

Antimodernism and Genre from Country-Rock to Alt.Country, 1968-98

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Abstract

This dissertation is a cultural history exploring expressions of and responses to antimodernism within country-rock and “alternative country” music, drawing on reception history, intellectual history of underground and mainstream left-wing American political movements, interview discourse with artists, and close readings of songs. In this dissertation I argue that despite styling itself as a type of purer root or “folk” form of contemporary country music, in terms of its ideologies, studio production techniques, fan and critical discourse, and business practices, alt.country is a type of rock music. It embodies some of rock’s core beliefs, particularly rock’s critique of the more bureaucratic and “rationalized” dimensions of postindustrial capitalism, particularly as this relates to the everyday impact of new technologies. I argue that this anti-modernism, emerging here from the American political left, has been different in different eras, from the back-to-the-land movement of the late 1960s, to late-‘80s/early-‘90s expressions of left populist punk’s longing for “folk” community. In this project I look beyond contemporary scholarly understandings of alt.country as mostly ironic, as ultimately I suggest that this music illustrates what Keir Keightley calls rock’s aesthetic of “seriousness,” more precisely than it does an understanding of country music ideology.

In Chapter 1, I discuss Bob Dylan’s *Nashville Skyline*, placing this LP of humorously clichéd country tunes in conversation with the late 1960s back-to-the-land movement, ultimately arguing that Dylan’s work here is a sly critique of hippie counterculture. In Chapter 2, I argue that Linda Ronstadt became the rare musician able to “cross over” from the rock to country charts due to the notably blurred genre lines between rock, pop, and country of the mid-1970s, and ultimately the creation of a new musical “mainstream.” In Chapter 3 I suggest that the 1990s band Uncle Tupelo retroactively became a “founder” of alt.country in part because their left-

wing populist music did not shy away from exploring the old-fashioned Christian thematic content sometimes historically associated with American populism. And in Chapter 4, I examine the work of alt.country singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams, arguing that her gendered critical reception as an emotional “genius,” coupled with her glamorous anti-modern portrait of loss and longing in her signature album *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, contributes to our contemporary understanding of the American south as a site of continual reimagining and contestation of meaning.

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Introduction: Alternative Country Music and Anti-Modernism

I was in Atlanta when the news came on TV
 I was washing dishes just to get my meals for free
 Remember grandpa talking and this he said to me
 As long as I live it'll never happen again
 When the poets hopped a ride out west
 Grandpa got us by just sweeping floors
 Now everybody's leaving town
 Sell the house and sell the farm
 But you just can't ride the boxcars anymore

—The Long Ryders, “You Just Can’t Ride the Boxcars Anymore”¹

There's a fish in my stomach a thousand years old
 Can't swim a full circle, the water's too cold
 Burnt out cars in my fingers, conveyor belts flow
 Right angles and steam whistles, nothing can grow
 A big-antlered deer stepping into the road
 A beautiful woman with her head in the stove
 The skyscrapers crumble heavy with rats
 The wind's full of beer cans and whiffle ball bats

—The Handsome Family, “Winnebago Skeletons”²

Well I live down in a valley
 Was the prettiest around
 Living in an alley in the middle of downtown
 And I didn't have to move
 To this big city
 You know I stayed right in my country home
 They built it all ‘round me
 I used to love these hills they flattened
 For that highway four lanes wide
 They're making a Manhattan
 Out of my countryside

—Bottle Rockets, “Manhattan Countryside”³

¹ The Long Ryders, *State of Our Union*, Island Records 7 90459-1, 1985, vinyl LP.

² The Handsome Family, *Milk and Scissors*, Carrot Top Records 011, 1996, compact disc.

³ Bottle Rockets, *Bottle Rockets*, East Side Digital 80772, 1993, compact disc.

The defining mood of what is now usually described as ‘Americana’—in purely musical terms—is something deep and folksy and slightly creepy, about family and nostalgia and blood and sex and religious faith and death. By itself that would be well nigh unbearable, but there is a matching and extremely deadpan sense of humor, born of fatalism and all the funnier for it... This is down-home music, intimate—sometimes too intimate, or too close to home—and often sung close to the mic. It can be played on loud guitars—often slightly out of tune or at the very least ‘twangy’—or on instruments as ancient as the hills. It is music that needs close attention. It often sounds bare, or rough around the edges. It is never merely for effect. Like the instrumentation, the lyrics are always interesting, never over-sophisticated and often downright weird. ‘Americana’ is kinda twisted. It is the opposite of contemporary Nashville and its heartless gloss. Real music for real people, in an uncertain time.

—Brian Hinton, *South by Southwest: A Road Map to Alternative Country*⁴

When considering the historical trajectory from country-rock of the late 1960s through the maturation of “alternative country” (alt.country) as a full-fledged commercial genre of the 1990s, it is worth noting the wide variety within this type of music: Freakwater are not the Bottle Rockets, who are in turn not Dave Alvin or Bob Dylan. Having said that, this dissertation focuses on an aspect of country-rock underexplored yet in my view representative of at least a sizable portion of the genre, arguably a majority portion: its seriousness, its earnest belief in certain visions of the past as having something to teach us, visions of a place we wish we could return. Though some would retroactively include him in the alt.country canon, this is not Waylon Jennings asking “Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way,” pondering his place as a modern country musician within a well-established genre tradition. Rather, this dissertation focuses on rock musicians playing their *idea* of what country music is—or, more precisely, what they believe it once was. And as suggested by the passage from Brian Hinton’s book quoted above, alt.country’s tendency to look to the past is—for its true believers—the thing that both

⁴ Brian Hinton, *South by Southwest: A Road Map to Alternative Country* (London: Sanctuary, 2003), 15.

elevates it above contemporary “radio” country, and allows it to speak political truth to an “uncertain time.” For alt.country partisans, these two things are by definition interrelated.

In this dissertation I argue that despite styling itself as a type of purer root or “folk” form of contemporary country music, in terms of its ideologies, studio production techniques, fan and critical discourse, and business practices, alt.country is a type of rock music. It embodies some of rock’s core beliefs, particularly rock’s critique of the more bureaucratic and “rationalized” dimensions of postindustrial capitalism, particularly as this relates to the everyday impact of new technologies. I argue that this anti-modernism, emerging here from the American political left, has been different in different eras, from the back-to-the-land movement of the late 1960s, to late-‘80s/early-‘90s expressions of left populist punk’s longing for “folk” community. While country-rock’s anti-modernism put it at the very center of commercially-and-critically-successful rock of the late ‘60s, by the late 1980s its more populist-folk expressions of similar sentiments kept it firmly within the American punk/indie underground. Diane Pecknold has already done the important work identifying how punk/indie’s touring network and independent record label infrastructure enabled alt.country to take shape as a full-fledged commercial genre in the 1990s.⁵ Though more historians should follow Pecknold’s lead in examining the commercial genesis of the genre, in this dissertation, I do not work to provide a *history* of alt.country. Rather, this dissertation draws upon reception history, intellectual history of underground and mainstream left-wing American political movements, interview discourse with artists, and close readings of songs to examine varied and subtly evolving responses to modernity by artists within the genre.

⁵ Diane Pecknold, “Selling Out or Buying In?: Alt.Country’s Cultural Politics of Commercialism,” in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 28-50.

I focus on the late 1960s/early 1970s and the 1990s, because these were the peak eras of visibility for country-rock and alt.country, respectively. Though journalist Peter Doggett, whose *Are You Ready for the Country* is perhaps the most definitive work on country-rock thus far, writes of a “death” of the music in the late ‘70s (followed by a ‘90s resurrection), I believe that the college-radio success of groups such as the Long Ryders, the Meat Puppets, the Mekons, and Green on Red suggests that in the 1980s the music simply went underground and took on new names, such as “cowpunk.”⁶ A fuller intellectual history of anti-modernism in alt.country would take into account these under-appreciated 1980s; unfortunately this is beyond the scope and resources of this dissertation, though I do hope to add such a study to this project at a later date.

As alluded to above, there is no overarching, uniform anti-modern message which remains consistent across the thirty years of this study. Rather, what is notable about country-rock antimodernism is the contrast between the back-to-the-land ideology of the ‘60s and ‘70s, and the left populism of the late ‘80s/early ‘90s—though aspects of each can be found within the other. In the case of the late 1960s, my discussion of commune culture vis-à-vis rock music culture focuses on the tension that, as Michael Kramer puts it, the practitioners “neither definitively embraced a libertarian emphasis on rights, nor endorsed a communitarian emphasis on obligations.”⁷ This tension not only differentiated the New Left from the counterculture in subtle but important ways; on the level of rock music, it helped generate an imaginative return to Edenic landscapes where people could be individuals, together. Country music was seen by rock players, journalists, and fans as a “natural” vehicle to facilitate that return to the land. In

⁶ See Doggett’s discussion on this “death” within the chapter “Trouble in Paradise: The death of country rock, 1973-1975.” Peter Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country: Elvis, Dylan, Parsons, and the Roots of Country Rock* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 179-196.

⁷ Michael Kramer, *The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12.

contrast, by the late 1980s I argue that (underground) rock music conceptualized country music as part of a “folk” tradition speaking truth to power, a lineage of protest shared by folk-rock, punk, and country. Drawing on classic and recent scholarship on populism, I argue that an underexplored area of overlap between American populism and antimodernism is a politicized desire for intensity of experience. This is particularly true in the case of the revivalist Christianity which historically speaking has—not coincidentally—often informed both populist movements and antimodern creative projects on the left and right. In the case of alt.country band Uncle Tupelo, I explore populist invocations of this Christianity in their work, taking care to discuss not just the politics but also explaining how the *sound* of the music (in this case, Woody Guthrie-inspired guitar work) can arguably register with listeners as populist.

Indeed, seeing as this dissertation concerns music and not just politics, one academic area of inquiry I am pleased to engage with in this project is popular music genre theory and history. Drawing upon the work of genre scholars such as Jason Toynbee, Steve Waksman, Keir Keightley, and Simon Frith, I build on their theoretical discussions to consider the ways in which rock’s interactions with a musical “Other” (in this case, country) help define and re-define rock’s genre identity and ideology. For instance, I engage with Aaron Fox’s work on wordplay and cliché in country music songwriting in order to explain how Bob Dylan’s humorous genre exercises in country music were ultimately more of a statement on Sixties rock culture.⁸ My second chapter puts recent work on genre by Motti Regev and Eric Weisbard into dialogue as I seek to explain how the blurred boundaries between pop, country, and rock in the 1970s enabled the crossover success of a musician such as Linda Ronstadt. And finally, my third chapter draws on Keightley’s well-known article “Reconsidering Rock” to argue that rock’s aesthetic of

⁸ See Aaron Fox, “The Jukebox of History: Narratives of Loss and Desire in the Discourse of Country Music,” *Popular Music* Volume 11, No. 1 (1992): 54-5.

“seriousness” manifests in the work of Uncle Tupelo in ways which both conform to and subtly challenge the genre’s ideological rules.⁹

The surprising and useful thing about investigating alternative country music is that doing so provides us fresh perspectives on rock genre ideology—much more so than it offers any new information on country genre ideology. I argue that country-rock and alt.country’s anti-modernist orientation has been deployed primarily through two different mechanisms within rock culture: Keightley’s aforementioned logic of “serious” distinction within rock, and the rock auteur.

The rock auteur here refers to a singer-songwriter figure within rock critical discourse who is judged as communicating a unique, personal, idiosyncratic vision to listeners, one which seemingly rises above the commercial strictures of genre and challenges listeners as a kind of popular “high art.” Borrowed initially from the discourse of film criticism, I demonstrate in my first chapter how the auteur as social construct was utilized by early rock critics at journals such as *Rolling Stone* to characterize rock as a “serious” music, on par with Western art music. In the case of Bob Dylan, I argue that his canonization as auteur was conducted at a scope above and beyond (and predating) his concurrent identity as country-rock singer-songwriter. Having said that, my study of Dylan demonstrates how conveniently the burgeoning country-rock movement fit within developing rock ideology, in that it flattered rock’s “roots-to-rock” critical narrative—a story that posited rock as the predestined culmination of all other American musical genres and styles which came before it. Moving forward to the 1990s, I argue that Lucinda Williams, through her songwriting work, public comments, and critical discourse surrounding her persona,

⁹ See Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rock and Pop*, eds. Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109-142.

has become established as an alt.country auteur; the signal difference I note from the Dylan model is that critics' perception of her is gendered in a way that presents her genius as unstable. I identify a tension between Freud's mourning and melancholia in her work and critical reception which I suggest, in turn, is related to anti-modern perceptions of the American South.

A Word on Definitions

Speaking as I have been of antimodernism, it is appropriate to briefly note the way in which I think of the term, inspired directly by cultural historian T.J. Jackson Lears. In his 1981 work *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, Lears defines American antimodernism, "particularly in its dominant form," as "the recoil from an 'overcivilized' modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience." In the case of the Victorian time period of Lears' study, the intense forms of experience were often discovered by antimodernists within "medieval or Oriental cultures."¹⁰ Lynda Jessup, in her 2001 edited volume *Antimodernism and artistic experience: policing the boundaries of modernity*, which focuses more specifically on the production of artworks, drawing on Lears, defines antimodernism in a period-specific fashion: "a broad, international reaction to the onslaught of the modern world that swept industrialized Western Europe, North America, and Japan in the decades around the turn of the century."¹¹

While this characterization would give the initial impression that antimodernism was a movement limited to the turn of the last century, Lears clarifies in his updated 1983 introduction that "the effects of possessive individualism have been as disintegrative in the twentieth century

¹⁰ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), xv.

¹¹ Lynda Jessup, ed., *Antimodernism and artistic experience: policing the boundaries of modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 3.

as they were in the nineteenth,” and that in the Regan Eighties “an antimodern outlook might help us to define liberation in larger than individual terms by preserving structures of meaning outside the self.”¹² Thus Lears sees antimodern sentiment as potentially relevant in any era, most especially our own, and it is in this broader, more current-day sense that I employ his term.

Lears argues throughout his book that antimodernism—at least American antimodernism 1880-1920—was profoundly ambivalent in its orientation. On the one hand, movements such as Arts & Crafts pointedly questioned the value of the “Machine Age” and the easily accessible luxuries of mass-produced goods. On the other, hand, Leers argues that antimodernism’s eventual emphasis on a “therapeutic” worldview dulled the movement’s potential for collective political action.¹³ While I share somewhat in his ambivalence, the two specific periods of antimodernist sentiment I present in this dissertation are a bit more hopeful, both in the 1960s and the 1990s teasing at least the *potential* for an active political community enacted through music. Antimodernism as a concept puts into productive tension the rights and responsibilities of the individual and the broader community, and for this reason I find it an excellent lens through which to examine popular music.

Speaking of music, here I offer an even briefer note about my use of genre-specific terms in this dissertation. Regarding country-rock, a broad label which I take to refer to the country-inflected rock of the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, one of the main reasons I choose to employ this term is that it is the term of choice for Peter Doggett in his aforementioned *Are You Ready for the Country*, a journalistic account of the era which was a starting place for this dissertation. Furthermore, academic historian Olivia Carter Mather also utilizes “country-rock”

¹² Lears, *No Place of Grace*, xi.

¹³ *ibid*, xi-xii.

as the term of choice in her excellent Ph.D. dissertation “‘Cosmic American Music’: Place and the Country Rock Movement, 1965-1974.” One of Mather’s primary arguments is that country-rock of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s was a *movement* within rock, rather than a fully-fledged commercial genre unto itself.¹⁴ As the reader will note in my second chapter, Mather’s conceptualization of this movement, especially its musical fluidity, provides a very useful departure point as I argue that pop-country-rock “crossover” was a distinctly Seventies phenomenon. I utilize “country-rock” because Doggett and Mather have fundamentally shaped my understanding of this music.

Turning to the 1990s, I designate “alternative country” as my primary genre label for two reasons. First, in my estimation, it has been the most frequently used term among journalists writing about the genre (chosen from among others such as Americana, No Depression, roots-rock, twangcore, and so on). In particular, “alt.country” was the editors’ term of choice on *No Depression* magazine’s masthead from its 1995 founding until Fall 2005, which is significant inasmuch as the magazine was arguably the central media player helping shape perceptions of the genre. Second, as Aaron Fox notes, the formulation featuring both “alternative” and “country” offers up provocative interpretations vis-à-vis modernity, consumer culture, national identity, class identity, and more.¹⁵ Throughout this dissertation, I will also use the genre’s popular abbreviation, “alt.country”, which as Richard Peterson and Bruce Beal note, refers to the

¹⁴ Oliva Carter Mather, “‘Cosmic American Music’: Place and the Country Rock Movement, 1965- 1974” (Ph.D. Diss, University of California, Los Angeles, 2006), 12.

¹⁵ Aaron Fox, “‘Alternative’ to What? *O Brother*, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music,” in *Country Music Goes to War*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James Edward Akenson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 164-167.

genre's purported beginnings in self-consciously "alternative" fan Internet newsgroups such as Postcard2—quite literally "alt dot country", a visual and textual representation of alterity.¹⁶

Aaron Fox argues that the "alternative" in "alt.country" draws on a history of previous "epochal formulations of bourgeois romanticism." While I disagree with Fox to an extent (the issue is more complex), I do agree that the term suggests its adherents' belief in "the idea of a singularity of expression and a uniqueness of individual identity, understood in opposition to the alienating effects of mass culture and rationalization."¹⁷ It is worth noting here that Fox's characterization likely falls more within what Robert Austin Russell would term "small-tent" alt.country, referring to countrified "alternative rock" bands, mostly of the mid-1990s, mostly those who wore their left-wing politics on their sleeve. In contrast, "big tent" alt.country could include performers as diverse as George Jones and Chris Thile; Russell argues that the "big tent" is defined more by its performers' oppositional stance toward the country music business in Nashville.¹⁸ I cite Russell's discussion here because I find it the most useful attempt yet at defining a music whose partisans remain steadfast in their efforts to resist definition. Though only one of the artists I write about in this dissertation—Uncle Tupelo—fits squarely into a tent (small, in this case), Russell begins my inquiry with the important observation that acts of naming (still) have incredible power in music, and that these acts tend to favor a rock orientation.

