Maines sings about a girl – a rarity for this era of patriotic hits – who meets and falls in love with an American soldier, the two sending letters between the U.S. and Vietnam. The song

allows a moment of reflection to honour those who die in combat, before acknowledging the impact on those who lose loved ones. By giving voice to a woman, “Travelin’ Soldier” presents an alternative interpretation of patriotic themes than the hyper-masculine and often cartoonish depictions of war found in other country songs at the time. One of the most ridiculous of these is Toby Keith’s “The Taliban Song” (2003), which Keith tells his audience is a “patriotic love song,” a description perhaps more suited to “Travelin’ Soldier.”³ Keith takes on the persona of a “middle-aged, Middle Eastern, camel-herding man,” who criticises the Taliban as “things used to be real nice, then they got out of hand since they moved in.” Whilst the Chicks sang about the cost of war on U.S. families, Keith encourages U.S. action by highlighting the need to liberate those living under the Taliban. This justification is unsurprisingly related to male gratification, as Keith’s narrator states: “I ain’t seen my wife’s face since they came here / They make her wear a scarf over her head that covers her from ear to ear.” The focus on “I” before the subject’s wife implies the issue more impacts him than it is a commentary on the liberation of women.

Whilst “The Taliban Song” articulates significantly different views than “Travelin’ Soldier,” rereading the Chicks’ single in light of their subsequent actions and the context of a history of outspokenness against the jingoism found in country hits at the time suggests that the single was always a protest song, at least in the group’s eyes. Indeed, this was the song that the group had just finished performing when Maines made her remarks criticising the then-imminent U.S. invasion of Iraq. The song focuses not on the story of a contemporary U.S. soldier, but rather one from the Vietnam War, a period known for inspiring music critical of U.S. military action, policies, and culture. Indeed, some of the most famous of these, from Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” to Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son”,

³ The song was not released as a single. Nonetheless, a raucous audience screams along throughout the live version included on *Shock’n Y’all*.

are often misremembered and erroneously considered patriotic anthems.⁴ This may have been the case with “Travelin’ Soldier,” which at the very least has an aura of what Griffiths considers “political ambiguity,” potentially either honouring or denouncing the sacrifice of war (2015, 237).

The impact of Maines’ comments was almost immediate. After reaching #1, “Travelin’ Soldier” dropped to #3 the following week, before falling outside of the Top 60 completely the week after. The group were blacklisted by 74 country radio stations, some immediately upon report of Maines’ comments and some in response to the wishes of their listeners amid a second wave of patriotism following the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom (Garofalo 2013, 12; Kopple and Peck 2006). As if to reassure listeners of country music’s continued respect for the military and patriotism, “Have You Forgotten?” began its record-setting run atop the charts the week “Travelin’ Soldier” fell out of the Top 60. The Chicks assessed their blacklisting as being politically motivated, the result of pressure from right-wing groups on country radio stations (Kopple and Peck). A 2006 *Time* article reiterated the significance of political affiliation to the group’s demise, noting “[t]he unwillingness of audiences to forgive the band is inseparable from politics” (Tyranigel 2006). The group’s popularity plummeted; at the year’s CMA awards, the audience booed at the mention of their name (Yahr 2019).⁵ When the band suffered low ticket sales for their North American tour in 2006, Canadian locations replaced U.S. concerts, the demonisation of the group tied to their perceived un-American criticism of the president (Gumbel 2006).

Much of the criticism and abuse that the Chicks received was gendered or sexist. Toby Keith led the way in villainising the group; his concert set design featured a mocked-up album cover of Saddam Hussein with his arm around Maines. Popular media responses went further.

⁴ Positions on the *Billboard* Hot 100.

⁵ Maines also received death threats, whilst a caller phoning in to a Kansas City country radio station suggested “they should send Natalie over to Iraq, strap her to a bomb, and just drop her over Baghdad” (Kopple and Peck 2006).

Commentator Pat Buchanan labelled the group “the ‘Ditsy Twits’” and called them “the dumbest, dumbest bimbos”; whilst television host Bill O’Reilly suggested they were “callow, foolish women who deserve to be slapped around” (Kopple and Peck 2006). Though Maines’ comments were considered reprehensible by a wide array of Americans, including those outside of Nashville, the incident appeared to have a significant impact on the country industry’s relationship with its liberal artists. In 2004, organisers of Vote for Change, a concert tour of mostly Democrat-aligned musicians in the build-up to the 2004 presidential election, approached country superstar Tim McGraw to headline a country line-up; McGraw declined (Willman 2007, 183).

Nonetheless, Lesley Pruitt’s work on gender and protest in country music highlights the significance of the Chicks being both female and liberal in their exile. Pruitt notes the dichotomy in reaction to Maines’ comments and the actions of Willie Nelson, who at the same time was releasing anti-war songs that questioned the motives of U.S. involvement in Iraq. Pruitt acknowledges that Nelson was better able to negotiate country music norms and articulate his views without backlash by rooting them in patriotic tradition and invoking freedom of speech; Nashville, mostly, tolerated this, in part due to Nelson embodying the historically rooted country character of the “outlaw,” intended to challenge the views of the establishment (2007, 95, 98).⁶ As young women, the Chicks were protected by no such traditions when making their remarks. However, the band did utilise these country norms after the controversy. On the first U.S. date of their tour after Maines’ comments, the group told the audience that if they were “here to boo, we welcome that, because we welcome freedom of speech” (Kopple and Peck 2006). Similarly, a 2013 interview saw Maines compare any potential return to Nashville with “going back to [an] abusive husband,” the abusive husband

⁶ Like Dolly Parton, whose career is touched on in pages 48-50, Nelson has developed a role akin to a country music elder statesman, whom it is almost unimaginable to challenge or accuse of being anything less than the embodiment of country.

being a country trope and the use of which Griffiths has suggested acknowledges Maines' "indebtedness to the genre, as well as her need to be free of it" (2015, 241-42). Perhaps the most noteworthy examples of the Chicks taking aim at Nashville by challenging its traditional codes can be found in the album *Taking The Long Way* (#1, 2006). "Easy Silence" (2006) inverts the message of Keith's "American Soldier," the lines "They form commissions trying to find / The next one they can crucify" portraying the Chicks as martyrs at the hands of Nashville's intolerance. "Not Ready To Make Nice" (#36, 2006) sees the band challenge Nashville's idealised norms of femininity, asserting themselves as strong-willed women who refuse to "back down," and that they remain "mad as hell" at the country establishment for turning its back on them.⁷

While Nashville's sound was being influenced by hyper-masculine conceptions of the American fighting spirit, the strand of patriotism that extols American values such as the nuclear family and Christian religion was producing another series of hits. These songs were typified by a desire for nostalgia. Braden Leap has assessed that nostalgic references were found in 40% of country chart-toppers in the 2000s; this figure is around 15% greater than in both the 1990s and 2010s (2020, 180). This increased appetite for nostalgic songs coincided with a significant reduction in the success of Nashville's female acts. Between 1996 and 2001, approximately 33% of country chart-toppers were by solo women or all-female groups. Between 2002 and 2007, this figure dropped to 12% (see Appendix B). Similar stories appear when analysing other measures of Nashville success. Between 1971 and 2001, there was at least one female nominee for the year's CMA Entertainer of the Year Award. Between 2002 and 2008, not a single woman was nominated for the award. Thus, female country artists and their songs enjoyed significantly less visibility than they did in the 1990s. Going some way to

⁷ After winning the 2007 Grammy for both "Song of the Year" and "Record of the Year," the song peaked at #4 on the Hot 100.

potentially explain these findings, Eric Rasmussen and Rebecca Densley's analysis of contemporary country music concluded that "[l]yrics in songs in the 2000s were more likely to refer to women in traditional roles than were songs in the 1990s" (2017, 196). The pair also identified that of the 65 (out of a sample of 250) songs in the 2000s to feature depictions of women in a family role, 60 were by male artists, a figure twice as high as in the 1990s and 2010s (197). Throughout the 2000s, then, Nashville's female acts found themselves in the peculiar position of having significantly reduced success compared to the previous decade, whilst songs extolling the virtues of women were becoming increasingly prevalent.

This was, in part, a result of a trend among Nashville's male artists of producing songs that sought to reiterate the value of women in traditional roles. Usually, such hits focused on the family. Lonestar's "My Front Porch Looking In" (#1, 2003) focuses on a man who realises that nothing will bring him more happiness in life than his family, namely his wife, whom he christens "the most beautiful girl" as she holds both his children. The group's subsequent chart-topper, "Mr. Mom" (#1, 2004), sees the singer realise the true value of his wife after spending a day in her shoes, and recognise how hard it is to do the traditional work of a stay-at-home mom. Other songs from the era, including Craig Morgan's "That's What I Love About Sunday" (#1, 2005) and Rascal Flatts' "Bless the Broken Road" (#1, 2005), similarly highlight the importance to male fulfilment of having wives who conform to traditional and Christian notions of femininity. The worldview of country, both when considering its focus on matters of patriotism and family values, was thus distinctly male. After six years of success between 1996 and 2001, the opportunities and support for Nashville's female artists rapidly declined. In 2003, "Travelin' Soldier" was the only #1 country hit by or featuring a female singer, meaning women accounted for just 2% of time spent at #1 that year (see Appendix A). The period after the controversy caused by Maines' comments correlates with a period in which most of the successful songs by female artists typically served to reinforce traditional, conservative gender

norms. These included hits like Carrie Underwood's "All-American Girl" (#1, 2008), Gretchen Wilson's "Redneck Woman" (#1, 2004), and Faith Hill's "Mississippi Girl" (#1, 2005). "Redneck Woman" highlights this reversion to traditional country norms of womanhood, and was the first female country #1 in over 14 months after "Travelin' Soldier." The song rejects the need to be a "high class broad" and instead promotes a sense of pride in "keeping it country." In Nashville, women could be empowered so long as this was in keeping with traditional country codes of class and regional identity, not in ways tinged by cosmopolitan elitism.