Previous Scholarship on Alternative Country Music

¹⁶ Richard Peterson and Bruce Beal, "Alternative country: Origins, music, world-view, fans, and taste in genre formation," *Popular Music and Society* 25:1-2 (2001), 235-6.

¹⁷ A. Fox, "Alternative to What?", 165-166.

¹⁸ Robert Austin Russell, "Looking for a Way Out: The Politics and Places of Alternative Country Music" (PhD diss, University of Iowa, 2009), 48-52.

This dissertation features four long chapters, and innate in the structure of these chapters are medium-sized surveys of scholarly literature, on music and/or politics, within each chapter. As such, it is not necessary here for me to provide a more detailed literature review of alt.country and country-rock music, since I engage substantively with other scholars in the body of the dissertation. Here I offer simply a quick, broad overview of what I identify as key themes. Inevitably this overview leaves out some useful scholarship, but please refer to the chapters.

The small body of scholarship on alternative country music has three central concerns: the origins of the genre, the sociopolitical intentions of alt.country musicians and/or the social/political *uses* of the genre, and the vexed question of “class minstrelsy” (broadly speaking) among the genre’s performers. On the whole, relatively little cultural studies and/or musicological work has been done¹⁹, and the scholarship that has been published is in need of updating, benefiting from years of critical distance since the genre’s commercial heyday in the 1990s.

On the question of alt.country’s origins, one of the earlier pieces of scholarship on the genre was Richard Peterson and Bruce Beal’s 2001 article in *Popular Music and Society*, which sets out to define the genre and provide context vis-à-vis Peterson’s previous work on country authenticity. Writing when alt.country was selling well but had not yet been explored much in a serious fashion, Peterson/Beal, while acknowledging that musical styles resembling alt.country had existed for decades prior to the 1990s, focus mostly on fan-run Internet e-mail list-serves such as P2, positing them as the force behind the genre’s creation. Peterson/Beal suggest that

¹⁹ Although this may be changing, with the 2009 publication of the excellent anthology *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, edited by Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox, parts of which I will discuss momentarily.

this “self-conscious community of likeminded people” may have created alt.country in a more grassroots fashion than other popular music genres.²⁰

However, historian Diane Pecknold, writing in 2009, offers a corrective to Peterson’s argument, pointing out that the growth of independent record labels in the early 1990s (such as Chicago’s Bloodshot Records) was just as much responsible for the formation of the alt.country genre as were the activities of fans. This more multidimensional portrait of alt.country’s origins jives well with Keith Negus’ observation in *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* that audiences and corporate structures co-construct one another.²¹ Additionally, Pecknold’s history of the corporate side of alt.country dovetails nicely with Olivia Carter Mather’s 2006 dissertation on country-rock in the early 1970s, which she argues was a “movement” rather than a genre. Mather’s point is that the corporate structures independently constituting alt.country that Pecknold writes about did not exist yet in the 1970s.²² This idea, in turn, informs my contention that we need to understand the evolution of country-rock and (into) alt.country differently—contingently—at various points in its historical development.

Another question scholars have asked about alt.country is what its songwriters and audiences are attempting to “do” with the music, particularly their intentions regarding social and political critique. John Molinaro makes the argument that in alt.country recordings such as Uncle Tupelo’s version of the Carter Family’s “No Depression In Heaven,” one hears “revolt in response to the economic failings of a new era, creating an empathetic bond between the Dust Bowl Refugees, the actual victims of Reaganomics, and alt.country’s audience, who at the very

²⁰ Peterson and Beal, “Alternative Country,” 244.

²¹ Pecknold, “Selling Out or Buying In?”. Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1999). For more on Bloodshot, see Nancy Riley, “Underground Not Underexposed: Bloodshot Records, Alt.Country, and the Chicago Live Music Scene” (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 2014).

²² Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 12.

least perceive themselves as facing economic repercussions stemming from the [1980s].”²³

Molinaro’s argument in this master’s thesis is noteworthy, because it echoes arguments advanced in 1990s popular media coverage of alt.country, making the case for a direct historical link between current alt.country musicians and activist-leftist folksingers of the Depression like Woody Guthrie (and the “Okie” audience he purportedly spoke for).

But where Molinaro heard earnest political protest in 1998, literary scholar Jon Smith, writing in 2009, hears a commodified fantasy of the bygone Depression era, a product for Generation X hipsters to consume. Smith argues that alt.country was part of the “retro” boom of the 1990s (including swing dancing and other activities) and that the genre’s social function was to help Gen Xers differentiate themselves from Baby Boomers via their subcultural consumption habits. Ultimately, aspects of both Molinaro and Smith’s arguments are correct. Thus, one productive question grappled with in this dissertation is: in alt.country, how can invocations of the past (the Great Depression, for instance) serve as both political critique and marker of taste? As I see it, refocusing on anti-modernism in the music and its discourse opens up a way of thinking beyond the politics/commerce construction that journalists and some scholars tend to discuss, but which fails to do justice to the complexity of the actual performances.

Finally, scholarly writing on alt.country has also grappled with the performance of working-class identities by (upper) middle-class, educated performers. Very much in keeping with broader cultural perceptions of “roots” in America, popular press accounts of alt.country have a tendency to play up the ostensible working-class origins of the music, fetishizing a “trailer

²³ John Molinaro, “Urbane Cowboys: Alt.Country in the 1990s” (MA thesis, University of Virginia, 1998), <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma98/molinaro/alt.country/jm-thesis.html>. Accessed July 31, 2016.

park” or “Southern Gothic” aesthetic while also holding it at arm’s length as cultural “Other”.²⁴

For cultural studies scholars, the question raised by rhetoric such as this is: Can educated, middle-class songwriters “authentically” speak “for” (or “as”) working-class Americans and their concerns? The answer from most scholars seems to be a conditional “no”. For instance, Aaron Fox argues that although country music historically has had a complex relationship with working-class identity, “new heights of problematic [class] minstrelsy were reached” by alt.country successes such as Gillian Welch and the *O Brother* soundtrack, whose “constitutive irony...is both bothersome and distinctly postmodern.”²⁵

In her 2009 book *Natural Acts*, Pamela Fox (no relation) agrees with Aaron Fox in her designation of alt.country as postmodern. She then proceeds to articulate why she, too, finds alt.country’s performance of class problematic. First explaining how honky-tonk music circa 1945 was essentially a sophisticated commentary on urbanization in America, she then argues, of male alt.country artists: “[They adopt] the honky-tonk pose to fashion their own stage personas but actually *write about* the contemporary equivalents of the hillbilly. That is to say, they themselves borrow the trappings of those early hard-living messengers of primitive emotion yet produce musical texts rife with comic rube imagery.”²⁶ Fox lauds groups like the Drive-By Truckers for resisting this trap, but criticizes other alt.country stars such as Gillian Welch for not thinking through more thoroughly their acts of cultural appropriation.

²⁴ For instance, consider again the passage British journalist Brian Hinton which began this chapter: “The defining mood of what is now usually described as ‘Americana’—in purely musical terms—is something deep and folksy and slightly creepy, about family and nostalgia and blood and sex and religious faith and death.” In one economical sentence Hinton invokes both a faint whiff of incest and a fatalism born of bleak life circumstances.

²⁵ A. Fox, “Alternative to What?”, 183-184.

²⁶ Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 172.

Though Pamela Fox contributes a more nuanced understanding as to why this question of class matters in alt.country scholarship, her analysis of various musicians ultimately comes down to whether or not they meet a certain standard of self-reflexivity—and this standard is in itself a type of authenticity. Indeed, this question of class minstrelsy often seems to be answered (by Aaron Fox and Pamela Fox) with a series of relative value judgments regarding various performers, and I find this not very useful. Instead, the question demonstrates that how class and privilege are articulated in broader alt.country discourse at various political moments in history is what matters, not the relative perceived success or failure of a particular alt.country musician's performance of identity. And it is worth noting that in my formulation in this dissertation, all the performers whose work I analyze come from either middle-class backgrounds, or from working-class backgrounds but having garnered considerable cultural capital. In this sense, they are quite typical for rock musicians, seeing as alt.country is a type of rock music. I wholeheartedly agree with Anne Kathryn Hohman's conclusion in her ethnographic study of the Brooklyn alternative country scene: alt.country is a middle-class music.²⁷ With this comes interesting complications, since at times alt.country seeks to deny this middle-class quality about itself. This leads me to what I believe are two notable interventions I perform in this dissertation.

Interventions of the Dissertation

To situate these interventions properly, I briefly signpost the chapters which follow: In Chapter 1, I discuss Bob Dylan's *Nashville Skyline*, placing this LP of humorously clichéd country tunes in conversation with the late 1960s back-to-the-land movement, ultimately arguing that Dylan's work here is a sly critique of hippie counterculture. In Chapter 2, I argue that Linda

²⁷ Anne Kathryn Hohman, "Brooklyn Country: Class, Culture and the Politics of 'Alternativity' (PhD diss, Columbia University, 2012), 5.

Ronstadt became the rare musician able to “cross over” from the rock to country charts due to the notably blurred genre lines between rock, pop, and country of the mid-1970s, and ultimately the creation of a new musical “mainstream.” In Chapter 3 I suggest that the 1990s band Uncle Tupelo retroactively became a “founder” of alt.country in part because their left-wing populist music did not shy away from exploring the old-fashioned Christian thematic content sometimes historically associated with American populism. And in Chapter 4, I examine the work of alt.country singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams, arguing that her gendered critical reception as an emotional “genius,” coupled with her glamorous anti-modern portrait of loss and longing in her signature album *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, contributes to our contemporary understanding of the American south as a site of continual reimagining and contestation of meaning.

In discussing Williams’ work vis-à-vis her native region, this dissertation contributes to the tiny extant body of scholarship which examines alt.country from the perspective of Southern Studies. As best I can determine, only Robert Russell’s 2009 dissertation on alt.country incorporates aspects of this body of work, in his discussion of deindustrialization, small-town life, and local music scenes as they relate to the modern South (and Midwest). My dissertation takes a much less ethnographic or historical, and more theoretical approach than Russell’s on this sub-topic. I begin with Lucinda Williams’ status as self-considered alt.country auteur, one who very consciously incorporates aspects of the Southern (at times Southern Gothic) literary tradition into her approach to lyric writing. I argue that Williams participates within a tradition of Southern “insider/outsider” whites—particularly women writers—creating autobiographical work about their experiences playing at the boundaries of racial cross-identification. This is particularly charged and unique due to her skillful appropriation of the Southern Soul musical

tradition, including her cross-pollination of that style with other Deep South-identified genres such as Cajun music. Ultimately I argue that her strategic playing across these musical boundaries is also part of what allows her to straddle the boundary between “modern” and “anti-modern” southern identity in her work.

Additionally, one very unique aspect this dissertation contributes to the scholarship on alt.country and country-rock music is my discussion of Linda Ronstadt as she relates to (and is excluded from) the tradition; as far I can ascertain I am the only person to date to have paid scholarly attention to her work. As I note in Chapter 2, despite being essentially the only artist from the famed 1970s Los Angeles country-rock scene to “cross over” to the country music charts (long a dream of LA country-rockers such as Gram Parsons), Ronstadt is routinely ignored (or paid lip service) and excluded from alt.country’s retroactive canon of “early influences.” Though, as I just noted, country-rock is a middle-class music and Ronstadt developed a thoroughly middle-class aesthetic (one of vocal polish and precision), her openness about this did not sit well with rock’s pretensions to working-class, populist, and/or “serious”/challenging artistic status. Ronstadt’s career trajectory, rising from a rock scene into success in country and Top 40 pop, provides me an excellent opportunity to contribute some theorization on genre to the scholarly conversation about the 1970s. I draw on Eric Weisbard’s discussion of the “multiple mainstreams” of ‘70s radio formats to explain how country music radio met Ronstadt in the musical and cultural middle, soon suiting her personal style and audience arguably better than did rock, even though rock was the genre world she came from. Weisbard’s promotion of formats tells us much about a growing middle-class female audience for many kinds of pop music in the ‘70s, but to this I add that Weisbard’s concept works best when paired in conversation with Motti Regev’s framework of “pop-rock.” I argue that part of why Ronstadt is

erased from the critical conversation on alt.country is that pop-rock is (per Regev) the music of modernity, and Ronstadt's embrace of being a "Seventies woman" did not mesh with a continued rock anti-modern orientation. Ronstadt's case study is an example of what this dissertation aims to accomplish: to critically interrogate country-rock and alt.country's responses to the modern world, rather than simply valorizing antimodernism, and to make each of the four analyses as specific to their historical period as possible, while still also drawing connections between eras.

Chapter 1

“Country Pie”: Bob Dylan’s Genre Work in a Back-to-the-Land Moment

Love is all there is

It makes the world go ‘round

Love and only love, it can’t be denied

No matter what you think about it

You just won’t be able to do without it

*Take a tip from one who’s tried.*¹

The man on stage sings these homilies with an earnest expression on his face, his head turned at an angle into the spotlight, like a silent film actress. He displays impressive microphone technique, leaning slowly in as he extends the final word of the bridge, “tried,” lowering the volume in a showcase of his smooth vocal timbre. His posture is ramrod-straight, his shoulders a bit arched, as if charged with quiet purpose. This visual effect is accentuated by his smart black suit, tailored more businessman than Mod, though sans tie and open at the collar. He strums his acoustic guitar in a straight 1/16th note pattern, although he stumbles in places, and it may be possible that the guitar is turned off, as it seems to not be audible in the mix. His backing band is completely hidden off-camera, as was often the convention for solo performances on television variety shows of the 1960s.²

¹ Bob Dylan, *Nashville Skyline*, Columbia Records 9825, 1969, vinyl LP.

² Here I should note, not only was it convention that solo performers hid their backing musicians, but also that both singers and bands typically synced their entire TV performance to a prerecorded track. Dylan’s performance here, broadcast July 7, 1969, was an exception to this set of conventions. Comparing the broadcast version of “I Threw It All Away” with the studio recording, one notices a slightly faster tempo, slightly heavier drums, and subtle variations in Dylan’s vocal performance. Additionally, see Kathy Sawyer, “New Monarch at Opry Tabernacle,” *Nashville Tennessean*, May 2, 1969, 38, and Patrick Thomas, “Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan Tape TV Number In Nashville,” *Rolling Stone*, May 31, 1969, 1; both Sawyer and Thomas establish that Dylan’s band played live at the taping. Thomas names the musicians: Kenny Buttrey, Charlie McCoy, Pete Drake, Norman Blake, Charlie Daniels

The arrangement the band has worked up is a stripped-down variation on the Nashville Sound, with organist Bob Wilson providing a smoothly consonant harmonic texture, and gentle contrapuntal melodies in the song's final verse. While drummer Kenny Buttrey's tom work, a bit heavier and with a few more flourishes than on his studio recording of the song, might for a moment seem to push the arrangement closer toward (soft) rock, other details keep the song firmly rooted in country style. Norman Blake's expertly arpeggiated acoustic guitar is a textbook example of the Nashville session work he was doing in the 1960s. And the song's simple harmonic progression, mostly I-vi-IV-I in the key of C, would be standard for any number of country and pop songs of the era. In fact, the surprise shift from vi to bVII near the end of the bridge ("Take a tip...") goes even further, adding a lush chromaticism that wouldn't be out of place in a Cole Porter composition.

It is May 1st, 1969, and Bob Dylan is performing his latest single, "I Threw It All Away," for a live studio audience at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium, at that time the home of the Grand Ole Opry. In this summer where Dylan passed on performing at the Woodstock festival, he chose to make one of his then-rare public appearances filming three songs for the premiere episode of his friend Johnny Cash's new TV variety show. Accounts of the taping, from Nashville's *Tennessean* to *Rolling Stone*, played up differences between the "hippie" Dylan fans and the Grand Ole Opry regulars both in attendance.³ But even a cursory viewing of Dylan and

and Bob Wilson. For the broadcasted footage of this performance, see: "Bob Dylan—I Threw It All Away", accessed December 16, 2013, <http://youtu.be/LLwhDb7J7TY>.

³ See Sawyer, 38 and Thomas 1, 6. Sawyer subtitles her article "Subjects Wait to See Their King", and characterizes cultural differences in terms of physical space: "In place of the familiar orderly lines of men in sports shirts and women in dresses or pedal pushers, there were throughout the afternoon clusters of flower children from several states on the steps at the front entrance on Fifth Ave., and in the back alley, hoping to glimpse their idol." While Sawyer mentions Ryman technicians grouching about Dylan's star status, Thomas in *Rolling Stone* paints the scene more as an ephemeral yet happy cultural mélange: "It goes without saying that Cash fans are as baffled by Dylan's emergence here as Dylan freaks were startled at the news of this new axis. But they all lined up outside the Opry:

Johnny Cash's duet on "Girl from the North Country" later in the program reveals a personal warmth between the two men that makes it understandable why Cash extended Dylan the invitation across genre "lines" to help him launch the show.⁴

"I Threw It All Away," besides being the single Dylan was promoting in May 1969, was suited to the glamour of the Ryman in another way: its straightforward story of love lost fits the lyrical conventions of post-WWII mainstream country music like a glove.⁵ In three streamlined verses and a bridge, Dylan's narrator tells of a lover he lost through carelessness, then implores the listener not to make the same mistake, to recognize that "love is all there is/it makes the world go 'round." Amateur Dylanologists searching for autobiographical roots of this song were likely frustrated. The lyrics are broad to the point of offering no clues of past Dylan romances, and Dylan's love life in May 1969 was reportedly rosy. His wife Sara Dylan, in attendance at the taping, was portrayed in media accounts of the late sixties as the new center of his life (along with their children), even serving as a kind of unofficial spokesperson for Dylan while he convalesced in Woodstock, NY after his 1966 motorcycle accident.⁶

Once shorn of expectations that it confesses any of Dylan's personal romantic woes, "I Threw It All Away" stands as a successful iteration of Nashville pop-country songcraft. Any

businessmen and their wives, country boys, bald heads, acid heads, bee-hive bouffant blondes, drawling teenyboppers and other assorted traveling wonderers."

⁴ "Johnny Cash & Bob Dylan -- Live on Stage AGY," accessed December 16, 2013, <http://youtu.be/9pjYMTe6uLY>.