In part, this switch in country music from a hawkish patriotism to one that focused more on traditional family relationships was due to new understandings of what war meant to Americans. Though the U.S. launched Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001, few U.S. service members initially died due to fighting overseas. This likely contributed to the inflated sense of American supremacy found in those early jingoistic hits. However, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the number of American military casualties rose. 2001 and 2002 saw just 29 deaths combined, but this figure increased to 312 in 2003. In 2004, this figure doubled again to 735, and was then maintained until 2008, when 847 U.S. service members died as a result of hostile action (Blum and DeBruyne 2020, 7).⁸ It seems likely that country musicians became increasingly hesitant of putting out hits meant to celebrate America's unrivalled military might whilst the nation was suffering significant casualties. This goes some way to explaining the rearticulation of patriotism in country music songs seen after the invasion of Iraq, ironically mirroring the sense of loss in "Travelin' Soldier" which had attempted to act as something of a cautionary tale. Often, these songs were connected to those promoting a strong love of family and religion. Lonestar's "Somebody's Someone" (#53, 2004) sees the narrator

⁸ This data is taken from a report by the Congressional Research Service. No breakdown of deaths per year for the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan is provided, but deaths are sorted by categories including "accident," "self-inflicted," and "hostile action." The data here relates to deaths attributed to "hostile action" between 2001 and 2007.

explain to his son the value of the American soldiers dying in terms of their familial worth, as they are “somebody’s someone, a neighbour, a husband / A brother, a father, and a mother’s only son.” Similar songs achieved more chart success, including Trace Adkins’ “Arlington” (#16, 2005) and Tim McGraw’s “If You’re Reading This” (#3, 2007). Again, the space made available for female artists in this patriotic realm of country music was limited, although one of the most successful of these country hits that deals with the familial or personal costs of war was Carrie Underwood’s “Just a Dream” (#1, 2008), which highlights the loss of a young wife’s husband fighting overseas. The song also serves the secondary purpose of highlighting an admirable life-course narrative for women: marrying patriotic men.

Throughout the 2000s, women’s significance in Nashville reduced drastically compared to the previous decade. Women achieved a significantly smaller amount of #1 hits, and their artistry went consistently unrecognised by the genre’s biggest awards. The dominance of male country artists in this period corresponded with a revival of patriotism and a romanticisation of the past, particularly where gender relations and women’s roles were concerned. Patriotic hits were almost always by male performers, both in the aggressively hyper-masculine period immediately following 9/11 and once country musicians embraced a patriotism that was more reflective of the sacrifice of U.S. soldiers. The standard role of women in country thus shifted from one of empowerment to one that sought to engage with norms that more closely resembled traditional understandings of country femininity: the homemaker, the wife, the mother. Whilst some songs by female artists challenged this norm, like Terri Clark’s “Girls Lie Too” (#1, 2004), these were significantly less frequent than they were in the previous decade. The country establishment’s response to the Chicks controversy made clear to the genre’s female artists where the boundaries lay regarding women’s outspokenness. Whilst other liberal leaning acts such as McGraw clearly understood that the blacklisting of the Chicks was tied to their disdain for a president who was largely admired by country’s conservative

fanbase, the response to Maines' comments was inherently gendered, particularly from country audiences whose insistence that the group should "shut up and sing" defined women by their exclusion from the political realm (Kopple and Peck 2006). The Chicks controversy became a cautionary tale in country music, making clear to female acts that to avoid being "Dixie Chicked," they had to conform to the standards of what it meant to be a country woman, that is, to shut up and sing.

2. New Decade, New Ideals: Women as Playthings in ‘Bro-Country’

We used to get a little respect

Now we’re lucky if we even get

To climb up in your truck, keep our mouth shut, and ride along

And be the girl in a country song

— Maddie & Tae, “Girl in a Country Song”

By the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the surge of country music featuring patriotic themes had begun to subside. As if the industry was hesitant to allow an opportunity for female artists to reclaim their place, the hole that patriotic music left in Nashville was immediately plugged by a new phenomenon, first described in 2013 as ‘bro-country’ (Rosen 2013). Following on from the conservative conceptions of gender roles propagated by early 2000s country music, bro-country represented an almost logical evolution. Nashville had become increasingly androcentric, and it had become rarer for female artists to achieve the same levels of success as their male country counterparts. Paired with what could be considered regressive attitudes towards women and their place in the country industry that became widespread after the Chicks controversy, bro-country, which glorified alcohol, trucks, and — most significantly for this chapter — the sexual pursuit of women, continued this revival of conservative ideology. The themes in bro-country songs were not new to country music: mid-2000s hits like Joe Nichols’ “Tequila Makes Her Clothes Fall Off” (#1, 2005) made use of innuendo and addressed alcohol and partying, as does bro-country. However, songs like Nichols’ hardly dominated the genre; moreover, Nichols’ character appears amused by his partner’s clothes-shedding antics, placing such songs at odds with the later culture of misogynist noise that came to dominate country music. Indeed, this culture is evident from even the earliest, prototypical bro-country hits. Trace

Adkins' "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk" (#2, 2006) sees Adkins and friends pursuing a particularly shapely lady, with one male character even provoking the ire of his girlfriend when he is caught ogling the woman in question. Adkins excuses him, singing, "Poor ol' boy it ain't his fault it's so hard not to stare."

Bro-country was not a peripheral subgenre: its sound dominated Nashville (Yahr 2019). A then-record was set by Florida-Georgia Line's "Cruise" (#1, 2012) when it spent twenty weeks atop Hot Country Songs (Carlson 2014).¹ A widely shared YouTube video uploaded in late 2014 overlaid six bro-country songs, all of which were Top 5 singles, in an effort to highlight the homogeneity in the subgenre's sound and themes (Sir Mashalot 2014). Although most popular between 2011 and 2015, bro-country's themes featured prominently in the genre for over a decade, with songs like Luke Bryan's "Country Girl (Shake It For Me)" (#4, 2011) and Sam Hunt's "Body Like A Backroad" (#1, 2017) echoing Adkins' sentiment. Bro-country made a habit of objectifying women, valuing them only when they benefitted men, usually in terms of sexual gratification. With a relative dearth of female country megastars at the time, and some of the most successful of this already limited number (notably Taylor Swift) foraying into the pop mainstream, not only was the culture of country distinctly male, but so too was its sound.

Jada Watson's analyses of gender inequality on country radio provide useful context. During the heyday of female country artists of the late 1990s, women received around 3 million spins per year on country radio, approximately half that of their male counterparts (2019, 9). But after the Chicks controversy and the industry-wide emphasis on reasserting a sense of tradition in country music, this figure had more than halved to fewer than 1.5 million spins for female country acts by 2010, whilst the number of male spins remained constant (9). Between

¹ Whilst the song spent just three weeks atop Country Airplay, its popularity outside of country radio highlights bro-country's permeation of society.

2010 and 2015, the height of the bro-country period, the number of total annual spins women received on country radio remained below 1.5 million per annum; however, the number of spins for men nearly doubled, jumping from the decade-long constant of around 6 million to nearly 10.5 million a year. The ratio of female to male spins thus decreased from 1:2 in 2000, to 1:6 in 2010, to 1:10 in 2015 (9). Whilst the position and influence of female country stars in Nashville declined during the 2000s, the next half-decade saw the status of country's male artists increase significantly. Emphasising the result of these paired phenomena, Watson notes that between 2000 and 2020, "the culture of *Billboard's* airplay chart changed so drastically that the percentage of songs by women in the Top 20 declined 75%" (2020, preface).

Bro-country contributed significantly to this change in culture. Male voices dominated throughout this period, as they had in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Similarly, as was the case in songs extolling the virtue of women in traditional roles, women's narratives during this period were often relayed via male artists; it became increasingly difficult for women's voices to be heard. This chapter analyses the bro-country subgenre in order to provide an insight into contemporary ideals of masculinity in country music. It also explores the resistance bro-country elicited from within the country music industry, and what this suggests about the conflicted and contested state of sexual politics and gender ideologies in country's post-Chicks evolution.

Whilst bro-country's domination of Nashville served the same purpose as did the reassertion of traditional American values in the early part of the century (re-centralising the masculine), the two eras were distinct. The culture of bro-country hardly resembled anything that had come before in country music, in part due to the growing influence of hip-hop and other musical genres. Whilst the trends of the 2000s had seen men celebrated as breadwinners and traditional heterosexual providers, Braden Leap has acknowledged that in the 2010s men were portrayed less as selfless providers for their families and more as selfish hedonists whose main interest in women was supplying them with "alcohol, transportation, and places to hook

up” (2020, 181). Bro-country took the now re-established country norms of male-centrism and turned them into something more nefarious, occasionally predatory, often sexist. Leap notes one such change as being prevalent in the depictions of women in country music in the two eras: the Lonestar-brand of country music saw women as typically “employed equals,” à la “Mr. Mom” (#1, 2004), wherein women were uplifted for the hard work of motherhood; in contrast, bro-country sought to normalise depictions of women as “sexual objects” (182).

Just how pervasive this objectification was is evidenced in Eric Rasmussen’s and Rebecca Densley’s analysis of gender roles in the top 50 country songs for each of the first 5 years of the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. 99 of the 250 analysed songs in the early-2010s featured comments about women’s appearance, a number double that found in the comparable sample a decade earlier (2017, 197). Rasmussen and Densley also found that lyrics in bro-country music were more likely to objectify women than hits of the 2000s, and that the changing attitudes towards women were largely driven by songs by male singers (196, 198). As Jada Watson has suggested, male country artists during the period of bro-country’s dominance appear to have held increased influence over the ideological direction of country music, often resulting in the marginalisation of women in the industry.