⁵ Country scholar Jimmie N. Rogers approximates that "three of every four popular country songs relate to some face of love, and most of the love songs depict a relationship that is unhappy or, to use the vernacular, 'hurtin'." He also identifies a popular sub-category of what he calls "Faded Love" songs, wherein the narrator sadly recounts a failed love affair, emphasizing economy of storytelling, in contrast with longer narratives of older "folk" lost-love songs. Jimmie N. Rogers, *The Country Music Message, Revisited* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1989), 47-48.

⁶ Dylan biographer Robert Shelton summarizes this media coverage in *No Direction Home*, including a 1968 *Newsweek* interview where Dylan indicates that familial responsibilities are now directing his life. Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 374-375.

autobiographical resonance between the lyrics and Dylan's life could only perhaps be found in context in the moment of performance, as the singer (in character) tells his Ryman audience that "once I had mountains in the palm of my hand," but "I threw it all away." For a rock superstar of his stature (one who initially rose to fame penning protest songs), playing an ostensibly apolitical country song to a Nashville TV audience during the peak era of U.S. civic unrest, Dylan had to be aware that to some he might be perceived as "throwing it all away."

Peter Doggett opens *Are You Ready for the Country*, his 2000 history of country-rock, with Dylan's appearance on Cash's TV show, emphasizing Dylan's shyness, almost fearfulness, at performing for a country audience in the home of the Grand Ole Opry.⁷ Doggett uses this episode to implicitly argue that Dylan (and other country-rockers like him) was taking a real *risk*, crossing cultural, political genre lines to a place he didn't belong. I don't deny that, particularly in the case of this unique TV appearance. But Doggett glosses too quickly over a recollection by Johnny Cash which adds needed perspective on the meaning of Dylan's genre moves. As he told *Musician* in 1988:

I think Bob Dylan was scared or even a little embarrassed. He's a very shy person. I can really appreciate that. When he went out to rehearse they had an old shack hanging from wires behind him to try to give it a backwoods look. He came offstage upset. He said, "I'm gonna be the laughingstock of the business! My fans are gonna laugh in my face over that thing!" I said, "What would you like?" He said, "Have 'em get that out of the way. Just put me out there by myself." I said, alright, you got it.⁸

Cash's behind-the-scenes story suggests that Dylan was concerned not only with the live audience in the Ryman, but perhaps even more with his TV viewing audience, implicitly his fans who might "laugh in [his] face." While Dylan took a risk performing for a Nashville crowd, the

⁷ Peter Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country: Elvis, Dylan, Parsons, and the Roots of Country Rock* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 5-9.

⁸ Bill Flanagan, Interview with Johnny Cash, *Musician*, May 1988, 104. Quoted in Doggett, 5.

bigger risk was how his pure country of “I Threw It All Away” would be perceived in a rock context. It is one of the consistent observations of this dissertation that the relationship between country and rock since the 1960s has been asymmetrical; while both rock and country “need” each other to some extent, rock has made more of country as an ideological and musical tool than vice-versa. Understanding Dylan’s pointed use of country music as a commentary on rock in the late 1960s is key to our broader historical understanding of subsequent uses of country music by rock musicians, including what became known as alt.country.

Though I am interested in the complexities of Dylan’s influence, in this dissertation I do not argue that Dylan “founded country-rock.” Indeed, in their work on this music, historians Olivia Carter Mather, Peter Doggett, John Einarson, and Richie Unterberger provide ample evidence that other rock musicians were experimenting with country music before the release of Dylan’s *John Wesley Harding* at the very end of 1967. Mather and Einarson, in particular, document a rich Southern California scene wherein LA rock musicians—independent of anything Dylan was doing in the mid-to-late ‘60s—drew inspiration from Bakersfield country such as Buck Owens.⁹ I also agree with Mather’s assessment that country-rock was a movement, not a genre, in the 1960s and ‘70s.¹⁰ But movements, like genres, have origin stories, and popular narratives of the country-rock movement focusing on Dylan influenced some of the founding ideas of what later became the full-fledged genre of alt.country.

Although Dylan did not found country-rock, it is indisputable that he sold more records than any other rock musicians playing country music in the late ‘60s: 1967’s *John Wesley*

⁹ Oliva Carter Mather, “‘Cosmic American Music’: Place and the Country Rock Movement, 1965-1974” (Ph.D. Diss, University of California, Los Angeles, 2006); Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country*; John Einarson, *Desperados: The Roots of Country Rock* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001); Richie Unterberger, *Eight Miles High: Folk-Rock’s Flight from Haight-Ashbury to Woodstock* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003).

¹⁰ Mather, “Cosmic American Music”, 11-14.

Harding and 1969's *Nashville Skyline* went to #2 and #3 on the U.S. album charts, respectively.¹¹ Though I assert in this chapter that these albums were best-selling due to Dylan's celebrity and not particularly because of a message about country music that struck a mainstream chord, to some music business observers—past and present—the fact that these two records sold well suggested a kind of causality. One notes this in early accounts of country-rock such as Robert Hilburn's, who wrote in 1968 in the *New York Times* that in *John Wesley Harding* Dylan “resurrected this tradition [country music] and made it accessible to his generation by poeticizing what was already implicit in it. He made it inevitable that a sizeable chunk of the folk-rock vanguard would desert the pop scene and take creative refuge in country music. That is what has happened.”¹² In contemporary accounts, one notes it in the “Alt.Country Chronology” compiled by Kelly Burchfield and Barbara Ching, in Ching and Pamela's Fox's *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*. Burchfield and Ching's chronology discusses only Dylan and Gram Parsons-related releases in the 1960s, and counts Dylan's work as the first rock music crossing over to country styles in that decade.¹³

Though Dylan was far from the only rock musician working with country music in the late 1960s, the fact that some popular and even academic narratives put him at the center of the story means that his disproportionate cultural influence is worth studying. His country work is what Ulf Lindberg et al., drawing on Motti Regev, call a “‘pure’ pole,” around which a narrative of canon formation is created, one which “redrafts the opposition between ‘old’ and ‘new’ in

¹¹ Clinton Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 228, 302.

¹² Richard Goldstein, “Big Pink is Just a Home in Saugerties”, *New York Times*, April 4, 1968, D20.

¹³ Kelly Burchfield and Pamela Fox, “Alt.Country Chronology,” in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, ed. Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 233-34.

noncommercial terms.”¹⁴ My analysis of Dylan’s country-rock begins with an acknowledgment that his influence looms large in alt.country canon formation stories, but rather than linger on the precise dimensions of his role, I focus instead on how his country rock intersects with key late-‘60s questions of modernity (anti- and post-), the American Left, and the cultural politics of rock and country music. While I briefly discuss *John Wesley Harding* vis-à-vis the concept of the rock *auteur*, I consider the more politically provocative *Nashville Skyline* in greater depth.

Nashville Skyline can be read most productively as a multifaceted, humorous, frustrated takedown of celebrity, rock stardom, and—coupled with this—late ‘60s rock’s fixation on the auteur’s expression of personal authenticity. While the album features a variety of country styles, its lightly ironic tone does not embrace country music as uncritically as is commonly thought. *Nashville Skyline* appeared far enough into the country-rock movement that Dylan had to be aware of the association many in the counterculture were now making between the purported “simplicity” of country music and the “back-to-the-land” movement. The reason *Nashville Skyline* confused both its admirers and detractors is that its songs were a country genre exercise in a rock context, implicitly critiquing both the New Left’s belief that culture could create political change, and the back-to-the-landers’ belief that simple old ways were best. *Nashville Skyline* is inherently about poses, jokes, showmanship, carrying country clichés to their logical (conservative) conclusion; thus, it questions rock’s uniform notions of an authentic self. In this way, it straddles a line between modernism and postmodernism that is markedly different from the mostly anti-modern take on country music proffered by the other rock musicians in this dissertation. However, since influence is often about creative and even purposeful misreadings

¹⁴ Ulf Lindberg, Gestur Guðmundsson, Morten Michelsen, Hans Weisethaunet, *Rock Criticism from the Beginning: Amusers, Bruisers, and Cool-Headed Cruisers* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 43.

of a text or author, it is worth noting that in my next chapter I consider The Byrds' 1968 recording of Dylan's "Nothing Was Delivered," which points the way toward the more somber direction many country-rock followers of Dylan took his songs and style.¹⁵

The Rock Auteur

As many Dylan commentators and fans—both past and present—have noted, *John Wesley Harding*, arriving as it did in late 1967, shared the (counter-)cultural conversation with two other massive musical events of the year: the Monterey Pop festival, and the release of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Both of these events, and the so-called "Summer of Love" that framed them, have long been understood as prime examples of the "psychedelic rock" movement. Sheila Whiteley characterizes psychedelic rock sonically as "manipulation of timbres (blurred, bright, overlapping), upward movement (and its comparison with psychedelic flight); harmonies (lurching, oscillating), rhythms (regular, irregular), relationships (foreground, background) and collages." All of this contrasts markedly with the more compositionally and texturally straightforward rock which came before it—not to mention the countrified sounds in Dylan's record.¹⁶ But as Whiteley and Michael Kramer argue regarding psychedelic rock, and as Franco Fabbri and other scholars have argued regarding popular music more generally, pop genres are never merely about sounds; genres are constructs situated in specific cultural and political contexts, can change over time, and involve the development of ideologies circulating between artists, critics, and audiences.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

¹⁶ Sheila Whiteley, *The Space Between the Notes: Rock and the Counter-Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 4.

¹⁷ Whiteley, *The Space Between the Notes*, 4; Michael Kramer, *The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3-25; Franco Fabbri and Iain Chambers, "What Kind of Music?", *Popular Music* Vol. 2, Theory and Method (1982): 131-143.

In 1967, the cultural and political context for psychedelic rock was the so-called counterculture; however, as Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle argue, the reason this term remains vague and controversial is that the counterculture was “an inherently unstable collection of attitudes, tendencies, postures, gestures, ‘lifestyles,’ ideals, visions, hedonistic pleasures, moralisms, negations, and affirmations...more a process than a product.”¹⁸ In 1967 a bestselling psychedelic album like *Sgt. Peppers*’ could be both mainstream and countercultural, and as Devon Powers notes, “As a counterculture developed, there was never a clean divide between it and the mainstream and not always a belief that there should be.”¹⁹ Counterculture or not, certain dynamics were becoming clear. Discussing rock music as “psychedelic” or “countercultural” was a sure sign that rock was reaching maturity as a full-fledged genre. The 1960s saw a shift from the racially integrated working-class milieu of “rock ‘n’ roll” to the mostly white middle-class collegiate “rock” scene, which began to dominate album sales. Educated white elites had the financial and social capital to do something country and R & B enthusiasts couldn’t manage: create countercultural magazines devoted to analyzing rock as art, informally building a new canon. Magazines like *Creem*, *Crawdaddy!*, and *Rolling Stone* were both a sign of rock’s new full-fledged genre status, and instruments in its codification as a genre.

In their book *Rock Criticism from the Beginning*, Lindberg et al. characterize the period of 1967 to 1975 as “Founding Fathers in the Promised Land,” since this is the era in music journalism when key writers such as Jon Landau and Greil Marcus began their careers.²⁰ These

¹⁸ Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, “Historicizing the American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s”, in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 10.

¹⁹ Devon Powers, *Writing the Record: The Village Voice and the Birth of Rock Criticism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 84.

²⁰ Lindberg et al., *Rock Criticism from the Beginning*, 131.

writers were determined to treat rock as a serious art form, attempting to shake off the “teenybopper” connotations of earlier British pop magazines such as *Melody Maker* by crafting long-form pieces influenced by New Journalism, literary theory, and film criticism. Lindberg et al. argue that writers like Landau and Marcus were self-conscious about their status as tastemakers and gatekeepers, viewing their role as distinguishing (in Bourdieu’s sense) between “good” and “bad” rock, often using some paradoxically old-fashioned aesthetic criteria borrowed from more established art forms.²¹

One criterion, however, was new and specific to the 1960s: “good” rock was often politically engaged in some way. From the beginning of countercultural rock journalism, its writers noted that not unlike a psychedelic drug experience, the new hip rock could take listeners out-of-body, communing with something divine and timelessly transcendent—paradoxically through a visceral experience of the musical moment. A rock concert could be an ephemeral secular spiritual community, suggesting utopian modes of living.²² Particularly at *Rolling Stone* magazine, many rock writers promoted the idea that the best rock music harnessed these communal vibrations to make a statement about generational political and cultural conflicts.

How best to make such political statements was a matter of debate among rock writers. As Lindberg et al. note, to some, the formal qualities of psychedelic rock—enumerated above by Sheila Whiteley—were political in and of themselves, without need for adding slogans.²³ But as tumultuous 1968 rolled in, some rock writers were becoming positively rhapsodic about the music’s potential for fomenting revolution. As Ralph J. Gleason put it in his *Rolling Stone*

²¹ Lindberg et al., *Rock Criticism from the Beginning*, 188-190.

²² See Kramer, *The Republic of Rock*, 20-21.

²³ Lindberg et al., *Rock Criticism from the Beginning*, 191.

“Perspectives” column, quoting Dylan and calling for a leaderless revolution, “At no time in American history has youth possessed the strength it possesses now. Trained by music and linked by music, it has the power for good to change the world. That power for good carries the reverse, the power for evil. Don’t follow leaders.”²⁴ And months later, discussing music’s role in a peaceful revolution, he declared, “Out of it will come the programs. Out of it will come the plans. When the time is right.”²⁵

For all of this blustery rhetoric about rock music’s call to action, countercultural journalists increasingly had to grapple with an obvious fact about rock music: it might be political, but it was also becoming increasingly big business. To some rock writers, like Robert Christgau and Richard Meltzer, the commerciality of rock was nothing new, and could even be celebrated, ambivalently. As Meltzer wrote in 1970’s *The Aesthetics of Rock*, “Rock ‘n’ roll has *always* been directly concerned with the art of selling and has produced an aesthetic of the hit...The feeling of triumph in such an achievement is clearly part of the rock ‘n’ roll experience.”²⁶ But the majority of rock writers became increasingly worried about the purported commercialization of rock, even as they were aware of their own role in generating what Devon Powers discusses as “hype”—a phenomenon of media (over-)exposure that was perceived as depoliticizing the counterculture (from music, to drugs, to film), watering it down into advertising copy.²⁷ Reflecting on rock’s origins from the vantage point of 1981, Simon Frith stated memorably, “Rock is a mass-produced music that carries a critique of its own means of production.”²⁸ But in the generative stages of rewriting rock as (pop) art, countercultural

²⁴ Ralph J. Gleason, “A Power to Change the World”, *Rolling Stone*, June 22, 1968, 10.

²⁵ Ralph J. Gleason, “Is There a Death Wish in U.S.?”, *Rolling Stone*, April 5, 1969, Insert 18.

²⁶ Richard Meltzer, *The Aesthetics of Rock* (New York: Something Else Press, 1970), 32.

²⁷ Powers, *Writing the Record*, 85-93.

²⁸ Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 11.

journalists, even if they were aware of the dynamic Frith describes, were heavily invested in protecting this burgeoning art form from what they perceived as phony entrepreneurs.

As each major label signed more rock acts, rock grew into an industry, large enough to employ thousands of cultural workers, including musicians, visual artists, marketers, sound engineers, band managers, and record store employees. All these roles were needed, working in a complex system, to get an LP into a rock fan's hands. This meant increasingly that the music industry had clear parallels with the film industry, another business wherein large sums of money and complex networks of employees are needed to connect audiences with movies. And the primary method by which film critics—an important model for rock critics—tried to make sense of their medium's mix of art and business was so-called auteur theory.

First posited in the 1950s and '60s by French intellectuals and Nouvelle Vague filmmakers in the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, auteur theory was further developed in the U.S. by critics such as Andrew Sarris, who argued for film's redefinition as a "personal" medium. Bucking the early-'60s film-critic convention of writing mostly about screenwriters or movie stars, Sarris focused on directors, evaluating these *auteurs* (directors) for "technical competence, presence of a distinct visual style, and the emergence of 'interior meaning' that...arose from the tension between the director...and the conditions of production with which he or she worked (i.e., Hollywood studio system)."²⁹ The work of Sarris and other auteurist film critics who followed him dramatically changed the reception of directors such as Douglas Sirk, who were working in oft-derided genres like melodrama. Sarris' basic assumption was that a singular

²⁹ David A. Gerstner, "The Practices of Authorship", in *Authorship and Film*, ed. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (New York: Routledge, 2003), 8.

talent like Sirk could use the conventions of melodrama against itself, manipulating the rules of genre films to make subtly subversive personal statements.

As Ulf Lindberg et al. argue, for rock critics in the founding late-60s era, auteur theory proved an attractive framework for arguing that rock could be both art *and* commerce.

Auteurism could be used to build canons of “classic” musicians, just as Sarris had done with directors; also, auteurism’s *metteur* (i.e. hacks) vs. *auteur* (i.e. geniuses) distinction could be mapped onto the commercialism vs. “authentic ‘art’” dichotomy late-60s rock critics favored.³⁰

As Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake note, “Because any system of rules brings with it the possibility of transgression, genre can be seen as providing a field for variation and elaboration of meaning; hence genre is not something that imprisons a director but precisely allows him a freedom.”³¹ Auteurism, whether in film or rock criticism, provided an alternate way to think about genre—one which allowed individual genius to appear evident in every scene or song.

Landau and John Wesley Harding as Auteur Expression

One notes a “rock as art” critical approach as early as 1963, when the (London) *Times* featured a “pop/rock” group (the Beatles) for the first time in their Arts pages, discussing “musical form, scales and harmonic analysis” in the style of Western art music criticism.³² But full-fledged conscious utilization of auteur theory in the rock critical world began with young writers like Jon Landau in the late 1960s.³³ Known for a prickly and authoritative interpretive

³⁰ Lindberg et al., *Rock Criticism from the Beginning*, 43.

³¹ Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006), 107.

³² Lindberg et al., *Rock Criticism from the Beginning*, 39.

³³ It should be noted that rock criticism’s use of auteur theory to canonize select artists and bolster its own credibility also indirectly provided cultural capital to Sarris, who by the late ‘60s was already coming under criticism from anti-auteur film critics like Pauline Kael. Sarris, in the *Village Voice*, got into the music game himself, proclaiming Dylan an auteur after viewing his performance in D.A. Pennebaker’s *verité* landmark *Don’t Look Back*:

style, Landau began his career at *Crawdaddy* but eventually went on to help make *Rolling Stone* into the rock magazine of record.³⁴ As Lindberg et al. point out, Landau had some academic training before beginning rock criticism, and it led him to seek ideological links between rock and other art forms. He believed that “rock is a specific art form whose one leg is named ‘entertainment’ and the other ‘provocation.’ To study and interpret this art form Landau follows in the footsteps of film critics who for more than a decade had searched for an auteur behind the technology and cooperative efforts of mass produced art.”³⁵ Landau believed that unique authorial vision, present on all levels of composition and production is what spurred rock’s movement forward as a modern art form.

Lindberg et al. cite Landau’s review of *John Wesley Harding* in *Crawdaddy* as one of the classic examples of rock auteur theory, and with good reason. Landau frames the review around the idea of *myth*, suggesting that while Dylan has spun myths in all his prior work, “on *JWH*, he completely shatters the vestiges of the myths that had dominated all of his previous recordings.”³⁶ This statement makes it sound as though the album is decidedly different from Dylan’s past; however, Landau goes on to argue that the artist has upended expectations all along.

Landau suggests that the Dylan of *John Wesley Harding* is “profoundly moral” in a new and different way, and that one can hear it in his vocal technique: “There is genuine understatement, there is an attempt at expressing different moods through different styles and

“Dylan projects a unified personality as a performer. He is what he sings—warts, obscurities, and all. He certainly is not a great musician and it can be argued that he is not a great performer...What makes Dylan electrifying is that his art is connected to the wholeness of his personality.” In Sarris, “Don’t Look Back”, in *The Dylan Companion*, ed. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (New York: Da Capo, 1990), 89.

³⁴ Ibid, 42.

³⁵ Lindberg et al., *Rock Criticism from the Beginning*, 147.

³⁶ Jon Landau, “John Wesley Harding,” *Crawdaddy!*, May 1968, 11.

there is an attempt to be honest without affecting honesty.”³⁷ Note the idea of “honesty,” here: Landau venerates a standard of rock authenticity which seems to spring from *personal* (as opposed to community-based) beliefs. He concludes his review by suggesting that “On this album Dylan’s songs are no longer just him, they are separate identities which exist apart from their author. And we see Dylan moving toward an identity of himself as a classical artist, not just as a pop artist.”³⁸ In other words, he rises above the commercial limitations of rock to create autonomous works which express the unified whole of his person(a). This approach is consistent with what Lindberg et al. attribute to Landau’s critical toolbox: “conventional art standards of expressive individuality and originality.”³⁹ Landau’s suggestion that Dylan could take traditional musical sources yet still make something completely “new” out of them is audacious—yet also completely of a piece with the times, upon which I will elaborate momentarily.

Also audacious in Landau’s review is his assertion that on *John Wesley Harding*,

Out of his identity being tied to what is happening in this country, Dylan manifests a profound awareness of the war and how it is affecting all of us. This doesn’t mean that I think any of the particular songs are about the war or that any of the songs are protests over it. All I mean to say is that Dylan has felt the war, that there is an awareness of it contained within the mood of the album as a whole...[The songs] acknowledge it by attempting to be real, by attempting to not speak falsely and by playing fewer games than ever before.⁴⁰

Landau’s take is auteurist in that, like Sarris, he finds “interior meaning” between the lyrics, reading a particular moral target (the war in Vietnam) in an album which makes no mention of it. Specifically, Landau’s claim regarding Dylan’s diffuse statement on the political world of war is a good illustration of what Michael Kramer calls “the republic of rock”: a “stateless entity...more a state of being...addressing, through culture, two of the core mysteries of

³⁷ Ibid, 16.

³⁸ Ibid, 17.

³⁹ Lindberg et al., *Rock Criticism from the Beginning*, 149.

⁴⁰ Landau, “John Wesley Harding”, 16.

democratic citizenship: how do disparate *persons* legitimately assemble into a *people*? And when they do, how does this affect them as individuals and a community?”⁴¹ Kramer argues that countercultural rock of the late ‘60s often (obliquely) grappled with these two questions, almost never producing clear answers, but laying bare the tensions between individual and community which were particularly urgent in the cultural moment. Both Kramer and Barry Shank point out that an emphasis on *personal authenticity* in articulations of political questions in countercultural music of the ‘60s coincided with the rise (and eventual fragmentation) of the American New Left, and that this overlap was not coincidental.⁴² Later in this chapter, I will discuss further Shank’s argument vis-à-vis Dylan and race. But for the moment I simply wish to point out that, as Kramer puts it, the ‘60s counterculture “neither definitively embraced a libertarian emphasis on rights, nor endorsed a communitarian emphasis on obligations,” that this was both a source of ambivalence and tension with the New Left, and also that this ambivalence was indirectly part of critics’ formulation of an auteur theory of rock, a theory from which Dylan’s career benefitted.

Returning to the music for a moment, it is worth noting that for its many mentions—past and present—as a “country” album, *John Wesley Harding* features only two songs with pedal steel guitar and straightforward lyrics about love: “Down Along the Cove” and “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight,” which are the closing tracks. If we simplify for a moment and consider these as two defining traits of country music, then by this standard *John Wesley Harding* is not particularly a country album. Certainly, the album’s extensive use of Biblical themes and imagery draws on a deep wellspring of American folklore that, historically speaking, also

⁴¹ Kramer, *The Republic of Rock*, 9.

⁴² Kramer, *The Republic of Rock*, 11-12, and Barry Shank, “‘That Wild Mercury Sound’: Bob Dylan and the Illusion of American Culture”, *Boundary 2* 29:1 (2002): 97-123.

inspired early country music. But to my ears, the musical setting is strictly folk-rock. For this reason, I will not linger on *John Wesley Harding*, except to mention one other aspect of its reception related to the anti-modern themes of this dissertation.

While Jon Landau focused his review mostly on Dylan's lyrics, several other rock writers were captivated more by the musical arrangements. In contrast with the lush full-band settings of Dylan's previous album, the austerity of the acoustic guitar-bass-drums-voice on *John Wesley Harding* was striking. Some reviewers used metaphors of *earthiness* as they struggled to describe this new sound. For example, Dan Sullivan in the *New York Times* found that "the instrumentation is as plain as dirt."⁴³ Related to this, reviewers emphasized the album's seeming timelessness. Setting the music in marked contrast to popular rock of the late '60s à la Jefferson Airplane, Alfred G. Aronowitz wrote in the *Saturday Evening Post* that "*John Wesley Harding* pulled out the psychedelic plug and pointed the way to country music, but it doesn't speak only to today...Its songs are the kind that can be sung and played beyond the reach of an electric cord...His cast of characters will be valid at any time, in any place."⁴⁴ Robert Shelton in the *New York Times* concurred, consciously linking the album to an American musical past, as he argued that Dylan's previous work had featured "ghost singers" ranging from Woody Guthrie to Ray Charles.⁴⁵ On *John Wesley Harding*, he theorized, the ghost singer was Hank Williams. Shelton's move works on two levels: it connects Dylan explicitly with the legacy of country music, *and* it suggests that Williams can in a sense live forever as a pure "roots" source for the kind of rural Americana sentiment he believes Dylan is attempting to express.

⁴³ Dan Sullivan, "Dylan's First Album in 17 Months Is A Runaway Hit," *New York Times*, January 11, 1968, 42.

⁴⁴ Alfred G. Aronowitz, "Enter the King, Bob Dylan," *Saturday Evening Post*, November 2, 1968, 35.

⁴⁵ Robert Shelton, "Dylan Sings of Lovers, Losers," *New York Times*, January 14, 1968, D22.

In other words, these rock writers are working to fit *John Wesley Harding* into a then-new theory of American “roots” music. The writers perceive “roots” music—which could include everything from 19th century ballads to Delta blues—as an independent entity, but even more so as key source material for current rock music. I borrow a contextual definition of “roots” here from Benjamin Filene, who argues in his seminal *Romancing the Folk* that “roots” was invented by rock critics: “I use ‘roots’...to identify musical genres that, whether themselves commercial or not, have been glorified as the ‘pure’ sources out of which the 20th century’s commercial popular music was created.”⁴⁶ Filene argues that “roots” is a “retrospective” term, having more to do with *perceptions* than actual stylistic traits of musical genre.⁴⁷ In other words, it is an *ideological*, not musicological, term. Even though rock critics of the late ‘60s may not have been using the precise word “roots” frequently, they were formulating the concept in reviews such as those highlighted above. A newly-penned “roots-to-rock” historical trajectory could both help explain the psychedelic studio creations of the most sonically progressive ‘68 rock, and also promote the idea of new “earthy” rock alternatives to psychedelia.

Antimodernism in a “Back-to-the-Land” moment

It is to these “earthy” alternatives and their respective ideologies I turn now, in a brief discussion of the “back-to-the-land” movement of the late 1960s. This cultural movement, as it was refracted in the rock music, films, and print media of the time, was very much the air into which *Nashville Skyline* was released. And that is not merely my take; journalists of Dylan’s own time were making the connection. It begins with buzz terms of the 1960s such as

⁴⁶ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing The Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 4.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 4.

“technocracy” and “Organization Man.”⁴⁸ As the sociologist Steven Goldberg wrote in 1970, providing context for Dylan’s recent country-tinged work:

Like the rest of us, Bob Dylan faces a universe that science discovers to be more and more a deterministic unity no part of which has meaning without reference to every other part. To the dispossessed this universe seems to be inhabited not by free agents in a world of free will, but by the living, irrelevant effects of an infinite number of causes.⁴⁹

Besides enumerating the (valid) fear of a loss of free will in 20th century life, Goldberg’s turn of phrase, “science discovers,” viscerally suggests the machines taking over, a world of complex systems of research and technological innovations intended to free us, but instead further isolating us from each other and ourselves, cogs in a massive wheel.

Goldberg would likely agree with the arguments of the pop-academic star of 1969, Theodore Roszak. His *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, begun in 1968 and published in book form in 1969, was widely discussed in both underground and mainstream media, likely because it attempted to explain what the hippies were so worked up about. Roszak’s concept was technocracy, which he defined as “that social form in which an industrial society reaches the peak of its organizational integration.”⁵⁰ Roszak believed that in a technocracy, “nothing is small or simple or readily apparent to the...amateurish citizen” and that every problem “inexorably demands the attention of specially trained experts.”⁵¹ These experts, committee upon bureaucratic committee of them, have the public so convinced that every social ill can be solved with research, planning, and new

⁴⁸ I will discuss “technocracy” momentarily; regarding “Organization Man”, see William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (1956; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

⁴⁹ Steven Goldberg, “Bob Dylan and the Poetry of Salvation”, *Saturday Review*, May 30, 1970, 43.

⁵⁰ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 6-7.

technological advances, no one (including the technocrat experts themselves) notices that a new form of totalitarianism has taken hold.⁵²

Roszak discusses Adam Smith's pin factory as an early historical example of the systemization he laments in the 1960s.⁵³ Those familiar with T.J. Jackson Lears' *No Place of Grace* will note the parallels to the concerns raised by Victorian-era anti-modern activists regarding Taylorism as a system of labor organization. These naysayers were so concerned that the "scientific management" style introduced by Frederick Winslow Taylor and his ilk was crushing the individuality of newly-minted white-collar workers, they set about creating entire new art/work movements, such as "Arts & Crafts" style, to compensate.⁵⁴ While much more could be written about the parallels (and also some differences), for the moment suffice to say one of the biggest similarities between the eras Roszak and Lears describe is they were both amazingly prosperous: Lears was investigating the Gilded Age, Roszak the increasingly affluent years following World War II in the U.S.

Roszak, as some have pointed out, was popularizing and putting his own spin on the ideas of Frankfurt School sociologist Herbert Marcuse, whose *One Dimensional Man*, published in 1964, became one of the foundational texts of the student New Left. Observing a post-war America wherein material prosperity (i.e. the growth of the suburbs, easier access to a variety of consumer goods) rendered unlikely a Marxian working-class revolution, and also wherein Americans lived in fear of nuclear war, Marcuse argued that the rationality of contemporary political, military-industrial, and social organization actually caused individuals to act in

⁵² Ibid, 7-11.

⁵³ Ibid, 5-6.

⁵⁴ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 14, 61.

irrational ways, which he called “false consciousness.”⁵⁵ Marcuse was ambivalent as to whether Americans of the 1960s could break out of this false consciousness, which he argued was related to consumerism. But he held out some limited hope for the possibility that what he perceived as the growing automation of post-war life could be harnessed for good. This is what Marcuse’s more utopian-minded contemporaries like Murray Bookchin envisioned as a “post-scarcity” society, wherein machines would perform all menial labor, thereby freeing resources to be more evenly distributed among all the world’s people, freeing repressed individuals to live more empowered lives.⁵⁶

In his book *Counterculture Green*, Andrew Kirk argues that a vocal sliver of the overall U.S. counterculture of the 1960s actively promoted what he calls “appropriate technologies,” which were gadgets, architecture, and product design from entrepreneurial yet civic-minded young hippies. Examples included the content featured in Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog*, as well as Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic domes, adapted as space-age housing by the Droppers artistic collective and commune.⁵⁷ Kirk suggests that Brand and his contemporaries like Ken Kesey considered LSD to also be one of these appropriate technologies.⁵⁸ And as Michael Kramer argues, the instruments of psychedelic rock itself were powerful countercultural technologies: “To enjoy commercial recordings and concerts, to ‘rock out’ while listening to roaring electric guitars, thundering drums, and intense amplification was, at some level to join

⁵⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 9-12.

⁵⁶ Andrew Kirk, “‘Machines of Loving Grace’: Alternative Technology, Environment, and the Counterculture”, in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 354-55.

⁵⁷ Timothy Miller, “The Sixties-Era Communes”, in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 332.

⁵⁸ Andrew Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 37-40.

larger forces of technological control even if one opposed them or felt ambivalent about them.”⁵⁹ All these appropriate technologies mediated relationships between humans and nature—humans and the divine, humans and the unknowable—in ways that did not shy away from the complexities of postindustrial capitalism in America. Appropriate technologists aimed to perfect the relationship between modern cities and the land, not to send us all back to the Garden.

However, as Kirk argues, counterculturalists who touted the benefits of technology were in the minority among those on the political left in the American Sixties. He cites the widespread popularity Rachel Carson’s 1962 *Silent Spring*, whose exposé of large-scale pollution struck a fearful chord among many young leftist intellectuals who were beginning to question their Progressive faith in government institutions and technological progress.⁶⁰ Inspired by an American conservationist tradition going back to Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, these “reversionaries” (as Theodore Roszak called them), distrusted cities on a basic level and wished to carve out protected space for land to exist unperturbed from development. On this land, small groups of people could live, both as caretakers of the land, and potentially to reimagine human civilization anew. While appropriate technologists saw earth-friendly gadgets as the route to a post-scarcity, postindustrial brighter future, the profoundly anti-modern “reversionaries wanted to move toward the postindustrial by returning to a simpler way of life in the Jeffersonian tradition.”⁶¹

Out of this reactionary impulse, Kirk argues, developed the back-to-the-land communal living movement. While Kirk’s narrative is compelling, I believe that it is also important to

⁵⁹ Kramer, *The Republic of Rock*, 11.

⁶⁰ Kirk, *Counterculture Green*, 26.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 40.

temper his point with countercultural historian Timothy Miller's observation that there were *many* different types of intentional communities in the American 1960s. Miller points out that intentional communities in North America date back to at least the Shakers, and that several of the big communes associated with the Sixties back-to-the-land movement date back to the 1950s and early Sixties. But Miller admits that in the late '60s the movement took off, with thousands to tens of thousands of communes beginning to dot the American rural landscape.⁶² Miller is quick to remind us that "There were urban and rural, drug-using and drug-free, egalitarian and chauvinistic, structured and anarchical, religious and secular communes, to name just a few of the antitypes;" however, Miller concedes that the more extreme, rural and remote, and (sometimes) drug-addled communes received the most media attention.⁶³

On the bright side, as Ryan Edgington points out, rural, anti-modern intentional communities of the late '60s found strength in drawing upon (and subtly updating) ideals of self-sufficiency that date back to the founding of the United States: "Using popular rural representations and innate Arcadian ideals, the movement reinvented the self-sufficient Jeffersonian yeoman farmer and 'pioneer' figure as a collective endeavor."⁶⁴ To these communards, reaching self-sufficiency (e.g. raising one's own beef, growing one's own grain, harvesting one's own honey, etc.) meant finding true liberation from contemporary technocratic capitalism, but also rediscovering an American pioneer spirit which seemed unjustly lost to the sands of time. Communards could draw strength in small-scale collectivism as they protested what they saw as an overly bureaucratic world—and put their beliefs into everyday action.

⁶² Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values, 2nd Edition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 74.

⁶³ Miller, *The Hippies and American Values*, 79.

⁶⁴ Ryan Edgington, "'Be Receptive to the Good Earth': Health, Nature, and Labor in Countercultural Back-to-the-Land Settlements", *Agricultural History* 82:3 (Summer 2008), 287.

Some intentional communities of the Sixties, such as Central Virginia's Twin Oaks, founded in 1967, still exist and even thrive today. But Miller and Edgington document how difficult it was for many communes of the era to survive, let alone achieve total self-sufficiency. Springtime frosts and unwanted insects sometimes destroyed crops, drinking water was sometimes unintentionally compromised, and food sometimes had to be rationed. Difficult facts such as these meant that communes often had a revolving door of members, which made it difficult to assemble cohesive teams for the massive amounts of field work which always needed to be done, in order to stay afloat.⁶⁵ And the many hardships of farming sometimes raised the question as to whether total self-sufficiency should even be a commune's goal.