Further supporting this, Cenate Pruitt’s analysis of masculine identity in country hits between 2000 and 2015 identified the prevalence of three “masculine archetypes”: the lover, the family man, and the country boy (2019, 176).² Noteworthy in Pruitt’s analysis is that the “life course narratives” identified imply a near-linear progression, from the rowdy country boy to the lover who settles down into a family man, with each “stage” growing to value women more as equals. However, the songs in Pruitt’s sample considered to represent the country boy, the most juvenile of the archetypes, were all released between 2010 and 2015, the most recent

² A fourth archetype was also identified: the hell-raiser. However, all the songs in Pruitt’s sample related to this archetype were by Toby Keith, perhaps suggesting Keith is atypical when it comes to country masculine life-course narratives.

years analysed (189). Conversely, a majority (13 of 21) of the songs describing lovers or family men were released prior to 2010 (189-90). The dominance of the bro-country period (synonymous with the songs described as representing the country boy) between 2010 and 2015 instead suggests a regression from the more emotionally intelligent male archetypes of the prior decade. The influx of a new set of young male country stars in the early 2010s, paired with country music's growing popularity amongst teenagers, could in part explain the popularity of this youthful attitude (NPD 2013).³ However, many of the biggest stars of the 2010s, who helped fuel the country boy persona (Jason Aldean, 32; Luke Bryan, 33; Blake Shelton, 33), were similar ages in 2010 to their "lover" and "family man" counterparts (Garth Brooks, 37; Richie McDonald, 38; Tim McGraw, 32) in 2000. This implies less a progression from youth to maturity than a change of culture within Nashville, and perhaps the U.S. at large, where the norms for men focused not on emotional growth but on reclaiming carefree youth.

Understanding this regression requires looking to other factors. Viewing the 2008 financial crisis as a turning point, Neal pinpoints economic uncertainty as being central to country's reimagined gender dynamics; increasingly common became depictions of "sophisticated women" who turn to country boys for satisfaction, an allegory for larger society and country music, a back-to-basics approach for gratification in the face of cosmopolitan over-indulgence (2016, 6-7). Randy Houser's "How Country Feels" (#1, 2013) features a country man seducing a woman who "Ain't never heard a rooster crow," whilst "Bait a Hook" (#17, 2012) sees Justin Moore court a woman with "new Gucci shoes," whose existing partner Moore seeks to emasculate, thus presenting country boys as positively masculine in comparison to sophisticated (sub)urban men. Moore critiques how the woman had to drive home her boyfriend after just "two umbrella drinks" (implying such drinks are feminine), before

³ At the start of the 2010s, bro-country stars Chase Rice, Florida Georgia Line, and Sam Hunt were all in their mid-20s.

attacking his choice of car, “a Prius, ‘cause he’s into being green.” The chorus drives home this emasculating anthem, with Moore poking fun at how the suburban man “can’t even bait a hook,” or “skin a buck”; nor, most laughably, does he know “who Jack Daniels is.” The romanticising of the country boy, and rurality more generally, can be linked to the creation of an epoch in country music wherein male characters can do little wrong, and are made masculine once again, particularly through their sexual prowess; if the country boy suffers in a world wrecked by financial crisis, he at least has the raw sexual virility bestowed by living on the land with which to re-establish his masculinity and tempt the cosmopolitan woman away from her metropolitan suitors.

Bro-country, then, sought to re-establish masculinity in country music in a way that differentiated it from the urban mainstream and pop music. A notable example of how this was achieved can be seen in “Boys ‘Round Here” (#1, 2013) by Blake Shelton (featuring Pistol Annies & Friends). The song asserts the differences between country and other ways of American life, uplifting a community of country boys who are united by pride in their shared culture, or “keeping it country.” Shelton praises the fact that “Ain’t a damn [country boy] know how to do the ‘dougie,’” a hip-hop dance move that was experiencing a revival in the early 2010s, with his sentiment only somewhat undermined by the fact that the song leans heavily on hip-hop inspired sounds. Nonetheless, “Boys ‘Round Here” promotes ways of performing country masculinity that were attainable to even those wrecked by financial crisis. Country men are seen to be authentic when they drink or drive (especially trucks) and through sex. Most importantly, in a period that, according to Edgar and Holladay, saw a crisis of masculinity, these country boys are presented as attractive to country women, who “like that y’all and southern drawl.” Shelton thus works to assure country men that whilst cosmopolitan women may be dissatisfied with urban and suburban men, country masculinity delivers for women of all types.

Women were not absent from the country music industry during the heights of bro-country; they were, however, less successful than their male counterparts. While the number of women per year with #1 singles as measured by country airplay in the height of the bro-country era (2010-2015: 4.2) was higher than in the era defined by patriotic themes (2002-2007: 2.8), both figures are substantially lower than during the period of women's heyday in country music (1996-2001: 6). Further, between 2008 and 2015, the percentage of country #1s by women decreased significantly (see Appendix A). The declining success of female country talent in the bro-country era can best be seen, however, when focusing on the number of female country 'superstars'. Whilst quantifying 'superstardom' is subjective, this work considers a valid metric to be repeated success within a set time frame; the following analysis thus considers a country 'superstar' as any act with #1s in at least three years of a six-year period. During women's heyday in country music from 1996 to 2001, five different female artists or women-led groups achieved this feat. In the comparable six-year period between 2010 and 2015, just three women did so.⁴ Whilst this difference seems negligible, this coincided with massive success for male artists in Nashville. Nine men earned #1s in three of the six years between 1996 and 2001, meaning women accounted for just over 1 in 3 country 'superstars' in this period; in the bro-country era, 21 male artists did so. Women thus constituted around 1 in 9 'superstars.'⁵

The bro-country period was one that saw few women reach the zenith of country stardom. The sexism in the era's music was exacerbated by sexism within the industry. One country radio consultant in 2015 declared that "[t]he expectation is we're principally a male format with a smaller female component", before equating female artists to the "tomatoes of our salad" (Keel 2015). Whilst there were challenges to this perceived unfairness, some female

⁴ During country's 'patriotic' era between September 12th 2001 through 2008, there were fifteen male to just two female superstars, for a ratio of 1 in around 7.

⁵ Between 2010 and 2015, two mixed-gender groups also achieved #1s in three of the six years, thus totalling 26 country 'superstars' throughout this period.

country artists engaged positively with bro-country themes as representing an updated version of the traditional gender norms pushed in Nashville in the 2000s. RaeLynn's debut single "God Made Girls" (#16, 2015) embraces much of bro-country's messaging about the social position of women, particularly as their status relates to men. RaeLynn opens the song by proclaiming that "God made girls" because "Somebody's gotta wear a pretty skirt / Somebody's gotta be the one to flirt." The song thus pushed back against those that considered bro-country to be sexist by suggesting instead that in a conservative, if not religious, context, women exist for men's pleasure. Further engaging with bro-country stereotypes, RaeLynn acknowledges that women are expected to be the emotional counterparts to men seemingly drained of emotional intelligence. The connection between Christian religion and conservative gender roles engages with themes from the 2000s in country music, wherein women were often praised for their value as homemakers and mothers, and acknowledges the long-standing association of Nashville's traditional audience with the American South. RaeLynn's song thus legitimises the bro-country attitude to women by reinterpreting it to fit country norms: bro-country's objectification of women is normalised given that "God made girls" seemingly only to aid or fulfil men's needs.

Nonetheless, bro-country did not go unchallenged within the country industry. Whilst criticisms from industry executives, radio producers, and record labels were rare, a sizable minority of country singers, male and female, critiqued bro-country. These criticisms can be separated into musical criticisms, which considered the sound and simplification of country themes a flaw of bro-country, and critiques of the culture of sexism perpetuated by bro-country's songs and stars.

In terms of the musical critique, bro-country came to be increasingly decried by artists who considered the subgenre to be detracting from the artistic merit and authenticity of country music. Country music is a genre rooted in the rural, southern working-class, often associated

with whiteness; by contrast, bro-country is infused with urban hip-hop sound and style. Except for a potential working-class solidarity, there would seem to be little common ground between the two genres. The racial implications of this backlash to bro-country should not be overlooked; the record-setting time “Cruise,” (#1, 2012) bro-country’s anthem, spent atop the Hot Country Songs chart occurred as a result of the renewed popularity and attention given to the song after a remix featuring hip-hop star Nelly was released. As with Lil Nas X’s and Billy Cyrus’s “Old Town Road,” the presence of an African American rapper on an ostensibly country tune caused some country fans and gatekeepers to question its authenticity.

Bro-country’s artistic integrity was further called into question by its seeming contradiction of long-defined standards of country authenticity, largely due to its absorbing of mainstream pop-music trends. Joli Jensen notes that by “ascribing to country music the authenticity we see evaporating in the present,” what is created in country music is an idealised past in which country audiences can escape the “conflicts of modernity” (1998, 137, 160). When country music then embraces undeniably modern sounds and topics, the genre’s authenticity, and the image of it as emerging out of an idealised past, is weakened. Indeed, the musical criticisms levelled at bro-country by other country artists focus on its musically unimaginative nature and repetitive themes, notably the themes of tailgate parties and alcohol-fuelled raves, rather than the subgenre’s sexism problem. Asked in a 2013 interview about what musical trend needed to be stopped, country singer Kacey Musgraves responded: “Anyone singing about trucks, in any form, in any song, anywhere” (Stark 2013). Echoing the sentiment, Scotty McCreery’s “Something More” (2013) criticised the proliferation of such songs, opening: “By now I think I’ve heard every line there is to hear ‘bout a truck / And I’ve got the point that beer tastes good....”⁶ The rest of McCreery’s song goes on to promote what he considers important things in life that mean “something more”: family and friendship.