In the late '60 and early '70s, *Rolling Stone* offered several long-form profiles of hip intentional communities, with perhaps the best of them being John Dean's "The Summer of New Mexico" in July 1970. In the piece Dean interviews residents of two different communes in Taos, New Mexico, one of "psychedelic farmers," the other of "acid cowboys." Questions of self-sufficiency and a commune's search for meaning are central to the article. Upon speaking with each group's farmers, he discovers that the acid cowboys are having difficulty growing marijuana due to drought in Taos, and that the psychedelic farmers are running low on their harvested food, since hippie hitchhikers just passing through seem to expect dinner. On these troubles Dean wryly remarks, "You could hustle the earth, as the Pennsylvania dirt farmer [one of the Taos communards] is doing. But that's hard work. Easier to hustle food stamps." He then goes on to explain that many Taos communards are receiving food stamp benefits, and that for many the food stamps are what keep them from starving. He notes that while a handful of bad apples have fraudulently applied for food stamps in multiple counties, most communards

⁶⁵ Edgington, "Be Receptive to the Good Earth", 298-99.

receive them fair-and-square, as they are genuinely poor enough to qualify for the benefit. Dean nonetheless adopts an ambivalent, humorously ironic tone toward the practice.⁶⁶

The ambivalence grows when Dean interviews at length a Taos acid cowboy known as “Brother Daniel.” Daniel tells Dean he is proud to be making a (subsistence) living raising livestock on his farm, and also proud that he has developed friendships with Latino locals who have lived in this area long before the communards. But he actively fears that too many hippie drifters just checking out the commune scene, unprepared for the rigors of livestock and agricultural work, will eventually ruin what he’s been building. He also seems to associate this anxiety with some potential tension regarding his “psychedelic farmer” neighbors:

But the acid cowboys can blow it for the psychedelic farmers, just like the hippies blew Haight-Ashbury, and Greenwich Village before that. The natives don’t necessarily distinguish between the farmers and the cowboys; we’re all Anglo newcomers. And it’s not just the cowboys that are blowing it; there are all kinds of weirdos, all over.⁶⁷

Daniel’s statement is a powerful illustration of both Braunstein and Doyle’s point that the counterculture was always an unstable collection of attitudes and lifestyles, and Kramer’s argument that the counterculture never quite settled on whether personal rights or communal obligations should take priority as the Sixties drew to a close.

Additionally, Dean’s ironic tone in discussing the communards’ food stamps highlights questions of personal autonomy and authenticity vis-à-vis government institutions—very much a 1960s New Left concern. Dean implicitly asks: if these commune members rely on Uncle Sam’s welfare state to indirectly bankroll their intentional community, are they truly challenging

⁶⁶ John Dean, “The Summer of New Mexico”, *Rolling Stone*, July 9, 1970, 26.

⁶⁷ Dean, “The Summer of New Mexico,” 28. It should also be noted that Daniel’s statement raises the specter of a long history of cultural tensions between representations of “mountaineers” and “hillbillies” in American culture; see Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

The System? Are they committed anti-capitalist countercultural revolutionaries, or are they just looking to shoot their guns in the desert, smoke dope, and take acid? This question of whether the counterculture should (or even could) radically change societal structures, or whether it was more about self-discovery, new freedoms, new pleasures, and new identities is central to the counterculture's relationship with the New Left in the 1960s.

As Douglas Rossinow notes in *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America*, New Left activists and broader hippie culture held in common a belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature, arguing that contemporary Western society was not “natural,” that its bureaucratic structures and emphasis on competitiveness were a perversion of innate human kindness.⁶⁸ As Rossinow puts it, “This opposition between the natural or the ‘real,’ and the artificial most directly expressed the existentialist search for personal authenticity, forming a kind of preface to any discussion of specific practices and values that ought to change.”⁶⁹ Scholars such as Grace Hale and Lee Marshall have noted that by emphasizing authentic selfhood as the font through which the dreams and goals of a community might be realized, activists and artists of the ‘60s were influenced by Romanticism, the 18th-and-19th-century European artistic movement which also valorized the individual—in this case during the first Industrial Revolution.⁷⁰ While this Romanticism was sometimes articulated in the 1960s as a kind of transcendence via modern art à la the emergent “Consciousness III” promoted by Charles Reich, it just as much if not more often skewed anti-modernist in orientation, as in the

⁶⁸ Rossinow quotes Alan Ginsberg, disputing the idea of human competitiveness, stating, “man’s basic nature is that he’s a pretty decent fellow when there’s enough to go around.” In Douglas Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 250.

⁶⁹ Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 250.

⁷⁰ See Grace Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27-9; Lee Marshall, *Bob Dylan The Never Ending Star* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 17-19, 63-7.

romance of the back-to-the-land movement.⁷¹ Rock music discourse of the late Sixties was often a complex blend of these two Romanticisms.

Both Rossinow and Hale discuss the New Left's "cultural" turn (to use Rossinow's words) as the Sixties progressed.⁷² The participatory democracy and direct action advocated by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) could become cultural "self-determination" for both white and black American outsiders, in the context of SDS's Economic and Research Action Project, and the eventual rise of the Black Power movement.⁷³ I will return momentarily to the New Left's (and rock culture's) tentative turn away from black culture at the very end of the Sixties, but for the moment it is worth noting that, as Rossinow puts it, New Left activists "may have flocked to the counterculture in a way that their opposite numbers elsewhere did not, but the warmth of this relationship says nothing about how these political activists viewed the counterculture in political terms."⁷⁴

An October 1967 march on Washington against the Vietnam War, in which "hippies" joined political protestors—100,000 strong—and attempted to levitate the Pentagon, is often cited as a countercultural highlight, a utopian moment wherein artistic expression and activism could be one and the same.⁷⁵ While many New Left activists, as Rossinow notes, were substantively involved with the counterculture, scholars such as Rebecca Klatch have also demonstrated real fractures between hippies and activists as the 1960s progressed. For instance, Klatch notes that members of the Progressive Labor segment of SDS disdained drug-taking, long

⁷¹ See Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970).

⁷² Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 258-9.

⁷³ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 180. See also Rossinow's discussion of the related New Left catchphrase, "the revolution is about our lives", in Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 247-48.

⁷⁴ Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 258.

⁷⁵ See Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 225.

hair, and free love as bourgeois affectations which distracted from the working-class revolution they hoped to foment.⁷⁶ It wasn't just PL members; many activists who leaned toward a Marxist perspective saw the counterculture this way. As George Novack stated in the *Berkeley Barb* in 1967:

The psychedelic revolution is not a revolution in any sense of the word. It is a means of escaping the realness imposed by everyday life upon everyone in this society. But it is sterile and infantile because it does not fundamentally transform these restrictions which afflict and affect every one of us...The philosophy of the 'hippies' is a philosophy of politics that says there should be love toward everyone. Love is a good thing, but hatred of what is hateful is as necessary and important.⁷⁷

In a late-'60s America where protesters were savagely beaten by police at the 1968 Democratic national convention, Richard Nixon was elected president promising a return to law-and-order, and the Vietnam War dragged on despite massive peaceful demonstrations, such a harsh assessment could start to seem logical among those who still envisioned a revolution.

“Back-to-the-land” meets late-‘60s rock

These cultural, political tensions bled through to the rock world in the onstage activities of the Woodstock Festival and its coverage in the media. As discussed earlier in this chapter, late-Sixties rock critics held in highest esteem psychedelic rock which offered a feeling of transcendence, but also channeled that transcendent energy into (left-wing) political statements. Jimi Hendrix's interpretation of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” wherein Hendrix altered the melody and employed distortion to apparently protest the Vietnam War, is hailed in mass-media retellings of Woodstock as an example of this, countercultural art and protest one and the same. But the experiences of the Yippies' Abbie Hoffman and other New Left activists at Woodstock

⁷⁶ Rebecca Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, The New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 143.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values*, xxiii.

suggest a different narrative. The “Movement City” established by Hoffman and others, with a goal of distributing leftist literature to politically engage festival-goers, was largely ignored as Woodstock progressed.⁷⁸ And when Hoffman commandeered the stage during The Who’s Woodstock set to give a political speech, Pete Townshend quite literally kicked Hoffman off the stage, later describing his violent outburst as “the most political thing I ever did.”⁷⁹

The possibility that Woodstock was more about capitalizing off the counterculture than it was about political community and/or returning to the land was frequently discussed by journalists in 1969, such as Jon Wiener: “It was a victory for the businessman-promoters...[abetted by Woodstock’s stars who turn] their music into a commodity...at the same time they claim to be part of a political movement that opposes exploitation.”⁸⁰ Andrew Kopkind, writing in his magazine *Hard Times*, was a bit more generous, praising Woodstock’s utopian quality, arguing “it was an illusion and it wasn’t.” For Kopkind, Woodstock taught counterculturally-inclined New Left activists that:

Political radicals have to see the cultural revolution as a sea in which they can swim, like black militants in ‘black culture’. But the urges are roaming, and when the dope freaks and nude swimmers and loveniks and ecological cultists and music groovers find out that they have to fight for love, all fucking hell will break loose.⁸¹

Besides serving as an example of the aforementioned evolving gulf between white and black activists and countercultures, Kopkind’s rhetoric demonstrates an optimism that libidinally-

⁷⁸ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 230-1.

⁷⁹ Quoted in John Street, “‘This is your Woodstock’: Popular Memories and Political Myths,” in *Remembering Woodstock*, ed. Andy Bennett (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 38.

⁸⁰ Jon Weiner, “Woodstock Revisited”, in *The Age of Rock 2: Sights and Sounds of the American Cultural Revolution*, ed. Jonathan Eisen (New York: Vintage Books, 197), 172.

⁸¹ Andrew Kopkind, “Woodstock Nation”, in *The Age of Rock 2*, 318. It should be noted that Kopkind’s cautiously optimistic take on Woodstock is similar to other contemporary journalists’ perspectives on the festival; see Simon Warner, “Reporting Woodstock: Some contemporary press reflections on the festival”, in *Remembering Woodstock*, 55-74.

charged political anger, music, and the land itself could yet converge to overthrow or substantively amend postindustrial capitalism as we then knew it. It was this belief that rock musicians and fans could be revolutionaries that seemingly inspired the new SDS faction the Weathermen—who embraced the political efficacy of violence—to name themselves after a line in Dylan’s “Subterranean Homesick Blues” in 1969, two months prior to Woodstock.⁸²

Romanticization of Woodstock as a more platonically Arcadian back-to-the-land gathering began shortly after the event proper. Joni Mitchell’s 1969 tribute to the festival, “Woodstock”, famously situates her narrator meeting “a child of God” on the road to Yasgur’s farm, ending with the imperative, “we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.”⁸³ Adam Trinkle perceptively notes that Mitchell tempers her textbook antimodernism with a nod to a scientific perspective on human existence: “We are stardust/Billion-year-old carbon.”⁸⁴ On the other hand, the song features prominent anti-technology images of military aircraft morphing into butterflies. Trinkle notes that an even sunnier portrait of Woodstock as rural Utopia can be found in Michael Wadleigh’s very commercially successful 1970 documentary *Woodstock*, wherein montages set to Canned Heat’s “Goin’ Up the Country” frame the festival as idyll, featuring more footage of hippies socializing among the trees than actual musical performances.⁸⁵

I examine Woodstock and its mythologizers here because the event and its reception prompted widespread public discussion of rock’s maturation as a genre, countercultural political activism and commerce, and back-to-the-land antimodernism which were very much the context

⁸² Ron Jacobs, *The Way the Wind Blew: A History of the Weather Underground* (London: Verso, 1997), 2.

⁸³ Joni Mitchell, *Ladies of the Canyon*, Reprise Records 6376, 1970, vinyl LP.

⁸⁴ Adam Trinkle, “Back to the Garden: Pastoralism, Country Rock and Authenticity in the U.S. Counterculture, 1968-1970” (Honors Thesis, Wesleyan University, 2008), 46-7.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 41-5.

for *Nashville Skyline*'s 1969 release and reception. What is more, the festival itself was attached to Dylan as star figure, in spite of his apparent desire to disassociate himself from it, as he departed the U.S. to headline England's Isle of Wight festival at the very moment Woodstock was taking place. Dylan biographers characterize the choice of venue—a farm near the Woodstock, NY area where Dylan lived in the late '60s—as a deliberate strategy by organizers to connect the festival to Dylan in potential ticket buyers' imaginations, despite his apparent refusal of offers to perform.⁸⁶ Clinton Heylin depicts Dylan's backing group The Hawks (by then known as The Band, and stars in their own right) as “surrogate Dylans” in their Woodstock performance⁸⁷; whether this was factually true, the perception alone is worth noting, seeing as The Band were celebrated by critics of the late '60s as the most anti-modern of all major rock groups.

As Adam Tinkle argues perceptively, The Band, whose songs famously examined farmers' labor unions and Confederate Civil War veterans, and featured instrumentation (tuba) and fashion (bowler hats) borrowed from the 19th century, achieved the seemingly impossible by making their great-grandparents' generation “cool” in the midst of a counterculture that claimed to trust no one over 30. Tinkle notes that the rock-critical reception of The Band in 1968 and '69 saw them characterized as hillbillies playing in a Kentucky tavern, or Tennessean gold miners in Alaska; in a striking cultural shift, these were described as *positive* attributes.⁸⁸ Even though all Band members save for Arkansan Levon Helm came from middle-class Canadian backgrounds, and they subtly integrated early synthesizers into their sound, their image as hardy American

⁸⁶ See Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited*, 306-307, and Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan*, 405.

⁸⁷ Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited*, 307.

⁸⁸ Tinkle, “Back to the Garden,” 97-8.

frontiersman harmonizing with “mangy voices” stuck, and as their star rose the group knew better than to discourage these old-timey associations.⁸⁹

Critics such as Richard Goldstein characterized The Band’s anti-modern affectations as a reactionary critique of the perceived excesses of psychedelic rock, but celebrated that contrariness as “honest, versatile and immensely vital.”⁹⁰ This was enviously good press, written a way that equated anti-modernity with authenticity, positing The Band as tailor-made exemplars of the aforementioned “roots-to-rock” historical trajectory. At times this dynamic was interpreted by critics as having political potential; for instance, Ralph Gleason wrote in *Rolling Stone* that their music “drew out all the paranoia, at least for a while,” its authenticity empowering listeners to affirm, “we are all one.”⁹¹ And as Gleason argued, to think of The Band’s music “without thinking of *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* [was] insane”⁹²; Dylan was firmly linked with the group and their approach in the public’s imagination. And yet, Dylan had experienced first-hand the contradictions of the “roots-to-rock” ideology during his own fraught transition to electrified music. By 1969, he was world-famous, on an entirely different level from The Band. And what Dylan apparently wanted to say about rock stardom in 1969 was in a different realm from what an anti-modern take on country music could offer him; celebrity is a distinctly modern phenomenon.

Dylan as Star

By the late 1960s, Bob Dylan was one of the biggest celebrities in the United States, if not the world. The release of *John Wesley Harding* was deemed so newsworthy, it made the

⁸⁹ Regarding “mangy voices” see Goldstein, “‘Big Pink’ Is Just a Home in Saugerties”, D20.

⁹⁰ Goldstein, “‘Big Pink’ Is Just a Home in Saugerties”, D20.

⁹¹ Ralph J. Gleason, “The Band,” *Rolling Stone*, May 17, 1969, Insert 5.

⁹² Ibid, Insert 4.

general-news section of *The New York Times*—“Bob Dylan Album, Coming Soon, First in 16 Months Since Crash.”⁹³ As Dylan recuperated from injuries sustained in his motorcycle crash, and then began writing and recording new music in seclusion, journalists were so hungry for a scoop on their elusive subject that they took to stalking Dylan at home, and had to repeatedly be chased off his property.⁹⁴ And it was not just reporters. Dylan has noted that fans of all backgrounds and degrees of sanity repeatedly trespassed at his Woodstock-area homes in the late 1960s;⁹⁵ the most notorious of these was self-proclaimed “Dylanologist” A.J. Weberman, an obsessed fan infamous for routinely inspecting Dylan’s household garbage, and for personally harassing his hero for turning his back on New Left-style protest songwriting.⁹⁶ Both mass-circulation and underground media continued to publish many articles on Dylan during his years in seclusion (roughly 1967 to 1974); these were mostly opinion pieces, since Dylan rarely sat for interviews during this period. But as mentioned earlier in this chapter, both *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* continued to dominate the U.S. charts, sans almost any touring or promotion on Dylan’s part.

Dylan muses disdainfully and at some length on the Woodstock-era media frenzy in his 2004 memoir *Chronicles: Volume 1*, stating: “It was like dealing with a conspiracy. No place was far enough away. I don’t know what everybody else was fantasizing about but what I was fantasizing about was a nine-to-five existence...a white picket fence...that was my deepest dream.”⁹⁷ Longtime fans and scholars of Dylan’s work know better than to take his public

⁹³ Alfred G. Aronowitz, “Bob Dylan Album, Coming Soon, First in 16 Months Since Crash,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1967, 30.

⁹⁴ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 375.

⁹⁵ Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, 307.

⁹⁶ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 410-12.

⁹⁷ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume 1* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 117.

comments as any kind of objective “truth” about his music, let alone his personal life; since his turn to rock in 1965 Dylan has made obfuscation in interviews into a kind of art form. Almost never giving a straight answer to a journalist’s inquiry, Dylan’s humorous replies tend to question the very premise of interviews or memoirs: that there is a “real self” waiting to be discovered beneath the surface of celebrity.

However, even if we recognize Dylan’s public comments on fame as the self-conscious constructions they are, it remains notable that he chooses to devote so much space in *Chronicles* to discussion of these Woodstock years. It suggests that celebrity is a topic germane to his rock-era songwriting interests, particularly the relationship between individual rights and communal responsibilities. As such, it is surprising that there is currently only one academic monograph which considers Dylan’s work through the lens of stardom, Lee Marshall’s excellent 2007 book *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star*. Marshall, a sociologist, utilizes Richard Dyer’s foundational work on film stardom to argue that Dylan’s status as “the first real rock star” matters because, as Dyer notes, stars are the crucial constructs holding together the inherent contradictions of show business.⁹⁸ Furthermore, Marshall argues, “One of the interesting things about Dylan is how the struggle for the meaning of Dylan’s star-image has proved a central strand of that star-image...The ambivalent relationship between Dylan and his audience has been a central motif of Dylan’s career.”⁹⁹ This echoes my point regarding *Chronicles*, and also points the way toward what makes *Nashville Skyline* worth reassessment.

⁹⁸ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986), 1-18. See Marshall, *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star*, 93, for discussion of Dylan as “the first real Rock Star”.

⁹⁹ Marshall, *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star*, 122.