⁶ The song was not released as a single but appears on his 2013 #1 album, *See You Tonight*.

Going further than either of these commentaries on bro-country, however, was Zac Brown, whose country credentials are cemented by his eponymous band's fourteen #1s. In a 2013 interview, Brown commented: "I love Luke Bryan and he's had some great songs, but ["That's My Kind Of Night" (#2, 2013)] is the worst song I've ever heard" (Whitaker 2013). Brown's collaborations with country legends like Alan Jackson, as well as notable figures on the country periphery like Jimmy Buffett, go some way to highlighting the distance between his own understanding of country music, and bro-country's. In response, however, Jason Aldean defended Bryan, posting on Instagram: "I hear some other artist are bashing my boy @lukebryan new song, sayin its the worst song they have ever heard..... To those people runnin their mouths, trust me when i tell u that nobody gives a shit what u think" (2013).⁷ Aldean's assertion that nobody cared for Brown's opinion clarifies the dichotomy that had grown in country music between those who valued bro-country, and those who did not.

Perhaps understandably, bro-country artists responded negatively to such criticism. Luke Bryan accused the term bro-country of being "aggravating and derogatory," and suggested that whilst he may "sing about a truck and a beer on one song," such subjects were not crucial to his artistry (Yahr 2019). On Twitter, Blake Shelton also attacked the label's derogatory implications, accusing it of being created by people who do not "understand that country music constantly changes" (Yahr 2019). Noteworthy are the different responses to being labelled bro-country taken by Bryan and Shelton. Bryan's clear displeasure with being considered bro-country suggests an acknowledgement that there is something inauthentic, or otherwise negative, about what the term connotes. Conversely, whilst Shelton dismissed the label, his subsequent comments highlighting the fluid nature of country music's authenticity suggest bro-country is not an inappropriate label because it is offensive, but rather that it is redundant: for Shelton, bro-country *is* country. The contested understandings of what country

⁷ Reproduced as written.

music was during the bro-country era often led to artists more associated with traditional country sound styles, or otherwise located on the fringes of the country mainstream, being labelled as ‘Americana’ or ‘roots’ artists (Hann 2017). Often, this recategorization process was undertaken by fans of such artists as Musgraves, Brown, and Chris Stapleton, who sought to differentiate their music tastes to the simple stylings and sexism of bro-country (Hann).

Debates around bro-country’s authenticity serve as useful background for the other major critique of the subgenre: its sexism problem. Bro-country emerged as a powerful force in country music before events that impacted American society later in the 2010s, notably the #MeToo movement. At the height of bro-country’s popularity, women’s voices were not just noticeably absent from country music, but from broader society too. Maddie & Tae’s hit “Girl in a Country Song” (#1, 2014) sought to address this.⁸ The song is a tongue-in-cheek response to the notable absence of women in bro-country songs, and their objectification when they are present. Rehumanising women in country music is one of the hit’s central themes: the second verse notes the pair “got a name / And to you, it ain’t ‘pretty little thing,’ ‘honey’ or ‘baby,’” all of which became increasingly commonplace in country throughout the bro-country era. Throughout the track, the duo take aim at multiple bro-country hits by placing themselves in the position of the often-unnamed woman in the songs: Maddie Marlow commented that doing so was “just giving the girls a voice” (Menze 2014). Songs lampooned in this manner include Shelton’s earlier-discussed “Boys ‘Round Here,” Billy Currington’s “Hey Girl” (#1, 2013), and Jason Aldean’s “My Kinda Party” (#2, 2011). Importantly, Maddie & Tae acknowledge that the attitude towards women in country music changed as bro-country appeared. The chorus questions how being “the girl in a country song” went “so wrong,” before again dismissing the notion that women are only good for “lookin’ good” for men. The lack of respect afforded to

⁸ 2013 remains the only year since 1990 without a country #1 by a solo woman or all-female group, as measured by airplay. See Appendix B.

women in bro-country music is contrasted with a more authentic and less sexist country music tradition, with the pair highlighting how country music patriarchs “Conway [Twitty] and George Strait / Never did it this way / Back in the old days.” Again, the romanticising of an idealised past is a significant aspect of country’s identity, and an acknowledgement of the increased objectification of women in contemporary country music suggests that the current crop of male country stars will hardly be remembered with the same level of respect or admiration as older-generation stars like Strait and Twitty.

The responses to “Girl in a Country Strong” from bro-country artists revealed the challenges facing women in the country industry at the time. In an abrupt interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Brian Kelley (of Florida Georgia Line) at first suggested he had not heard the song, before stating, “All I’m gonna say about that is, I don’t know one girl who doesn’t want to be a girl in a country song” (Yahr 2019). Kelley’s response suggests he took personal offence at what was a largely humorous retort to a period wherein the role and place of women in country music were demeaned. Further, his insistence that he knows “girl[s]” who want to be like those in his songs highlights the power of men in bro-country, dominating not just country narratives but being the arbiters of what women like. His use of infantilising language in this context is also particularly revealing of the power imbalance between country’s ‘bros’ and ‘girls.’ Emily Yahr of the *Washington Post* acknowledged a tweet by Chase Rice, who co-wrote “Cruise” before achieving country chart success as a performer, as being the only example from a male star which “publicly praised” Maddie & Tae’s record, although this praise was itself patronising: “I love this new @MaddieandTae song. Somethin [sic] sexy bout a little shit talkin [sic]. Keep it up girls” (2019).

It was not just Nashville’s women who took exception to the prevailing sexism of bro-country: two of country-music’s biggest names at the time, Kenny Chesney and Brad Paisley, were openly critical of the subgenre. Interviewed by *Billboard* in 2014, Chesney lamented the

fact that “Over the last several years, it seems like anytime anybody sings about a woman, she’s in cutoff jeans, drinking and on a tailgate — they objectify the hell out of them” (Waddell 2014). Significant in Chesney’s reprimand of bro-country is the implication that singing about women in a way that does not treat them as intelligent human beings is juvenile. Chesney acknowledges that “[t]wenty years ago, [he] might” have sung songs with similar attitudes, but implies that both he and his music have matured and now treat women with the respect they deserve (Waddell).

Paisley likewise criticised both the absence of women in country music and how the industry’s male-dominated sound was unimaginative and disrespectful. In an interview published a month after Chesney’s, Paisley pointed to two of his songs, “Crushin’ It” (#9, 2015) and “River Bank” (#2, 2014), as songs that fit the bro-country vibe without employing the same overused clichés and sexist attitudes (Finan 2014). Indeed, the theme of both songs is “getting unwound,” and the only references to women are Paisley’s partner chiding him for dropping framed photos, Paisley encouraging his partner to change clothes so they can go inner tubing together, and one errant “baby.” The comments of the pair are significant given their status in Nashville. Chesney is a four-time winner of the CMA award for “Entertainer of the Year,” a record only bettered by Garth Brooks’ seven wins. Paisley won the same award in 2010.

With some of country’s biggest stars highlighting a growing sexism issue within the genre, it is apparent that bro-country was acknowledged as a significant contributing factor to the reduced space for women in Nashville. It is also noteworthy that by the bro-country period, both Paisley and Chesney had reached the heights of their success. In part, this may be explained by their age: at the time of their 2014 interviews, both Chesney and Paisley were in their 40s, an age Chesney seemingly considered too old to be still singing about women in a demeaning manner. Additionally, the pair’s music, despite Paisley’s attempt at

producing original, non-sexist bro-country hits, seems out of place with a culture of tailgate partying. Paisley's "Southern Comfort Zone" (#2, 2013) exemplifies this: the song is an ode to the perceived wonders and comforts of the American South (from biscuits and gravy, to NASCAR, to Billy Graham, to — of course — country music), and is more representative of the mid-2000s patriotic country music than bro-country.⁹

As bro-country dominated Nashville, the awards success of older artists less inclined to modern trends thus declined. All of Chesney's "Entertainer of the Year" victories came between 2004 and 2008, and he was nominated for or won the award every year between 2002 and 2009; yet between 2010 and 2015, Chesney was nominated just twice. Paisley was nominated every year between 2005 and 2009, but just three times between 2010 and 2015. What this makes clear is that bro-country represented a departure from the country music that came before. Whilst the music of the 2000s made clear the expectations of being a woman in country music, bro-country music drastically reduced the agency of women to such an extent that it became obvious, even to artists aligned with the tradition of the 2000s, that bro-country reflected and reinforced a hostile environment for women in the genre.

Bro-country dominated the country airwaves for over five years and popularised a culture that marginalised the place of women, not just in the industry, but in country songs as well. During this time, tension emerged between artists, male and female, increasingly aware of the damage that bro-country was doing to the status of women in country music, and those mainly male stars benefitting commercially from the subgenre. For those male critics of bro-country like Chesney and Paisley, bro-country's hedonism, as well as the musical similarity of some of the biggest hits of the era, pointed to inauthenticity. For such men, women in country music should be considered as equals to men, at least to the extent that they had been in the

⁹ Paisley sings: "I can't see this world unless I go / Outside my southern comfort zone," suggesting a limitation to the greatness of the region. The song's success in Nashville suggests either that this aspect of the song was overlooked in place of its favourable depictions, or Paisley's regret at the truth of the sentiment was sincere: the song ends with a choir performing "I Wish I Was In Dixie."

conservative country music of the 2000s. But despite the rebuke of certain country stars, the period of bro-country's dominance in Nashville coincided with it becoming rarer for female artists to rival their male counterparts' success, and a growing disparity between the prevalence of female and male voices on country radio.

3. Leaving Nashville, Never Easy: Formerly ‘Country’ Women as Crossover Successes

Part of the fabric of being a country artist is ‘don’t force your politics on people’... That is grilled into us.

— Taylor Swift, *Miss Americana*

One of the defining aspects of American country music has come to be a sensitivity about what makes country ‘country.’ As previously addressed, this sensitivity has led to periods in which performers have variously been accused of selling out, forgetting their roots, or otherwise not being country enough. The rise of empowered women in the late-1990s country scene and the infusion of hip-hop themes in ‘bro-country’ music mark just the two latest entries in this field. Understandably, therefore, those who presume themselves to be country’s gatekeepers tend to be particularly sensitive when it comes to sounds and artists who straddle the line between multiple genres, or, even further, leave country altogether in search of greener pastures. Over the last decade, some of country music’s biggest female acts — most notably Taylor Swift and Kacey Musgraves — have reduced or altered their association with country music as it exists in Nashville. These moves appear to have been made with artistic freedom, along with financial implications, in mind, suggesting an increasing dissatisfaction amongst some of country music’s biggest names with the way the industry operates. The evolution of the genre’s sound and identity since the 1990s means there remains a degree of latitude within the industry; yet this appears to be too limited to afford artists their own space to effect meaningful change in country’s sound, image, and perception.

One recent example of this can be found in the debacle surrounding Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” (2019), which features Billy Ray Cyrus. Despite the song’s country themes, boasting a bona fide country star as a featured artist, and not being dissimilar to much of the

bro-country music that dominated the country airwaves earlier in the decade, “Old Town Road” was not considered country enough to remain on the Hot Country Songs chart. After climbing to #19, *Billboard* disqualified it from the chart on the basis that the single failed to “embrace enough elements of today’s country music” (Leight 2019). Unperturbed, the song reached #1 on both *Billboard*’s Hot 100 and Hot Rap/Hip-Hop Songs charts — hip-hop seemingly less unaccepting of country, than country of hip-hop.¹ That a country-rap mega-hit by a gay Black man reignited debates over country music’s identity reveals the fundamental precariousness of the genre; country music could mean any number of things to any number of people, but it cannot be everything for all. With country being historically defined by a connection to region and tradition, it can become destabilised when it takes on aspects of other genres. Florida Georgia Line’s bro-country hit “Cruise” (#1, 2012) employed a similar blend of country instrumentation, *twang*, and rap as did “Old Town Road,” yet was nonetheless considered authentically country; the significance of place and race as factors in this outcome should not be understated. Florida Georgia Line’s name highlights the group’s southern-ness, while the duo also consists of two white men who play into the ‘redneck’ stereotype. A reasonable deduction would therefore be that artists who, by region and race, are more ‘typically country,’ are awarded a greater degree of freedom in their experimentation with genre norms and crossings.

The policing of country music’s norms creates an environment that at the very least, if not hostile to outsiders, could be described as insular. To remain welcome in this insular community, country artists often face self-imposed restrictions, creating an even more suffocating environment. Whilst expulsions from the country community, as with the Chicks, highlight how country radio and fans can force acts into exile from the genre, a more frequent

¹ It reached just #50 on the Country Airplay chart, a more reliable method of measuring support from country audiences, but also won the 2019 CMA award for “Musical Event of the Year.” Winning this accolade despite being disqualified from the country charts highlights the continued negotiation of the meaning of ‘country,’ even among the different groups of people laying claim to the legitimacy of defining the genre.

occurrence in the history of country music, especially since the 1990s, has been country acts choosing to move away from the genre of their own volition. This chapter explores the increasing commonality of this practice which in the 1990s concerned mostly fringe artists but in the past decade has involved megastars of the country industry, and appears to be a particularly gendered phenomenon.

Many former country artists have highlighted the pressure faced by performers — typically, but not exclusively, female — to conform to the sonic, aesthetic, and gendered standards expected of country stars.² Notably impacted by such expectations are queer artists or artists with large queer followings, as well as acts whose music plays with country music's norms. One such example is Canadian k.d. lang, who has acknowledged facing a “pressure” to conform to “the typical stereotype” of a female country singer; however, their performances included not-so-subtle hints to their identity as a lesbian, and their genderqueer embrace of the cowboy persona queered iconic country imagery and expectations (“Deep Dive into Queer Country” 2022). lang's eventual crossover to adult contemporary music has been seen as a critique of the limitations of country music's sense of self, with lang unable to express her identity as a lesbian in the same way she could in the pop world.³ lang's experiences in and subsequent escape from country, paired with Lil Nas X's quasi-rejection by some in the industry nearly three decades later, are indicative of a long-established norm in Nashville that demands conformity, not only to the genre's musical conventions but also to traditional ideals: even in contemporary country music, queer artists attempting to achieve stardom acknowledge

² Few male country artists have crossed into other genres as have female country stars. However, at the height of his fame in the late 1990s, Garth Brooks released a pop inspired album under his one-time persona Chris Gaines. The album's R&B-inspired lead single, “Lost In You,” reached #5 on the Hot 100 in 1999. Brooks' use of an alias to release music far removed from country suggests that men too were expected to conform to the musical norms of Nashville, devoting the genre their full attention.

³ It is worth noting that lang's ability to fully establish herself in the country mainstream faced numerous uphill battles besides her queerness, most notably her proclivity for an older style of country, more typically associated with the “Western” that has long been dropped from the genre's name, and her Canadian nationality. Though there are country stars who are not from the US (including Twain and Keith Urban), such acts constitute a small minority.

being encouraged to hide their sexuality (Yahr 2021). The expectation from the early 1990s remains that women in country should conform to traditional codes of femininity, stifling displays of queerness and its disregard for gender and sexual norms. However, artists who queer country's norms to a lesser degree than lang have still sought either to explore other genres in order to share the full scope of their artistry and ethos, or have withheld beliefs which they feel are incompatible with country music orthodoxy.

The most notable example of this is Dolly Parton, one of country's most recognisable names, as well as something of a gold standard for negotiating country music as a woman. In recent years, Parton has publicly championed both liberal and non-ideological causes, including voicing her support for marriage equality as early as 2009 and, through her Dollywood Foundation, fundraising for families affected by wildfires in her home state of Tennessee (LGBTQ Nation 2009; "The Dollywood Foundation" n.d.).⁴ However, Parton's present openness regarding which causes she supports is the result of many years of stardom in which she studiously avoided public involvement with politics or social issues. Her inaction on such issues did not go unnoticed, at one point hampering her chances of an invitation to perform at the White House. Correspondence between the then-Governor of Tennessee Lamar Alexander and Ronald Reagan's Deputy Chief of Staff in 1982 reveals a debate over which popular country acts would be suitable performers at a White House function, based primarily on their record of support for conservative causes (Alexander 1982). After suggesting various artists who would and would not be suitable, based on their involvement in politics, Alexander adds: "I certainly don't mean to ignore some of the superstars like...Dolly Parton. They would be great entertainers and great representatives of Tennessee. They simply have never been very

⁴ Parton's support for marriage equality followed her appearance on the compilation album *Red Hot + Country*, intended to raise funds to fight against AIDS/HIV, suggesting long-standing support for LGBTQ+ causes. Despite featuring a wealth of country talent including Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, and Billy Ray Cyrus, the album received limited airplay on country radio, a result of the cause it supported (Farber 2020).

active in [*sic*] behalf of candidates of either party.”⁵ Parton was not explicitly rejected for having failed to espouse politically conservative causes, yet this exchange reveals an expectation that to be offered full access to every opportunity presented by being a country star, embracing conservatism was expected. To be outspokenly liberal was undoubtedly damaging to career opportunities — at least where political or industry heavyweights could assert their dominance. Parton’s loud and exaggerated personality, along with her caricature-worthy figure, hardly reflect the standards of mild-mannered femininity commonplace in country. As such, it is unsurprising that Parton’s negotiation of the political as a country star has been carefully managed, acknowledging in a 2010 interview with *The Times*: “[l]ook at the poor Dixie Chicks. They were just trying to make a personal statement and it ruined them. So, I stay away from that” (Rifkind 2010). As such, Parton has largely adapted to country’s expectations by embodying political neutrality throughout the most politicised eras of the genre, keeping her in good standing with the country music industry and fanbase.

Nonetheless, Parton’s career has not been without controversy, at times pushing the limits of what is acceptable to say and sing as a (mostly) country star. Whilst the 1990s saw Parton releasing music more closely aligned to roots or Americana than country, her legacy as a country star remained most significant. As such, her involvement with the 2005 movie *Transamerica*, which follows a trans protagonist, received significant attention and similarly loud responses from country fans.⁶ Parton wrote the song “Travelin’ Thru” for the movie, which featured lyrics referencing Jesus’s crucifixion and spiritual rebirth: “We’ve all been crucified and they nailed Jesus to the tree / And when I’m born again, you’re gonna see a change in me.” The use of religious imagery, typically adopted by conservatives, for a song written with a trans character in mind shows Parton’s provocative engagement with, and queering of,

⁵ Each individual mentioned as having openly commented on politics is male, whilst Parton, acknowledged but dismissed on account of not being politically active, is female.