Marshall's argument hinges on his assumption that Dylan-as-star is a social construct co-created by fans, media, and Robert Zimmerman to embody (and ease the contradictions of) key rock ideologies—particularly the supremacy of the individual in an ostensibly meritocratic capitalist democracy.¹⁰⁰ As Dyer puts it, star image is what is publicly available to us; the construct of stardom encourages fans to ponder what their hero is “really” like backstage, but all we have is what is in front of us.¹⁰¹ This is useful for my purposes in analyzing *Nashville Skyline*, because the album is entirely about surfaces and (genre) conventions—highlighting and embracing their contradictions instead of working to hide them. Furthermore, this notion that stardom is a co-creation between fans, media, and artist is useful because I will momentarily discuss what the song “Country Pie” “says” about rock ideology by utilizing the listener's contextual knowledge of Dylan's career.

I should note that I do not intend here to divine Dylan's “real” intentions in writing and releasing this song, which are unknowable in the same way that the “real” life of a star is unknowable. Lee Marshall aptly describes the quality I am trying to draw out when he argues:

Stardom as the mediator of meaning...does not depend on authorial intention—Dylan's stardom provides a source of meaning for songs on [his albums] even if not intended by Dylan. This is, however, not to say that Dylan is ignorant of the effect that his stardom has on his songs. There are times when he has dealt with it directly (such as in “Brownsville Girl,” discussed in chapter 6). There are also times when he strategically employs this effect in songs not explicitly “about” stardom.¹⁰²

Marshall then gives a reading of “With God on Our Side” that incorporates the dimension of star image—not typically a song associated with celebrity. Marshall's point here is that the recordings and public comments of Dylan demonstrate a thoroughly self-aware understanding

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 79-83.

¹⁰¹ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 2-3.

¹⁰² Marshall, *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star*, 46.

that listeners generate meaning using social and biographical contexts beyond the recording itself. This is a concept which was being developed by cultural theorists such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault precisely around the time period that Dylan released *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*.¹⁰³ I am not suggesting that Dylan wished to “kill” his author-function; rather, Dylan was questioning ideas of authorship at the cultural moment wherein changing notions of individuality vis-à-vis postindustrial capitalism were inspiring Barthes and Foucault to ask similar questions. This interest would not, however, be immediately discernable from the initial press reception of *Nashville Skyline*.

Critical Reception of Nashville Skyline

Just a year after *John Wesley Harding*’s release, *Nashville Skyline* surprised the rock journalism world; once again, it appeared to be another left turn on Dylan’s part. Recorded in Nashville, it adopted a post-WWII Nashville country music sound which in some ways echoed Dylan’s duet partner Johnny Cash stylistically. Perhaps most surprising to critics was Dylan’s smooth new singing voice, never before heard on record. As Clive Barnes of the *New York Times* articulated it, “Dylan’s Civilized Moan of Yesteryear Is No More.”¹⁰⁴ All but two of the songs were seemingly straightforward odes to romantic love, presented in language which many reviewers saw in the mode of Nashville or even Tin Pan Alley-style professional songwriting.

If the critical buzzword for *John Wesley Harding* was “simplicity,” the tag which stuck for *Nashville Skyline* was “happiness.” Writing for the *New York Times*, Mike Jahn remarked that “*Nashville Skyline* is a warm, friendly album...Dylan has mellowed, calmed down, grown

¹⁰³ See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image / Music / Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-7, and Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” (lecture presented at the Société Française de Philosophie, Paris, France, February 22, 1969).

¹⁰⁴ Clive Barnes, “Dylan’s Civilized Moan of Yesteryear Is No More,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1969, 38.

up...[He] seems to have learned how to be happy.”¹⁰⁵ In what has perhaps become one of the better-known assessments of this Dylan era, Paul Nelson wrote in his *Rolling Stone* rave review: “In many ways, Nashville Skyline achieves the artistically impossible: a deep, humane, and interesting statement about being happy.”¹⁰⁶ Yet even as many critics registered their happiness over Dylan’s seemingly newfound happiness, still others pointed out that something about that happiness felt slightly theatrical or performative. Patricia Kennely’s review for *Jazz & Pop* praised the upbeat sentiment of *Nashville Skyline* but also noted that “the overall album tone is very aware and totally unselfconsciousness.”¹⁰⁷ How can music be simultaneously self-conscious and not self-conscious? Kennely’s cryptic remark hints at the contradictory impulses within *Nashville Skyline* which divided critical opinion. In short, rock writers attempting to interpret this “country” album struggled with questions of artistic autonomy: was Dylan regurgitating country music tropes or reinventing them? Was he speaking for himself—reveling in personal happiness—or capturing the zeitgeist, leading the country-rock movement?

Several rock critics took a “roots”-centric approach to the album, an approach similar in many ways to the reception I sketched for *John Wesley Harding*. For instance, Irvin Moskowitz in *Down Beat* heard “the influence of blues and rock...added to Country and Western,” likening *Nashville Skyline*’s sound to The Band’s *Music from Big Pink*.¹⁰⁸ On a musical level, that comparison seems ludicrous; however, it illustrates well the ideological thinking wherein musics perceived as “roots” were lumped together by late-‘60s rock writers. And even as critics praised rock artists who incorporated “roots” music, the rougher-hewn varieties always attracted the

¹⁰⁵ Mike Jahn, “Warmth Invades Dylan Recording,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1969, 21.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Nelson, “Nashville Skyline,” *Rolling Stone*, May 31, 1969, 36.

¹⁰⁷ Patricia Kennely, “Bob Dylan: Nashville Skyline,” *Jazz & Pop*, July 1969, 63.

¹⁰⁸ Irvin Moskowitz, “Record Reviews: Nashville Skyline,” *Down Beat*, Jun 26, 1969, 20.

quickest praise. For instance, Greil Marcus tosses a backhanded compliment to *Nashville Skyline* in a late-1969 *Rolling Stone* retrospective of Dylan's work. Writing on the album's "Girl from the North Country" duet, he remarks, "The Dylan-Cash version is a bit of burlesque."¹⁰⁹ This suggests that even in positive reviews of the album, rock critics of the era found something less-than-desirable about the "commercial" country quality of the music.

Continuing in this vein, the few flat-out negative reviews of *Nashville Skyline* are notable in their focus on clichés. In a review for *Life* entitled "That Angry Kid Has Gone All Romantic," Andrew Goldman attacks this "soft" album for its "straw-hat throwaway lines and goony goony steel guitar glissandos."¹¹⁰ He argues that Dylan "mindlessly croons...romantic clichés," and "the materials from which [the songs] have been made are paper thin and plainly derivative."¹¹¹ Ellen Sander of *Saturday Review* chimed in with a similar take, describing the music as "flat, easy, somnambulant" and full of clichés.¹¹² She writes, "The album has none of the intense subliminal power that distinguishes his previous albums," and suggests that Dylan is lazily abdicating his prior attempts to be culturally relevant.¹¹³

These reviewers' arguments rest upon the late-'60s ideology of rock I have outlined above. In these writers' eyes, commercial country music is pop trash, a nostalgic fabrication of Nashville hacks who sell to a gullible public a comforting rural Americana past which never actually existed.¹¹⁴ "Real" rock, on the other hand, stretches psychic and bodily boundaries of

¹⁰⁹ Greil Marcus, "Records," *Rolling Stone*, November 29, 1969, 44.

¹¹⁰ Andrew Goldman, "That Angry Kid Has Gone All Romantic," *Life*, May 23, 1969, 18.

¹¹¹ *ibid*, 18.

¹¹² Ellen Sander, "Bob Dylan Revisited," *Saturday Review*, April 26, 1969, 76.

¹¹³ *ibid*, 76.

¹¹⁴ See Frith, *Sound Effects*, 26, for a distillation of this idea: "Contemporary country records symbolize the past, exude nostalgia, describe a way of life that city dwellers value more now that they don't have to live that way again." In Frith's formulation, it is not entirely clear whether he personally believe this to be true, or is simply stating the rock-critical party line on country music.

personal identity, offering transcendence through the ultimate noncommercial, authentic experience: a dialogue between the self and one's fellow citizens.¹¹⁵ Looking at *Nashville Skyline*, rock writers such as Goldman and Sander find these ideological/musical forces at cross-purposes with each other, unable to be reconciled. Their issues with mainstream country music present a potentially significant “snag” in the collective authoring of a rock-critical theory of American “roots” music, as articulated through Dylan's work.

In general, though, the critical reception of *Nashville Skyline* was quite positive, despite occasional qualifiers regarding clichés. Steven Goldberg's aforementioned 1970 *Saturday Review* think piece on Dylan demonstrates that even critics who took note of *Nashville Skyline*'s clichés interpreted them generously, often as part of a personal quest for meaning which fit within broader rock ideology. Goldberg sees the album's simplistic lyrics and music as almost totemic, representative of what he believes to be Dylan's quest to discover God:

Alone, *Nashville Skyline* is a tightly written, cleverly executed series of clichés that would seem to be merely a collection of nice songs written by a Dylan who has gotten a bit mentally plump. As the final step in Dylan's search for God, however, it is a lovely paean...evidence that he has finally been able to bring it all back home. He has heard the universal melody through the galaxies of chaos and has found that the galaxies were a part of the melody.¹¹⁶

Although I concede Goldberg has a broader point, in that theological concerns have lurked in the background of many songs throughout Dylan's career, based on the lyrical evidence in *Nashville Skyline* (nary a spiritual reference), to this listener Goldberg's reasoning is not sound. But I include it here to demonstrate just how invested many writers of the late 1960s were in casting Dylan in the role of mystic, prophet, leader—leader of both the rock and New Left communities.

¹¹⁵ See Kramer, *The Republic of Rock*, 17-22.

¹¹⁶ Goldberg, “Bob Dylan and the Poetry of Salvation,” 57.

Paradoxes of Rock Stardom

My approach to *Nashville Skyline* is by definition a bit skeptical of rhetoric such as Goldberg's. I take as my starting point Lee Marshall's assertion that Dylan's star-image continued to inflate during his "seclusion" years following 1967, partly because the public's interest in rock in general grew exponentially, and partly because Dylan's purposeful withdrawal from public life became a story unto itself.¹¹⁷ Marshall discusses an "aesthetic of silence" which he argues Dylan's recordings and public comments (and lack thereof) embody during this period—an attempt to control or even suffocate one's star image, by cutting down on opportunities for "misinterpretation."¹¹⁸

Regarding this aesthetic of silence, I agree with Marshall that *Nashville Skyline* was "a deliberate attempt to undermine his star-image, to wrest control of what 'Bob Dylan' meant away from those who placed him in the vanguard of radical politics."¹¹⁹ When he argues that Dylan's work and image were increasingly "apolitical" in the *Nashville Skyline* era, on one level, yes, by no longer singing on behalf of causes such as the civil rights movement, Dylan removed himself from the world of politics, defined as activists working toward political goals. However, "apolitical" is a slippery term here, seeing as Dylan had not released a topical ("finger-pointin'") song since 1964. In this context, one could argue persuasively that Dylan went "apolitical" even before his turn to rock music in 1965. However, few critics and fans would deny that post-1964 rock-era songs as diverse as "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Highway 61 Revisited," and

¹¹⁷ Marshall, *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star*, 129.

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, 129.

¹¹⁹ Marshall, *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star*, 136.

“Rainy Day Women #12 & 35” are political, in that they illustrate and interrogate the rapid global cultural and political changes of the mid-to-late 1960s, albeit in a somewhat obtuse style.

It is in that context I part ways with Marshall. I argue that Dylan’s use of cliché in *Nashville Skyline* is political—not so much because it appropriates the “right wing’s music” (more on this shortly), but because Dylan’s pointed celebration of mainstream country genre conventions is an anti-auteur move. And by the late 1960s, as I have outlined, the auteur in rock music had become *the* ideological construct through which the “personal authenticity” so foundational to both rock and the New Left was articulated. Being personally authentic in one’s public utterances and actions was seen as the best possible way to stick a thumb in the Establishment’s eye. *Nashville Skyline*’s purposeful presentation of country artifice as a kind of rock music implicitly questioned the rock-critical assumption that singing one’s individuality with sincerity elevated rock above commerce to the realm of politically subversive Art.

As Marshall notes, and as Dylan surely found to be true while essentially a prisoner in his own home in Woodstock, it is the public who decides when a star is no longer a star. Star power wanes only when an audience’s curiosity wanes; attempts by a star to destroy or diminish their stardom are not guaranteed a result.¹²⁰ Marshall argues, “Given the inescapability of stardom, the only option would seem to be silence;”¹²¹ however, as I have already intimated, Dylan’s use of clichés in *Nashville Skyline* is not silence, but instead an effort to disentangle stardom from rock auteurism. Dylan surely was aware in 1969 that his stardom was inescapable, but since the

¹²⁰ Marshall, *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star*, 129. Marshall notes that key examples of this dynamic are Greta Garbo and J.D. Salinger, who remained famous the rest of their lives after their retirements, because public fascination with their reclusiveness did not cease.

¹²¹ *ibid*, 129.

auteur as figure is constructed more in dialogue between *critic* and artist, Dylan likely realized this was an arena where he actually had a chance to renegotiate some of the “rules.”

As mentioned previously, I agree with Marshall that Dylan was the first real “Rock Star;” however, I go beyond Marshall to specify that Dylan was the first Rock-Star-As-Singer-Songwriter. As Simon Frith notes, in the early years of rock-and-roll celebrity, ‘50s stars like Elvis Presley (not to mention Ricky Nelson) were marketed as sexy boys-next-door whose career successes were “a matter of luck as much as talent,” and who did not necessarily write their own material. Due to changes pioneered by British stars of ambiguous class and educational status like Paul McCartney and Mick Jagger, Frith notes that by the late ‘60s, rock stars “had degrees, suburban homes, and made knowing references to literature and art.”¹²² In other words, a late-‘60s rock star was expected not only to write his own material, but to enjoy a cosmopolitan, elite lifestyle informing those self-penned lyrics. This conflation of the auteur with the star was a late-‘60s development specific to the maturation of rock as a genre. It could be called by another name the birth of the rock “singer-songwriter”—a construct I will touch on in the next chapter as it continued on to commercial success in the 1970s. By the mid-‘70s, it was no longer necessary to be an auteur in order to be a rock star; solo stars like Eric Clapton and bands like KISS and Aerosmith could be rock stars without also being singer-songwriters.¹²³ Rock stardom was thus not a construct fixed in stone. But in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, Bob Dylan was at the apex of the marriage of auteur and star that constituted a “real” Rock Star.

¹²² Frith, *Sound Effects*, 64.

¹²³ These three acts (and others like them) usually did write their own material, but were not typically described as “serious” songwriters in the same auteur mode as Dylan, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, etc.

That the coronation of Dylan as the first rock star took place at the same cultural moment of the veneration of anti-modern rock groups like The Band is an interesting paradox. At first glance, one might initially interpret this as the communal spirit of the 1960s folk revival finding its full fruition in a new form of folk-rock. But as Marshall notes, when folk joined rock there developed a much greater emphasis on the individual and her/his search for meaning, in a mid-‘60s context of youth and leisure that was distinct from folk music.¹²⁴ Some critics and fans believed in the political potential of the antimodernist auteur (namely: Dylan) speaking for and to his community, leading us back to the proverbial Garden.¹²⁵ But the difference here is that on *Nashville Skyline*, Dylan uses clichés to celebrate the very modern artifice of contemporary country music, to suggest that it’s all show business, rock and country alike—and that this is not a bad thing. “Country Pie” is the song whose music and lyrics I explore in greater depth, because it goes the furthest of all *Nashville Skyline* songs in questioning whether rock is or even should be oppositional in any way.

Clichés as Ironic Humor in “Country Pie”

With its major-key tonality, moderate tempo, pedal steel guitar, and lyrics using clichés to generate ironic humor, “Country Pie” is quite representative of the ten songs that comprise *Nashville Skyline*. On the other hand, it stands out for two reasons which interest me: its country-soul musical setting (more on this shortly), and its lyrics, which are at least partly about the act of making music. Despite the fact that *Nashville Skyline* was sometimes lumped together

¹²⁴ Marshall, *Bob Dylan: The Never Ending Star*, 99-114.

¹²⁵ For instance, upon watching Dylan’s performance of *Nashville Skyline* material at the Isle of Wight festival, bearded and dressed in a white suit, Geoffrey Cannon of the *Los Angeles Times* compared Dylan to a Talmud scholar and then proclaimed, “he has come to his people, and his people is us.” Cannon, “Dylan at Wight: A New Voice and a New Style,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sep 14, 1969, O1. Cannon’s depiction of Dylan as a spiritual leader, commanding a mass outdoor gathering, arguably would have reminded readers of media discussions of the back-to-the-land movement, at least in tone.

by critics with such odes to rural living as The Band's self-titled LP (also from 1969), in actuality "Country Pie" is the only song on the album to even vaguely gesture toward "country living." The eight other songs with lyrics—there is one instrumental—all deal exclusively with romantic love, sans any shred of geographic context (unless one counts a reference to the eponymous "North Country" of the opening track).

All nine song lyrics newly composed for *Nashville Skyline* ("Girl from the North Country" is from 1963) feature clichés to such a prominent degree, it led several critics to take note, as mentioned previously. But the structure of "Country Pie" is unique in that it presents its clichés to the listener in a linear, at times list-like fashion, and then comments upon both the clichés and the act of songwriting itself in two bridge sections. The song begins with two verses describing musicians at work/play: "Just like old Saxophone Joe/When he's got the hoghead up on his toe/Oh me, oh my/Love that country pie//Listen to the fiddler play/When he's playin' 'til the break of day/Oh me, oh my/Love that country pie."¹²⁶ Of immediate note here is the way the narrator is at a remove in the song, positioned like an audience member or even a voyeur, taking in these scenes of happy music-making without participating himself. Furthermore, the opening phrase "just like...", typically used as the bridge component of a metaphor's structure, projects a kind of studied casualness that sounds almost like an aphorism. It's perhaps due to language such as this that Christopher Ricks calls "Country Pie" a "peasant dance of a song."¹²⁷ Certainly, the fiddler "playin' 'til the break of day" suggests a quality of infinite repetition, a kind of mindless but timeless ecstasy of music-making-for-hire that to my ears evokes everything from traveling minstrels of Medieval Europe, to American minstrel show performers, to Bob Wills

¹²⁶ Bob Dylan, *Nashville Skyline*, Columbia Records 9825, 1969, vinyl LP.