⁶ Some of the negative responses Parton received included picketers at her shows holding placards with phrases like “Dolly Parton Supports Gays” (Hall 2014).

country's norms; by doing so, Parton could legitimise the song to most in Nashville, reducing the risk of being ostracised like the Chicks or having to leave under her own volition as lang. Reconciling her storied history of speaking out on behalf of queer rights with her professed political neutrality, Parton has stated that on issues such as equal marriage, "[t]hat's not politics to me. That's human rights" (Rifkind 2010). As suggested by Chris Willman, "with great power comes... a free pass to say something moderately controversial once every few years" (2007, 166). Having not tied herself to a history of political activism and firmly engraining herself as one of country's own, Parton walked the fine line between the personal and political, building up decades of fan loyalty along the way, to create a space in which the country industry could interpret most of her political actions as being in good faith.

This method of engaging with established themes and ideas in country music history in order to challenge some of its hegemonic understandings has also been used by female country artists in more recent years. Since her major-label debut album *Same Trailer Different Park* (#1, 2013), Kacey Musgraves has continually challenged the standards imposed upon country artists in a similar way to how Maddie & Tae challenged the normalisation of bro-country: musically. Musgraves has confronted traditional country values and norms, with the lyrics of even the most successful of her country hits addressing topics long-considered taboo or ill-advised for a woman to discuss. Nonetheless, she has attained impressive levels of commercial success: all of her subsequent studio albums, bar a 2016 Christmas special, have reached #1. Her first single from *Same Trailer*, "Merry Go 'Round" (#10, 2013), rejects the traditionally idealised depictions of rural life found in most country songs, with the lyrics of the chorus revealing its mundanity and hopelessness:

Mama's hooked on Mary Kay

Brother's hooked on Mary Jane

And Daddy's hooked on Mary two doors down
 Mary, Mary quite contrary
 We get bored, so we get married
 Just like dust, we settle in this town
 On this broken merry go 'round

Musgraves' refusal to shy away from real-world issues such as drug abuse and infidelity contrasts with the idealisation of rural family life often depicted in country songs. Whilst infidelity is an established topic in country music, the topic has typically been depicted with condemnation or retributive action against the wrongdoer. However, Musgraves rejects the norms of country and instead merely offers passing indifference to the issue. Further, such songs are typically sung about from first-hand experiences, but "Merry Go 'Round" focuses on the actions and lives of others, simultaneously creating a sense of distance from the issues whilst highlighting their significance as something to note in an otherwise unassuming world. It would be a stretch to make any assumption that Musgraves sought to effect real societal reform on these issues through her debut single, but the song's content hinted at her future work and artistry which has continued to challenge the status quo in Nashville.

The upbeat "Follow Your Arrow" (#10, 2014)⁷ sustained this trend. The single almost mirrors the boisterousness of bro-country by co-opting its loudness and shameless promoting of the artist's values, but in place of bro-country's often sexist hedonism, Musgraves promotes inclusivity and love. Throughout the single, Musgraves highlights many contradictory societal norms before encouraging the listener to "do whatever you want" and "follow your arrow." Notable examples include: drug use ("When the straight and narrow gets a little too straight / Roll up a joint, or don't"); sex ("If you save yourself for marriage you're a bore / If you don't

⁷ On Hot Country Songs.

save yourself for marriage you're a horrible⁸ person"); and queerness ("Kiss lots of boys / Or kiss lots of girls / If that's something you're into"). Whilst undeniably a country song, the concepts it addresses are so far removed from the industry's norms that the single could be considered as mocking the genre's typically reserved nature. However, like Parton, Musgraves engages with established country trends to legitimise her messaging as in the style of, if not authentically, country, notably leaning into the long-running trend of addressing sex in a semi-cartoonish manner. Whilst examples of women singing about casual sex in country music are rare, men doing so is more commonplace. The title alone of Big & Rich's "Save A Horse (Ride A Cowboy)" (#11, 2004), and Toby Keith's equally raucous "As Good As I Once Was" (#1, 2005), the first verse of which sees Keith's character propositioned by twin sisters, highlight this typically fun-loving approach to sex. By imbuing a sense of country history into "Follow Your Arrow," Musgraves engages with existing tropes but adapts them to suit and legitimise her artistry.

To exemplify just how far Musgraves pushes the limits of country music's tolerances in her first few singles, her work can be compared with another country hit, Luke Bryan's "Most People Are Good" (#1, 2018). Musically, Bryan's song is a slower, ballad-type, and addresses its subject matter with more seriousness than Musgraves. Bryan promotes similar themes to those found in Musgraves' "Follow Your Arrow": inclusivity, love, and allowing life to take you along your journey. The examples that Bryan sings about, however, are more firmly established country song subjects. He sings about family: letting children be children "as long as they can," and that he believes "most mamas oughta qualify for sainthood." He implies that good people put in the effort to become so, praising forgiveness and "working hard for what you've got." One particularly significant line highlighting the differences between Bryan's and Musgraves' artistry is found in the chorus, where Bryan sings: "I believe you love

⁸ The first syllable is stressed to sound like "whore."

who you love / Ain't nothing you should ever be ashamed of." If Musgraves, with her large queer following and track record for speaking out on the matter, were to have sung this line, the intent would be obvious: she supports queer love.⁹ In Bryan's case, the matter is more complicated. When asked about the line in interviews, Bryan has provided ambiguous answers. Bryan has stated that he initially considered the line to be "interracially charged" (Liptak 2018). However, he has subsequently clarified that other interpretations of the song are welcome, even if he would not espouse the same sentiments publicly: Bryan has mentioned that to proclaim support for the queer community would be a risk, even with his megastar status. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, he was asked if he felt free to voice his opinions on contentious issues. Bryan acknowledged his frustration with having to "walk a smart line" with such topics, before addressing the "Most People Are Good" line: "I had a lot of people ask me, 'Well, does that mean you want to plant a flag and support the gay and lesbian community?' I'm like, 'I'm not saying I'm gonna go fly that flag — but I'm not saying I'm *not* either'" (Wood 2020). Bryan's answer highlights the caution required by those who remain solely within the confines of country when it comes to addressing issues that could be seen as in conflict with the industry's conservatism.

Whilst Bryan's awkward explanations of "Most People Are Good" show the difficulties that country artists face with expressing their social or political beliefs, it clarifies the extent to which Musgraves pushed boundaries with her debut singles and has continued to do so since. A neat summary by Dacey Orr suggests that "'Follow Your Arrow" didn't just make country a welcoming space for all kinds of people; it eliminated the need to be a particular *kind* of person at all" (Orr 2021). To an extent, this is a solid assertion: Musgraves releasing a country song that unapologetically encourages queerness and difference has potentially opened

⁹ Musgraves' support from and engagement with her queer fanbase has been written about at length (Moss 2022, 1-3).

mainstream country music to listeners who otherwise might have bypassed the genre. But the suggestion that country as a monolith has suddenly become welcoming of queerness requires further attention. Despite remaining Musgraves' highest charting single on the Hot Country Songs chart, this was not the result of manoeuvring by industry executives to "open" the genre to a queer audience. The single reached only #43 on *Billboard's* Country Airplay chart, revealing a relative lack of support from country radio, who perhaps viewed the song's message as incompatible with the messages of their usual songs, as well as the preferences of country radio audiences. Artists like Musgraves, who queer country music's norms, are often attributed an outsider status, or pushed to the country music periphery.

Perhaps acknowledging the limits of what is possible to achieve — or at least be supported with — in country music, in recent years, Musgraves has made a muted move away from Nashville, with her recent releases embracing more elements of pop than her earlier material; her two latest albums have been oriented toward adult contemporary radio stations as much as they have to country. Of her seven most recent singles, six have charted on *Billboard's* country charts, whilst four have charted elsewhere; three of the seven charted higher on non-country charts (see Appendix C). As if doubt remained over Musgraves' status as a crossover artist, "Justified," the lead single from her latest album *star-crossed* (#1, 2021), peaked the highest, climbing to #4 on Adult Alternative Airplay; it failed to chart on Country Airplay. Further belying her continued success on the Hot Country Songs chart, it should be noted that this appears to be despite the country industry, rather than because of it. The highest charting of these singles on the Country Airplay chart is "Rainbow," peaking at just #33; her better success on the Hot Country Songs chart suggests her popularity within Nashville is contested and not the result of support from country radio.¹⁰ In part, this may have been influenced by

¹⁰ That Musgraves maintains success in country despite a lack of radio airplay suggests Nashville's control over the genre may be waning, seemingly reasserted by *Billboard's* primary country chart no longer being that which relies solely on radio airplay. Research into the impact of streaming and contemporary media on country music and its relation to Nashville would be warranted to provide further detail on the matter.

Musgraves' refusal to shy away from criticism of those in positions of power in Nashville. Her 2015 track "Good Ol' Boys Club" attacks the culture of the country industry; Musgraves clarified in an interview that whilst she loves country, she dislikes what "it's turned into" in the bro-country era, stating her intention to "push buttons early on" in her career (Moss 2013). Musgraves' outspokenness on issues including LGBTQ+ rights and gun rights may have won her plaudits from her fans but simultaneously alienated her from aspects of Nashville. Reinforcing the barriers that remain to social and political outspokenness as a country star, after Musgraves made an impassioned plea in the aftermath of a wave of gun violence, she was criticised on the conservative network Fox News by host Ainsley Earhardt, who called Musgraves "the modern-day Dixie Chick" ("Fox & Friends" 2019).¹¹

Subverting the expectations of the idealised female country star, Musgraves has become a divisive figure in contemporary music. Her success as a country star is as much a result of her transcending genre boundaries and distinctions as it is due to her having a specific country appeal. Despite limited country airplay and her open flirtation with other genres, admiration for her in certain country circles remains steadfast: she won the 2018 CMA award for "Album of the Year" and the 2019 CMA award for "Music Video of the Year"; she also received two CMT nominations for "Rainbow" and "Space Cowboy." Musgraves' fandom transcends boundaries as much as her music, not allegiant only to country music; her artistry and success in country and elsewhere highlights the power of rejecting definition as it is understood by the *Billboard* constructs of genre, and instead navigating their norms to create a new space for oneself.