¹²⁷ Christopher Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 111.

and other country performers keeping an audience dancing to a hot band all night long.¹²⁸ It is essentially an image of the music business, of an unwritten country genre imperative: keep one's audience entertained. This is then immediately tagged by Dylan with the inscrutably clichéd, yet direct, "Oh me, oh my/Love that country pie!"

As scholars of Dylan's work such Michael Gray and Christopher Ricks note, Dylan—like most famed songwriters—has employed clichés as lyrical devices since the beginning of his career. In his piece "Clichés and American English," Ricks highlights several Dylan lyrics, such as "I see better days and I do better things" (from "I Shall Be Free", 1963), wherein Dylan's slight alterations ("I see" instead of the "I seen..." of the usual cliché) and juxtapositions reinvigorate clichéd language, forcing the listener to consider the assumptions behind truisms from new perspectives. Ricks argues that Dylan's manipulation of clichés celebrates a distinctively American insistence that language itself is ephemeral, which he contrasts approvingly against staid "British English."¹²⁹ As I see it, this approach to cliché is thoroughly consistent with rock ideology, which harnesses the quotidian in search of the transcendent.

Michael Gray's exploration of Dylan's use of cliché in his 1972 book *Song and Dance Man* takes a slightly different approach than Ricks. Gray highlights rock-era Dylan songs such as "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest," wherein "Dylan simply *displays* the clichés, holding them up in relish of their obvious absurdity," for the purposes of celebrating "uncannily accurate glimpses of an oh-so-fallible humanity."¹³⁰ Gray finds a generosity of spirit in Dylan's

¹²⁸ I should also note here that the image of Joe balancing a "hogshead up on his toe" (presumably a heavy barrel) while playing the saxophone evokes both the acrobatics and the conflation of entertainers' bodies with physical objects found on the American minstrel stage of the 19th century. See Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 150.

¹²⁹ Christopher Ricks, "Clichés and American English," in *The Dylan Companion*, ed. Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2001), 163-172.

¹³⁰ Michael Gray, *Song & Dance Man: The Art of Bob Dylan* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1972), 214-15.

use of clichés, here—emphasizing the quotidian not to turn it around in a sophistication move (à la Ricks’ analysis), but rather to celebrate the community we find in shared foibles, also known as the human condition. It calls to mind the saying—itself a cliché—“it’s a cliché because it’s true.” Aaron Fox notes a similar dynamic in the clichéd wordplay of many country songs, wherein country songwriters distill complex human problems into recognizable formulas, denaturalizing them; country *singers* then renaturalize clichéd language and its depth (dearth?) of meaning via heartfelt, conversational vocal performances.¹³¹

I summarize Ricks’, Gray’s, and Fox’s perspectives on cliché here because what they argue is true for so many songs in popular music, and also aptly describes the use of cliché in *some* of *Nashville Skyline*’s lyrics. For instance, in “To Be Alone with You,” Dylan uses the shopworn “night time is the right time/to be with the one you love,” among other clichés, arguably to celebrate the near-universal human experiences of sex and intimacy with a romantic partner. However, in the case of many songs on *Nashville Skyline*, and in particular “Country Pie,” there is a difference: country clichés sit list-like, largely un-commented-upon, in a manner that highlights their artifice. In the images of dancing Saxophone Joe and the energetic fiddler, what is being celebrated—in albeit lightly ironic, detached fashion—is the mainstream music industry (both country and rock). The subject is *not* relatable, universal human foibles.

One of the paradoxes of “Country Pie” is that although it is ironic, and in its own way a cutting commentary on rock stardom (possibly even the country-rock trend), it is performed with what seems to be warmth toward country music, as is the rest of *Nashville Skyline*. As I stated

¹³¹ Aaron Fox, “The Jukebox of History: Narratives of Loss and Desire in the Discourse of Country Music,” *Popular Music* Volume 11, No. 1 (1992): 54-5. It should be noted here that Fox credits Jacques Derrida’s theories on written and spoken language as directly inspiring his own thinking on clichéd country music language.

previously, we can't know Dylan's "real" intentions, but there is evidence that his relationship with country music runs deep: his professed childhood fandom of Hank Williams, his choice to record almost exclusively in Nashville from 1965 to 1970, his friendship and recordings with Johnny Cash.¹³² When Dylan stated in a rare 1969 interview that the songs of *Nashville Skyline* "reflect more of the inner me than the songs of the past," it's possible he was speaking narrowly, from the perspective of an accomplished songwriter, pleased to be writing stylistically coherent exercises in a genre which spoke to him, offered him new compositional challenges.¹³³ From this perspective, "Country Pie" has much to do with craft and the limits placed on it by stardom, and not much at all to do with the romance of simple living, or getting back to the land. From this perspective, the denaturalized language of "Oh me, oh my/Love that country pie!" can be read as both ironically playful and deadly serious.

That Dylan directs little animosity toward country itself is suggested by the song's move from irony into parody in its third verse. The parodic humor is not in fact at country music's expense. I use parody here the way it is defined by literary theorist Linda Hutcheon, whose writings explore how postmodern texts use parody to contrast older with newer modes of representation, which she argues often embody differing political ideologies.¹³⁴ She argues that while parody can be used for purposes of political commentary, it is not necessarily about mocking and tearing apart an older text and/or way of thinking, as is commonly assumed in the popular understanding of the term. In her more expansive definition, parody is simply repetition of a text, with difference. Hutcheon argues that irony is "the main rhetorical mechanism for

¹³² See Keith Negus, *Bob Dylan* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2008), 85.

¹³³ Quoted in Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited*, 302.

¹³⁴ Here Hutcheon distinguishes her theory of parody from other writers on postmodernism such as Frederic Jameson who question postmodern culture's ability to offer meaningful political critique. See Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 90-95.

activating the reader's awareness" of parody; in other words, a text can be ironic without necessarily also being a parody.¹³⁵

By this definition, the first two verses of "Country Pie" are ironic, but not parodic. We can interpret Saxophone Joe and the fiddler as an ironic presentation of country genre conventions, irony here defined broadly as intentional slippage between the surfaces of lyrical phrases and their multiple, contradictory meanings in cultural context. The first two verses of "Country Pie" use denaturalized, ironic, distant language to present happy images of country musicianship, but don't move beyond simply presenting this type of archetypal imagery, not far removed from Bill Monroe's "Uncle Pen." But the third verse moves into parody, i.e. repetition of country music tropes with a twist, when Dylan sings: "Saddle me up my big white goose/Tie me on 'er and turn her loose/Oh me, oh my/Love that country pie."¹³⁶ In my interpretation, this image—Dylan's narrator attempting to ride an out-of-control goose like a bucking bronco—is a conscious injection of psychedelia into a country song, creating a humorous parodic tension with the clichés in the rest of the song. A cowboy at the state fair is suddenly transplanted into an acid-tinged nightmare, but the fact that the upbeat musical arrangement and vocal style continue as before makes the image surreal and funny, instead of surreal and terrifying. As I see it, the giddy ridiculousness of the narrator riding the crazed goose subtly suggests any self-conscious hippie marriage of rock and country to be equally ridiculous. And, of course, there is another plausible reading: the goose represents a star image so wildly out of the star's control, all he can do is throw up his hands and laugh.

¹³⁵ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 31-2.

¹³⁶ Bob Dylan, *Nashville Skyline*.

This latter reading is supported by the two bridge sections of the song, whose stylistic difference from the verses serves as a dry commentary on the strictures (and freedoms) of genre. The two bridges are the only sections which feature an “I” as the speaker of the lyrics, although the content is anything but confessional. Instead, the first bridge is a list of pie flavors: “Raspberry, strawberry, lemon and lime/What do I care?/Blueberry, apple, cherry, pumpkin and plum/Call me for dinner, honey, I’ll be there.”¹³⁷ Keith Negus notes that Dylan is “a notoriously listing songwriter. He’ll identify an issue, a theme, an experience, or an event and he’ll then build up an impression of it through a list of characteristics.”¹³⁸ The most famous of these is 1963’s “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” which is almost entirely a long list of Cold-War-inflected images, each one darker and more hallucinatory than the next. This song is justifiably lauded for its use of the lyric poetry tradition to articulate existential despair and political dissent. Fans and rock writers familiar with Dylan’s listing tendencies likely found a marked contrast in “Country Pie”; its list of pie flavors reads as plainly as a diner’s menu.

One immediate and understandable impulse when considering the distance between these two lists is to suggest that Dylan has abdicated his role as the political conscience of his generation—as some of the reviews glossed above mentioned. But from a different perspective, the list of pie flavors and Dylan’s pointed addendum to the list—“What do I care?”—is in its own way political, as it questions the auteur’s ability or responsibility to speak to or “for” a diverse and contradictory community’s experiences and values. As Michel Foucault argued in a lecture the same year as *Nashville Skyline*’s release:

How can one reduce the great peril, the great danger with which fiction threatens our world? The answer is: One can reduce it with the author. The author allows a limitation

¹³⁷ Bob Dylan, *Nashville Skyline*.

¹³⁸ Negus, *Bob Dylan*, 117.

of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations within a world where one is thrifty not only with one's resources and riches but also with one's discourses and their significations. The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning. As a result, we must entirely reverse the traditional idea of the author. We are accustomed, as we have seen earlier, to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations. We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, to proliferate indefinitely. The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius, as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion.¹³⁹

Foucault's remarks are striking for two reasons. One, with his talk of how the author essentially comforts and rescues us from "great peril" and the "proliferation of meaning" in an overwhelming modern world, he captures the zeitgeist circa 1968-69 wherein countercultural activists from the Weathermen to the back-to-the-landers were still seeking leaders and spokesmen—despite occasional claims otherwise—in the midst of political turmoil. Two, Foucault's analysis runs precisely counter to late-'60s rock criticism's claim that the most skilled auteurs find creative freedom and personal meaning by rising above the strictures of the "roots" genres that provide the raw materials of rock (country, blues, folk, etc.).

In its pointedly perverse simplicity, Dylan's "What do I care?" embodies Foucault's critique fully. "What do I care?" implicitly places his pie flavors list alongside the dissident's lyricism of a song like "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" in the listener's mind, asking: what's the difference, really? To Dylan, both fulfill his societal role as author, as they both are product of the auteur-star "Bob Dylan." The list of pie flavors is a cutting answer-in-song to a fan's clichéd rave about any star, "I could listen to him read the phone book!" Its one-dimensionality, and

¹³⁹ Foucault, "What is an Author?"

suddenly serious addendum “What do I care?” create an interesting contrast with Dylan’s articulation of the same idea in the song’s final verse: “Shake me up that old peach tree/Little Jack Horner’s got nothin’ on me.”¹⁴⁰ The sarcastic equation of himself with the nursery rhyme figure who finds such satisfaction (“What a good boy am I!”) in a meaningless act of creation (pulling a plum out from a pie) plays his authorial predicament as comedy, as opposed to the resignation in the first bridge. Keith Negus argues that in a song like “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” Dylan’s use of nursery rhyme structures can “convey an almost mythical moral wisdom...impart[ing] concisely a sense of good and evil.”¹⁴¹ Indeed, as with clichés, nursery rhymes persist over the centuries because they articulate seemingly timeless truths of the human experience. Dylan’s humorous parody of Little Jack Horner, however, actively resists any sentimental universalizing. In “Country Pie”, the nursery rhyme is referenced not to share relatable heartwarming wisdom, but to laugh at childish solipsism, the self-indulgent belief of a man-child author that anyone should care about what he has to say at all.

By this point, hopefully it is clear to the reader that “Country Pie” is essentially a caustic, funny attack on the rock ideological belief that the auteur-star’s job is to cogently express his inner self. Instead, using irony and parody, the song subtly celebrates show-biz artifice and knowingly acknowledges songwriting formulas in both country and rock music. But one final paradox of “Country Pie”’s lyrics is that even as Dylan works to deconstruct the singer-songwriter auteur figure, his playing with genre rules and clichés constitutes its own kind of

¹⁴⁰ Bob Dylan, *Nashville Skyline*.

¹⁴¹ Negus, *Bob Dylan*, 75. Negus points out that Dylan has borrowed liberally from nursery rhymes throughout his songwriting career, particularly on his 1990 album *Under the Red Sun*.

auteur sophistication. Just because a rock songwriter is clever enough to lay bare the genre conventions that restrict him, does not mean that those strictures can be fully escaped.

There is a claustrophobic circularity to the kind of play Dylan is engaged in; he may be able to on some level disentangle auteur and star in a song like “Country Pie,” but he cannot truly control what the public thinks of him, or drop out of stardom altogether. Musically, this frustration is expressed in a subtle but unmistakable detail in the two bridge sections of the song. As Dylan sings the words, “I don’t need much, that ain’t no lie/Ain’t running any race” (1:08-1:12), pedal steel guitar suddenly appears prominently in the mix, initially quite dissonant as it *slowly* (over a period of two seconds) bends in pitch up to the harmonically correct note of F#. With this clever bit of commentary, the pedal steel, typical musical signifier of heart-tugging sentimentality in the country genre, via its dissonance gives the lie to Dylan’s assertion that “I don’t need much,” that he is fulfilled and enjoying the simplicity of country living in Woodstock. Whereas Dylan’s “I don’t need much” ironically insists on a closing off of the star figure from the world, the pedal steel’s slow bend in pitch gleefully, rudely opens up the very “proliferation of meaning” which Foucault argues citizens of the 1960s fear the most.

Purposeful failure of country soulfulness

This humorous tension between the lyrics and their recorded musical performance points toward one other way in which “Country Pie” tweaks expectations placed on Dylan as the first Rock Star. Dylan’s performance of a purposeful failure at soulfulness in this recording serves as a commentary on a late 1960s shift in both rock music and the New Left: the (tentative) turn away from African-Americans and toward rural low-income whites as objects of romance for privileged artists and activists. Since the connection I make is fairly subtle, I should note here

that I am not arguing that Dylan was necessarily conscious of using country-soul to make a statement. Instead, I agree with Christopher Ricks' treatment of such questions: "an artist is someone more than usually blessed with a cooperative unconscious or subconscious...like the great athlete, the great artist is at once highly trained and deeply instinctual."¹⁴² With that caveat in mind, it is worth considering the role of "black music" in *Nashville Skyline*.

As previously mentioned, the newfound smoothness of Dylan's vocal performances on this album was the primary musical dimension critics immediately gravitated to when reviewing this album. While the singing voice is interesting due to its uniqueness within Dylan's oeuvre (and I will consider aspects of it momentarily), its unifying presence on the album tends to obscure another aspect which is just as interesting if not more so: the diversity of country styles featured on *Nashville Skyline*. While typically thought of as a uniform (some have said uniformly bland) collection, there is arguably the following mix: 1 folk (self-)cover "Girl From the North Country", 1 instrumental ("Nashville Skyline Rag"), 1 Western Swing tune ("Peggy Day"), 2 country-soul tracks ("Country Pie" and "To Be Alone With You"), 1 pop song ("Lay Lady Lay"), and 4 tracks in a more sedate Nashville Sound pop-country style ("I Threw It All Away", "One More Night", "Tell Me That It Isn't True", and "Tonight I'll Be Staying Here With You").

As country music scholars Bill Malone and Peter La Chapelle note, Western Swing music developed as a complex 1930s mélange of cultures and styles particular to the Southwestern U.S., including Okie country music, African-American jazz, Tex-Mex and polka, even Native

¹⁴² Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, 7.

American music.¹⁴³ While La Chapelle raises the important caveat that Western Swing's embrace of black "hot jazz" was purely on a musical level—black musicians were intentionally excluded from playing Western Swing gigs—the multiculturalism of the music radiated an urbane modernity not typically associated with country music.¹⁴⁴ The Western Swing feel of Dylan's "Peggy Day" is subtle but undeniable, with a swing rhythm and steel guitar in the generic style during a bridge (0:39-0:55) and instrumental breakdown (1:10-1:26). Coupled with the obviously soul-inspired "Country Pie" and "To Be Alone With You," this means almost a third of *Nashville Skyline* openly embraces multicultural country music styles at the very moment the genre of mainstream country was perceived to be turning to the concerns of suburban, middle-class, right-leaning whites.

Country-soul, more of a minor stylistic delta fed by tributaries of country and Southern Soul music than a full-fledged genre, started to become visible in the late 1960s. At least in the rather narrow way I am defining it here, the style featured mostly white, southern country artists such as Joe South, Tony Joe White, Jim Dickinson, and Bobbie Gentry performing in a rhythm-heavy style clearly influenced by the Southern Soul of Stax/Muscle Shoals artists such as Eddie Floyd, Sam & Dave, Clarence Carter, The Staples Singers, and Otis Redding. Many songs by The Band could be considered country soul (particularly "King Harvest Has Surely Come"), and British singer Dusty Springfield also fits the description, demonstrating that the term can be vague to the point of frustration. But one characteristic quality of country soul is that the vocals and guitars are often a bit softer, a bit more pop, compared with what soon became the Southern

¹⁴³ Bill Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A., Second Revised Edition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 158, and Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be An Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 92-3.

¹⁴⁴ La Chapelle, *Proud to Be An Okie*, 109.

Rock of Dylan sideman Charlie Daniels and, eventually, bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd—although they, too, were influenced by the sounds of Southern Soul.

Dylan has stated on several occasions his fandom of soul music—including a personal friendship with the Staples Singers—and their influence is evident on the recording of “Country Pie.”¹⁴⁵ The song’s simple yet syncopated drum pattern, heavy on high-hat and snare, owes much to a Staples song like “We’ve Got to Get Ourselves Together,” or the drums in Otis Redding’s “Let Me Come on Home.” Also similar to those Staples and Redding tunes, the bass line is sparse (much less busy than a comparable Motown arrangement), allowing copious space for the highly syncopated (“squawking”) guitar with the clean, extremely treble-heavy timbre to take center stage as the main foil to Dylan’s vocal performance—literally “answering” his vocal lines throughout the song. Even the production on the guitar, isolated in the left stereo channel, with some light reverb, making it even more crisply audible vis-à-vis Dylan’s voice, seems to copy directly the Stax guitar productions of an artist like Eddie Floyd.