Underlying how Parton and Musgraves have attempted to challenge some of Nashville's norms has been the assumption that women should not explicitly voice their

¹¹ Country music's conservatism has been established throughout this dissertation. Whilst Fox News is distinct from Nashville, it seems reasonable to suggest that for conservative country music audiences, the attitude of Fox News would closely resemble their own.

political opinions. However, for younger artists, following the Dolly-esque route of espousing political neutrality is incompatible with their artistry, just as their liberal tendencies are in tension with Nashville's conservatism. As established, Nashville's norms are in near constant flux; where political matters are concerned, country music has not been immune to the increasing politicisation and partisanship that has swept American society, particularly since 2015. Mild rebukes and criticisms from liberal-leaning stars have become more common: whilst hosting the CMA awards in 2017, Brad Paisley and Carrie Underwood mocked then-President Trump, drawing laughs from revisiting his various online blunders, before altering the lyrics to Underwood's "Before He Cheats" and singing "Maybe next time he'll think before he tweets" (Sampathkumar, 2017). Paisley has a record of addressing controversial subjects: the 2017 "Love and War," featuring John Fogerty of Creedence Clearwater Revival and "Fortunate Son" fame, is undeniably anti-war, the chorus ending with the refrain "They send you off to die for us / Forget about you when you're done." However, Underwood has largely remained mute on political issues, and some of her biggest hits "Jesus, Take The Wheel" (#1, 2006) and "All-American Girl" (#1, 2008) revere country music's more conservative traditions of patriotism and Christianity. Potentially explaining Musgraves' lack of country radio success, songs critical of country music norms have become the basis of Musgraves' repertoire; often, these songs border on espousing political ideology in a manner increasingly reserved for male country artists.

Undoubtedly, the Trump presidency ushered in a seemingly more politically diverse, if divided, country music scene. Just as common in the last few years as the political jokes at country music award ceremonies have been songs with right-leaning espousals. Not all of these songs have achieved commercial success. Riley Green's "Different 'Round Here," the title track from his 2019 album, was not released as a single, but lines such as "We stand for the flag and if you don't like it, we don't care," "Brave' is 18 wearin' army green," and "'Proud'

is what you say about where you're from" take clear aim at American liberals. Whilst the song may have had little success, it has been co-opted on the social media site TikTok, with more than 187,000 videos being created to accompany it: most of these, however, ridicule and parody its message (TikTok 2022). Nonetheless, Green's song is just one in recent years to address current political issues explicitly. Toby Keith's "Happy Birthday America" (2021), halfway between a love song to the U.S. and an apology letter on behalf of its current reputation, decries the children who "burn your flag in their city streets" as well as "All the broken-down cities / By the Left's design."¹² However, Keith also criticises the political right, who "can't seem to get it right / Most of the time," and notes that when voting he only ever gets to choose "the lesser of two evils." Despite reaching #31 on Hot Country Songs, the single did not chart on Country Airplay, suggesting an unease amongst country radio station producers that the song would be ill-received by their audiences. Equally as significant, however, was the fact that Keith's political articulations were not censored or negatively received amongst his fans, who supported the single enough for it to be a minor chart hit even without the aid of country radio.

A more unequivocal and unapologetic ideological message was communicated by Aaron Lewis' "Am I The Only One" (#52, 2021). Released just before the Fourth of July, Lewis laments "the threads of Old Glory come undone," taking specific issue with "another statue comin' down in a town near you" — referring to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.¹³ Lewis' lyrics suggest that anti-American sentiment, clearly identified with the American left, is not just threatening his values but also destroying his homeland. Relating his song to the themes of conspiracy peddled by the Trump administration, Lewis also asks if he

¹² Given that Keith has always produced country music (unlike crossover artists), the song's success outside of country radio likely still came from typical country audiences.

¹³ The single was a Hot Country Songs #1. The huge discrepancy between the two rankings perhaps suggests that, despite the song's overwhelming popularity, country radio was hesitant to play such an overtly political record. Its open embrace of conservative ideology also implies it was welcomed by an audience broader than country music, supported by the fact it reached #14 on the Hot 100. However, it remains telling that the song used the country genre to spread its message, hinting at an understanding of country music as a home for conservative thought.

is “the only one not brainwashed?” Lewis’ repeated search for solidarity and community through praying that he “can’t be the only one” invites the receptive conservative listener into his beat-down community. That such an undeniably political song topped a country chart implies, firstly, that the song and its message resonated with a sizable proportion of country audiences, and secondly, when paired with recent releases by other country stars, men expressing their opinions on political matters remains considerably more palatable to country audiences, especially when they are conservative, than when their female counterparts do so.

Male country artists seeking to explore their political opinions in country music can do so without hiding resorting to euphemism. This ability to be politically forthcoming extends even to male stars who have liberal leanings: Paisley has released various songs which could be considered as supporting a liberal ideology, including the aforementioned “Love and War” and “Accidental Racist” (2013), recorded with rapper LL Cool J, without facing significant backlash.¹⁴ However, expressing liberal-leaning beliefs as a woman presents more of a challenge. Whilst Parton, Musgraves, and others like them have been honest in their music about their opinions, they have typically articulated views that are not overtly political in the same manner as their male counterparts; for example, they can express support for queer rights but avoid criticising those with different ideological beliefs. To negotiate the norms expected of women in Nashville it is clearly understood that voicing political views in songs must be kept to a minimum wherever it may cause problems.

One artist who can provide valuable insight into how female country artists are expected to comply with standards that prevent them from speaking out on political matters is Taylor Swift. Despite having firmly crossed over into the pop mainstream, Swift established herself as a country singer. Her first four studio albums were country chart-toppers, producing seven #1 singles between them, and she won the 2009 CMA for “Entertainer of the Year” – the only

¹⁴ “Accidental Racist” failed to chart on Country Airplay but reached #23 on Hot Country Songs.

female winner of the award since the Chicks in 2000. However, since moving away from the country industry, Swift has sought to highlight the challenges facing female acts in Nashville. Her 2020 documentary film, *Miss Americana*, portrays the decision to transition to pop music as, in part, inspired by the politically suffocating environment of country. In the film, Swift is quoted as saying: “Throughout my whole career, label executives and publishers would just say “Don’t be like the Dixie Chicks” (Wilson 2020). The sentiment echoes that of Parton’s 2010 interview, wherein she acknowledged trying to stay away from making personal statements out of fear of retribution. Swift’s comment, though, suggests that there is a culture in Nashville that actively seeks to prevent artists from expressing their political opinions for fear of fall-out. Notably, this policing of politics appears to be a distinctly gendered one. As the aforementioned examples of songs have proved, men appear to have greater latitude in Nashville when it comes to expressing their political opinions than women. A counterargument might suggest that, typically, these ideologies are expressed in songs, not outright statements in the style of Maines’ controversial anti-Bush remarks. However, recent examples rebut this. On January 1st, 2022, country singer Jason Aldean posted a photo of himself alongside Donald Trump. The caption read: “Well, this New Years [sic] was the best of all time. I got to spend a couple days with the G.O.A.T this man is unbelievable and I wish u all could see what he does behind the scenes. #classact” (Aldean 2022a).¹⁵ Aldean’s openness implies that the fears plaguing female country stars like Parton and Swift did not impact him; the differences between the situations being the artist’s gender and political leanings.

A key aspect of Swift’s stance on political openness is her relationship with her fanbase. Unlike most country stars, Swift’s core fanbase when she was a country artist was primarily adolescent girls. Travis Stimeling has acknowledged that the youthfulness of Swift’s fanbase,

¹⁵ Later in the year, Aldean shared another post on Instagram featuring Trump, captioned: “Back in Palm Beach today and ran into my ol friend @realdonaldtrump on the golf course” (Aldean 2022b).

in addition to contributing to criticisms of her music as simplistic or of poor quality, hampered her ability to claim she was an authentic country artist (Stimeling 2016, 88). Swift's music was especially sensitive towards the "difficulties faced by teenaged girls"; but speaking out on issues that were important to this fanbase might entail articulating political opinions that were likely to alienate some within the country music industry (89). Swift's mantra of silence on political matters implied that there was a commercial logic at work in negotiating the conflicting demands of her fans and industry executives. In *Miss Americana*, Swift wrestles with these dilemmas with her entourage, and is told that she risks "[halving] the number of people that come to your next tour" if she addresses politically sensitive matters (Wilson 2020).

The significant financial implications that political openness could cause are highlighted here. Despite *Miss Americana* portraying Nashville as a prohibiting factor to Swift's openness, her political silence continued as Swift became an established pop star. Swift received criticism for her silence on the 2016 presidential election; reports at the time, however, indicated that this continued silence was a result of her fanbase having largely followed over from her days as a country singer, and Swift remaining "fearful of alienating a large portion of her fan base who might support Trump" (Glatsky 2017). As such, it can also be questioned to what extent Swift's leaving Nashville was actually impacted by her political ideologies, and whether what were rather more impactful were the commercial implications and the appeal of unadulterated pop stardom.¹⁶ Regardless, *Miss Americana* sees Swift present herself as finally being free of the shackles of Nashville's conservatism by the time of the 2018 U.S. mid-terms, portrayed as her political coming out; this section of the documentary is followed by scenes from the music video of Swift's "You Need To Calm Down" (#2, 2019),¹⁷ which features queer

¹⁶ Myles McNutt argues that much of Swift's branding focuses on portraying herself as a feminist icon for negotiating the sexist standards of both Nashville and the popular music industry; however, McNutt claims that Swift fails to actively support women in the music industry, and much of this branding has been done to improve her reputation, rather than out of sincerity (McNutt 2020, 88).

¹⁷ On Billboard Hot 100.

celebrities and ends with a message urging the passing of the proposed Equality Act (to prohibit discrimination based on sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation), a clear political stance that Swift might not have made as a country star.

As with Musgraves and Parton, most of the opinions that Swift has voiced support for in recent years have been liberal but relatively non-party-political causes, such as queer people's and women's rights, which are broadly mainstream in nature. However, unlike other country stars, Swift refused to voice her support for these issues until much later in her career; this perhaps suggests a further commercial calculation that she risked losing the support of her increasingly liberal, metropolitan audience, which by 2018 had become potentially more significant and lucrative than her original country fanbase. This could, in part, explain why it took Swift over half a decade since her last country album to make any real political statements, despite her assertion that it was Nashville that was holding her back from doing so. Similarly of note is that Swift has continued to engage with country norms when articulating her views. In *Miss Americana*, Swift's reticence on politics appears finally to break when she is reflecting on the race for the U.S. Senate seat for Tennessee, and says of Martha Blackburn, the Republican nominee: "I can't see another commercial and see her disguising these policies behind the words 'Tennessee Christian values.' Those aren't Tennessee Christian values. I live in Tennessee. I am Christian. That's not what we stand for" (Wilson 2020). The invocation of pride in her Tennessean identity plays into the regionalisation of country music, and referencing her Christianity serves to authenticate her to those audiences who may have differing political ideologies but can be contented by the fact that Swift shares some similarities and beliefs with them. Nashville's norms then appear to continue to exert influence over Swift's artistry and public persona, despite the fact that she asserts that such standards and conventions influenced her move away from the country music industry.

The influence and power of Nashville appear to play a significant role in female country acts' articulations of their opinions whilst ever they remain reliant upon Nashville for airplay and success. Though the country establishment appears to tolerate a degree of outspokenness on matters of identity, most notably regarding women's rights, this does not extend to matters of partisan political debate. As such, a pattern has emerged of young female acts embracing other genres besides country to find more tolerant spaces to express their political beliefs; often, pop audiences reward their favourite artists' outspokenness with continued loyalty and support, a wholly alien concept in country music. These country standards have been imposed on female acts since the Chicks controversy, and the legacy of the group's subsequent blacklisting continues to impact female stars today, irrespective of status. The current political openness of country music's men, both in terms of praising who they support politically and singing ideologically influenced songs, suggests a double standard whereby men are expected to be able to share these beliefs, especially when they resemble the supposed conservatism of Nashville, and women are warned of complete commercial ruin if they speak out on partisan issues. For female country acts, the ability to negotiate Nashville's norms then is more than preferable: it is necessary to achieve and maintain commercial success.

Conclusion

“I just figure I’m a 22-year-old singer and, you know, I don’t know if people really wanna hear my political views.”

— Taylor Swift, *Miss Americana*

The above quotation encapsulates a basic understanding of the power and position of Nashville’s female artists since 9/11. Whilst Swift had three #1 country albums by the time she made the statement, she clearly recognised her role as a country singer to be confined to performance. This understanding differs markedly from that of female country artists in the 1990s, who frequently produced records that challenged, however gently, the genre’s understandings of femininity and womanhood. A number of factors have contributed to this declining place of women, from the rise of nationalism post-9/11, to the 2008 financial crisis, to the increasingly polarised and partisan state of American politics in more recent years. At each turn, it is Nashville’s female artists who have suffered. Whilst the 1990s country scene had welcomed and encouraged new female artists, leading to the emergence of a new wave of female superstars, the period after 9/11 has been defined by gender-inflected controversy and episodes of misogyny from the country establishment. The hostile reaction to the Chicks’ rebuke of George Bush established a new status quo in Nashville wherein the place of women was not to rock the boat, but simply to sing. The mild-mannered outspokenness of 1990s artists on matters of sex and gender almost vanished from Nashville in the 2000s, replaced by a plethora of songs praising the traditional country themes of heterosexual marriage and motherhood. Male artists contributed to and often led the way in re-establishing traditional ideals of country femininity, as expressed in some of the era’s biggest hits such as Craig

Morgan's "That's What I Love About Sunday" (#1, 2005) and Lonestar's "Mr. Mom" (#1, 2004).

But male artists also revised and updated ideas of country femininity in this era, breaking with certain aspects of tradition but nonetheless reiterating female subordination to male imperatives. This was best exemplified in the 2010s phenomenon of 'bro-country,' a dominant sub-genre which rejected country's traditional depiction of idealised femininity in terms of marriage, monogamy and motherhood, and focused more on partying than family life. But in positioning women as sexual playthings rather than potential homemakers, never mind fully developed human beings, bro-country songs simply found new ways to assert male dominance. The themes and sounds of Nashville undoubtedly became male-dominated, and the significance of country's female artists vastly declined. Paired with Nashville's continued stifling of female artist's voices on political matters, this pattern of demeaning the value of women has contributed to some of country's biggest female stars, most notably Taylor Swift and Kacey Musgraves, departing Nashville in favour of other genres.

This dissertation contributes to our understanding of two notable episodes in country music history, the Chicks controversy and the emergence of bro-country, and it positions these episodes in relation to broader trends in the post-9/11 period, both in Nashville and the U.S. at large. But further developments in American social and political life in the past few years have undoubtedly had an impact on country music and its surrounding culture and discourse, and these might be the focus of further research. In particular, exploring country music attitudes towards women in the pre- and post-#MeToo worlds would be a worthwhile undertaking, as would analysing the scope for political outspokenness in the genre in an increasingly partisan era.

As the preceding chapters have shown, country has always been shaped by different expectations for the genre's female and male artists. Whilst the 1990s saw a shift towards

equality between men and women in country music, developments in the past two decades have erased much of this progress. Sexism and bias within the country industry have led to reduced opportunities for the genre's women, with both a significant relative decline in their airplay compared to their male counterparts and a heightened policing of their discussion of ostensibly political matters, in song and in person. This climate has reduced the opportunities for country's women to score #1 hits, to earn awards, to challenge country's dominance by male artists. Whilst research like that conducted by Jada Watson has led to a re-examining of practices on country radio, the significance and power of country's female acts remains much reduced in comparison to their position in the late 1990s. This dissertation's analysis of the place of women in post-9/11 country music reveals that they have been constrained by Nashville's desire for gender conformity, confirming that the country music industry's understanding of the place of female artists is best encapsulated by the title of the Chicks' 2006 film: *Shut Up and Sing*.

All data in these Appendices constitutes original research.

Appendix A

Year	Percentage of Country #1s with Female Leads	Percentage of Weeks Female Leads Spent at Country #1	Number of Female Leads with Country #1s
1990	23	12	5
1991	10	10	3
1992	16	19	2
1993	12	15	3
1994	13	15	3
1995	17	15	5
1996	43	37	9
1997	22	19	4
1998	50	46	9
1999	42	31	7
2000	32	42	5
2001	27	19	5
2002	10	6	2
2003	5	2	1
2004	19	15	4
2005	15	12	3
2006	22	33	4
2007	16	17	3
2008	27	27	3
2009	20	23	4
2010	24	29	5
2011	21	21	7
2012	19	17	5
2013	19	17	5
2014	9	6	2
2015	3	2	1
2016	20	17	6
2017	9	8	3
2018	9	8	3
2019	6	4	2
2020	15	13	6
2021	15	23	5

Appendix B

Year	Percentage of Country #1s by Solo Women or All-Female Groups	Percentage of Weeks Solo Women or All-Female Groups Spent at Country #1	Number of Solo Women or All-Female Groups with Country #1s
1990	23	12	5
1991	7	8	2
1992	16	19	2
1993	6	10	2
1994	13	15	3
1995	17	15	5
1996	43	37	9
1997	22	19	4
1998	42	40	7
1999	42	31	7
2000	21	38	3
2001	27	19	5
2002	5	4	1
2003	5	2	1
2004	19	15	4
2005	15	12	3
2006	13	25	2
2007	12	15	2
2008	23	25	2
2009	7	6	2
2010	14	19	3
2011	12	10	4
2012	13	10	3
2013	0	0	0
2014	3	2	1
2015	3	2	1
2016	10	8	2
2017	6	4	2
2018	6	4	2
2019	3	2	1
2020	10	10	4
2021	6	8	2

Appendix C

Single	Peak Year	Country Airplay #	Hot Country Songs #	Alternate Chart #
Butterflies	2018	56	32	
Space Cowboy	2018		30	
High Horse	2018		36	39 (Adult Pop)
Slow Burn	2019		38	
Rainbow	2019	33	17	16 (Adult Contemporary)
Justified	2021		22	4 (Adult Alternative)
Camera Roll	2022			29 (Adult Alternative)

* From January 20th, 1990, country chart positions have been calculated by airplay on country radio stations, first on *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs chart, and, from October 20th, 2012, on *Billboard's* Country Airplay chart. To ensure continuity, the data from the first two weeks of 1990, when a different methodology was used, has therefore been omitted from all figures in this appendix.

Discography

- Adkins, Trace. "Arlington." *Songs About Me*. Capitol, 2005.
- . "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk." *Songs About Me*. Capitol, 2005.
- Aldean, Jason. "She's Country." *Wide Open*. Broken Bow, 2008.
- . "My Kinda Party." *My Kinda Party*. Broken Bow, 2010.
- Big & Rich. "Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy)." *Horse of a Different Color*. Warner Bros., 2004.
- Brooks & Dunn. "Only in America." *Steers & Stripes*. Arista, 2001.
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