In all these ways, “Country Pie” is archetypal country soul. But what is fascinating about the song is Dylan’s vocal performance. As has already been noted, *Nashville Skyline* attracted media attention due the smoothness of his vocal timbre, a striking contrast with the rougher-edged, occasionally dissonant vocals heard in all his previous records. On a *Nashville Skyline* song like “Tell Me That It Isn’t True,” Dylan pushes this new style to extremes, crooning like a low-rent Jim Reeves. Aspects of this smoothness persist in “Country Pie,” such as the moment Dylan swoops up into his A sharp, singing “What do I care?” (0:42-0:43). However, at several other points in the song, his vocal performance is disjointed in quality, almost more reminiscent

¹⁴⁵ Shelton, *No Direction Home*, 151, 359.

of the older Dylan style. For instance, in delivering the phrase “Tie me on her and turn ‘er loose” (0:51-0:53), Dylan’s differentiation between pitches is slight to the point of being nonexistent; as such, in terms of harmonics and timbre it is close to the nearly spoken-word delivery of an older song like “Subterranean Homesick Blues.” The most dramatic examples are found in his delivery of the first few lyrics, particularly when singing the words “Joe” and “toe” (0:20-0:24). At these words Dylan’s voice noticeably cracks, producing a high-pitched yelp that resembles a comedian’s clowning on a country music “cry break.” Keith Negus has noted that one of Dylan’s common musical devices is to suddenly drop down in pitch while singing a melody, underscoring the emotion of a lyric. Conversely, he calls “upsinging” (the opposite, less common but still present among Dylan’s tricks) “a way of sending the words out to the audience without...drawing them back into the self.”¹⁴⁶

Upsinging creates an emotional blankness, an anonymity that is often comic, and in the case of this song, related to the denaturalized country music language that Dylan is playing with. When compared with others in the country-rock movement that Dylan was often grouped with in the late-‘60s rock press, from The Band to Johnny Cash and even the Byrds, his singing here is striking in its lack of passion, soulfulness, urgency, “natural” emotion. Here I’d like to suggest that Dylan’s pairing of soulless singing with country-soul music is a humorous commentary on a shift in attitudes toward black culture among white, leftist artists and activists in the late 1960s. As briefly noted already, the rise of black nationalism and the creation of the Black Panther party in the late 1960s interacted in complex ways with the white middle-class New Left, which at its origins called for participatory democracy and self-determination for all oppressed peoples, but also could not shake the fact that most of its white college student activists were operating from a

¹⁴⁶ Negus, *Bob Dylan*, 133.

societal position of privilege. As Grace Hale puts it, the power of black activists organizing their own communities and staking out a black culture distinct from the white mainstream was that black political actors could be “subject and object, both the person acting and the person acted for.”¹⁴⁷ This was a shift, because white-black alliances had been a prominent part of Civil Rights movement organizing, albeit characterized by unequal power relationships, resulting in the mixed legacy of a mostly white-led project such as ERAP. As scholars such as Hale, Douglas Rossinow, and Barry Shank have noted, central to the New Left for most of the 1960s was young white activists’ optimistic belief that identifying with and advocating for the rights of African-Americans could be a key source of personal authenticity: a way to move beyond their privilege, find meaning in life, and create a “youth”-African-American alliance for social and economic justice.¹⁴⁸

But by the time 1968 and ’69 tumbled to a close, it became clear that with the white American left increasingly focusing its energy on ending the war in Vietnam, and black activists increasingly doing the work advocating for their own community, a shift had occurred. Some white activists in what remained of the rapidly-splintering New Left responded to this shift by doubling down on their romanticized commitment to identifying with African-Americans as the ultimate “outsiders;” Grace Hale shows how Weather Underground members adopted black slang such as calling policemen “pigs,” claimed to be inspired to violent action by the militancy of the Black Panthers, and in general “wrote and acted as if they were perpetually auditioning for the role of militant blacks’ favorite whites.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 227.

¹⁴⁸ See Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 84-131, 163-203, Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 162-3, and Barry Shank, “‘That Wild Mercury Sound’: Bob Dylan and the Illusion of American Culture.”

¹⁴⁹ Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 215-224.

But arguably most white left activists, particularly those who identified more with the hippie counterculture, swung another direction, rediscovering the virtues of indigent Appalachian whites, creating another wave in a cycle which seemed to repeat approximately every thirty years in the 20th century. One notes it in the decision of some white collegiate activists to “move to eastern Kentucky to make documentaries and picket mining companies.”¹⁵⁰ One notes it the late-‘60s wave of Great Depression Chic, the countercultural popularity of movies such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, which glamorized two white working-class Texan anti-heroes.¹⁵¹ One notes it in the dynamics of a film such as *Easy Rider*, whose soundtrack, as Adam Tinkle perceptively notes, “associates country rock with a benevolent vision of America’s wild, natural spaces, while the urban sounds of R&B signifies the site of the hedonism, conflict and other ills generated by capitalism.”¹⁵² One notes it in Timothy Miller’s observation that most members of the back-to-the-land movement, the communards, were white and came from middle-class backgrounds.¹⁵³

Despite all this, when surveying the pages of a magazine like *Rolling Stone* from the late 1960s, it becomes clear that rock writers—the founding theorists of rock ideology—were unsure just how far to go in turning toward Appalachian white “roots” and writing off the persistent relevance of the once-foundational influence of African-American music on rock ‘n’ roll. A May 1968 editorial by Jann Wenner about Dylan and Johnny Cash perfectly illustrates the ambivalence and anxiety surrounding the shift in racial politics taking place in American (counter-)culture. Wenner begins by stating that he believes the current country-rock trend goes

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 227

¹⁵¹ See Peter Braunstein, “Forever young: Insurgent Youth and the Sixties Culture of Rejuvenation,” in *Imagine Nation*, 261-5 for a discussion of this film and its enthusiastic reception by the 1960s counterculture.

¹⁵² Tinkle, “Back to the Garden”, 53.

¹⁵³ See Miller, “The Sixties Era Communes,” in *Imagine Nation*, 343, wherein Miller cites social scientific studies on the race and class dynamics of commune membership.

“deeper than fashion,” then quotes Johnny Cash lauding the recent impact rock groups like the Beatles have had on country music.¹⁵⁴ After establishing Cash’s hardscrabble biographical bona fides as a child of Great Depression rural poverty, he then goes on to argue that figures like Dylan and Cash make country that is “intensely close to people,” because their music radiates a soulful quality, similar to what performers like Otis Redding are doing.¹⁵⁵ He labels Dylan and Cash “master bluesmen,” though there is only one 12-bar blues on *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline* combined.¹⁵⁶ He goes on to close the piece:

It would probably be deadly accurate to say that country and western music is the soul music of white people. Its origins are in the lives of the dispossessed Okies and it reflects the knowledge and suffering of people who have learned that there is an honest compromise with other men and with the land. In many ways, it is a music of reconciliation, of people who have been wronged or wronged others, but who in the end found out that that’s the way it is. I think that is, in many ways, what Dylan now sings about.¹⁵⁷

Wenner’s argument here seems to be that because country and rock ‘n’ roll music share historical roots in African-American blues-based music, the best of late-‘60s country and country-rock reclaims that vexed legacy as a positive attribute, through its soulfulness. His assertion that “country and western music is the soul music of white people” implicitly acknowledges the divide between white and black music, which only deepens as rock matures as a genre, but his rhapsody about “a music of reconciliation” posits a utopian fantasy—so typical of late-‘60s hippie culture—that poor and rich, rural and urban, black and white, could be united by music in a renewed quest for the common good. “Soulfulness” seems to be the musical quality which could make this all possible, in Wenner’s formulation.

¹⁵⁴ Jann Wenner, “Country Tradition Goes to Heart of Dylan Songs,” *Rolling Stone*, May 25, 1968, 1.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid*, 1 & 14.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid*, 1.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid*, 14.

Bringing it back to Dylan, this is why his vocal performance in “Country Pie,” which in its quirky yelps edges closer to novelty record than to soulful majesty, matters. Dylan’s emphasis here on a vocal sound which is inconsistent in texture, nasal, and almost spoken-word in places marks it as cluelessly, humorously “white”, against a Stax soul backdrop—a musical style increasingly associated with black nationalist politics.¹⁵⁸ Dylan’s juxtaposition brings to mind Barry Shank’s discussion of individuality and minstrelsy in his article “‘That Wild Mercury Sound’: Bob Dylan and the Illusion of American Culture.” Shank argues that although idealistic white activists believed that their work and identification with African-Americans in the early-to-mid-Sixties was genuine, in fact “the antifoundational artificial authenticities of blackface were misrecognized as a set of cross-racial alliances that were believed to be the foundation for the progressive work of the New Left.”¹⁵⁹ Shank argues that although Dylan initially believed that these alliances were possible, and wrote folk protest songs advocating for their importance, his shift to rock music demonstrated his growing realization that they were in fact an illusion inspired by the structures of minstrelsy. The persistent centrality of the minstrel conceit—self-transformation that balances contradictory desires for individual autonomy and authentic *communitas*—to American music and culture could no longer be ignored by Dylan, who in songs such as “Like a Rolling Stone” urged his audience and himself to not pretend otherwise. Shank argues that Dylan was not *endorsing* minstrelsy as historical, racist institution; rather, his embrace of the reality of minstrel structures in popular culture was about questioning the myth of autonomous-yet-authentic selfhood.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ For a brief overview of soul music’s relationship with the Civil Rights Movement and black nationalism, see Robert Stephens, “A Historical Reconstruction of Continuity and Change in Black Popular Music,” *The Black Perspective in Music*, 12:1 (Spring 1984), 21-43.

¹⁵⁹ Shank, “That Wild Mercury Sound,” 103.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid*, 120-3.

I agree with Shank's analysis and believe it can be extended to Dylan's play with the racial connotations of genres and singing styles in "Country Pie." On some subconscious level, rock writers and musicians of the late 1960s noticed the increasing "whiteness" of rock, and recognized that this evolution had something to do with the fraught minstrel legacy of cultural appropriation. On some level they further recognized that rock needed to grapple with this legacy, and the late-'60s rock interest in white country music that could be claimed as "ours" was likely a part of that. But just because rock critics, fans, and musicians tentatively moved on to romanticizing whites does not preclude that they for the most part continued to regard "soulful" black vocals as the pinnacle of personal authenticity. In fact, Jann Wenner's editorial can be read as an attempt to rationalize the contradictions of claiming country as "our" (white) music, while continuing to romanticize African-Americans as the most soulful of all. From country-rock like Creedence Clearwater Revival and The Band, to psychedelic blues-rock like Janis Joplin and Cream, African-American-inspired "soulful" vocal performances were essentially the default among white rock performers in the late 1960s, and this continued on in the singer-songwriter early '70s, with commercially successful "blue-eyed soul" singers like Van Morrison. For all reasons I have discussed, black-music-inflected "soulful" vocalicity was a big part of the currency of authenticity on rock recordings, perceived as something "real" and rough-edged and even non-commercial. Dylan's purposely "bad," "white" vocal performance of a country-soul song is a finger in the eye of the rock ideology that soulfulness communicates personal identity. In some ways, his critique-in-song anticipates the humorously abject, emotionally blank, "white" vocals of the punk movement six years later, which mocked '60s rock's soulful sincerity.

Small-l libertarianism, hip capitalism

Nashville Skyline, Dylan's country music genre exercise in a rock context was, for the reasons enumerated above, an articulation of a love/hate relationship with the commerciality of rock, celebrating its artifice and formulas, while eviscerating its star system that he knew all-too-well. The album's songs, most of all "Country Pie," raise a cocked eyebrow to the anti-modern hippie notion that country music (itself an intensely commercial genre) could deliver rock fans back to the land, to a cleaner, more soulful, less commercialized way of living. Rock is pure show business, just like country music, Dylan implicitly argues, and would do well to admit that post-haste, minstrel subtexts and all. Paradoxically due to the rise of rock 'n' roll, country music had experienced its own identity crisis in the 1950s and '60s via the introduction of the Nashville Sound, as explored by Joli Jensen in her book of the same name.¹⁶¹ But by the late '60s, the crisis was over (for now), the slick Nashville Sound having won the day, and *Nashville Skyline* takes no issue with that—quite the opposite. His target on the album, instead, is *au courant* anti-modern rock notions of authentic selfhood.

Despite the fact that *Nashville Skyline* was by, for, and about the rock world, it did not stop some rock writers from classifying the album as pure country music, and in the polarized political climate of 1969, immediately declaring it a suspect alliance with the enemy, the so-called "Silent Majority." In his critical June 1969 *Village Voice* op-ed "South Country Blues," James Stoller uses Dylan's appearance on Johnny Cash's variety show as a jumping-off point to fret that country-rock may drift into conservatism: "As I understand it, Dylan's courtship of Cash has something to do with musical 'roots.' From the looks of things, it would not surprise me to learn he got roped or embarrassed into doing the show."¹⁶² Stoller goes on to dismiss

¹⁶¹ See Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 1998).

¹⁶² James Stoller, "South Country Blues," *Village Voice*, June 12, 1969, 34.

Cash's apparently conservative politics ("a most depressing cop-out by Cash on the subject of gun control"), and worries that Dylan's silence on the show (he did not open his mouth other than to sing) could be construed by the viewing public as an endorsement of the sociopolitical status quo ("suspicious of where this kind of thing could lead," he writes).¹⁶³ The implication here is that in 1969, when the Vietnam War raged on despite widespread protests, to not speak out was to automatically support the Establishment.

It is interesting that Stoller criticizes Cash not only politically, but also aesthetically: "I've been wary of Johnny Cash ever since I saw him play a crooning terrorizer of housewives in a fifth-grade movie on 42nd Street, 'Door to Door Maniac.' His oft-noted resemblance to Governor Wallace doesn't help." Although witty, Stoller's comment illustrates that rock's defenders had a tendency to paint country music with a broad brush—similar to any genre's fans who denigrate another genre for its perceived political and aesthetic shortcomings. That there were important political differences between Wallace and Cash, one advocating racial segregation, the other advocating for the rights of Native Americans (for instance), is elided in Stoller's analysis. In fact, select mainstream late-'60s country stars such as Cash, Merle Haggard, and Earl Scruggs garnered lots of hippie rock fans in part due to their complex political views, incorporating aspects of both left and right, including questioning the Vietnam War (or at least its execution). The fact that in 1969 Earl Scruggs performed at a large public anti-war protest while Dylan pointedly refused to condemn the war when pressed by Happy Traum and

¹⁶³ *ibid*, 34.

John Cohen in an interview demonstrates that aligning left and right with rock and country, respectively, fails to capture the complexity of the political and cultural moment.¹⁶⁴

Rebecca Klatch's *A Generation Divided* documents a little-known area where the 1960s student New Left and New Right unexpectedly had some overlap: the veneration of the individual, and with that the rise of the U.S. libertarian movement. SDS members who found New Deal-style government bureaucracy stifling occasionally discovered common ground with select YAF (Young Americans for Freedom) members whose idea of limited government extended to banning the state from individuals' private lives. With margins of left and right united by participation in the counterculture, Klatch documents libertarian YAF members who had a "Bob Dylan Appreciation Society" in the late '60s, which involved listening to Dylan records while smoking marijuana together.¹⁶⁵ This provides some anecdotal evidence that *Nashville Skyline* could appeal to politically-minded listeners beyond the "he's sold out" versus "he's found personally authentic happiness" binary found in the rock-critical reception.

It is impossible to divine Dylan's "real" politics of the period, given that he refused to publicly state any of his political views in the late Sixties. As with the phenomenon of stardom, all we have to go on is what is publicly available. But Steven Goldberg of *Saturday Review* hazarded an interesting guess in 1970: "It is quite conceivable...that, when he bothers with politics at all, Dylan's political outlook is conservative. His emphasis on personal, as opposed to societal, salvation could very possibly leave him feeling most at home with a political

¹⁶⁴ Regarding Scruggs' performance at the November 15, 1969 Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam in Washington DC, see: David Hoffman, *Earl Scruggs: The Bluegrass Legend - Family & Friends*, Film, The Hoffman Collection, 205698, 1972. For the interview in which Dylan is pressed on the Vietnam War and refuses to take a position, see John Cohen and Happy Traum, Interview with Dylan, October/November 1968 issue of *Sing Out!*, reprinted in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott (New York: Wenner Books, 2006), 136-7.

¹⁶⁵ Klatch, *A Generation Divided*, 155.

philosophy that emphasizes the individual's right to be left alone to his own search for God.”¹⁶⁶

Based on the evidence publicly at hand—two late-‘60s albums focused on Biblical and romantic love themes, and a handful of interviews wherein he refused to answer political questions—Goldberg may be on to something, articulating a kind of small-l libertarianism which could conceivably help explain Dylan’s friendship with a figure like Johnny Cash. But examining political orientation, personal political philosophy, only tells part of the story. As I have hopefully demonstrated, I am more interested in the politics of aesthetics and genre in *Nashville Skyline*, the way in which Dylan’s use of lyrical and musical irony works to disentangle auteur and star, questioning rock ideology and the New Left’s emphasis on personal authenticity.

Since *Nashville Skyline* highlights and even celebrates show-business artifice, Thomas Frank’s concept of *hip capitalism* may further help us understand what the record meant in a late-‘60s rock context. Frank’s book *The Conquest of Cool* examines the “creative revolution” in the 1960s advertising industry, a shift in the business away from top-down management styles, toward an enhanced role for an agency’s creative team. Frank argues against the common notion we saw articulated in some contemporary accounts of the Woodstock festival, that big business shamelessly co-opted the nascent counterculture in order to sell products. Instead, he points out that ad agencies were staffed with hip young bohemians from the early 1960s forward. Hip capitalism for these people meant an eagerness to disseminate subversive ideas into the mainstream via advertising and fashion; these creative professionals were excited to see the

¹⁶⁶ Goldberg, “Bob Dylan and the Politics of Salvation,” 46.

counterculture gain momentum as the Sixties progressed, because they themselves were part of it (in other words, not just exploiting it).¹⁶⁷

Frank's argument is useful because it reframes the typical "tragic" narrative of the '60s, oft-retold in popular media, wherein the youthful idealistic political activism of the early part of the decade gives way to hedonistic excess, corporations selling "flower power," and a general turn away from political engagement. The decade reads differently when a "fall from grace" is not possible, when the narrative does not revolve around an "authentic, noncommercial" versus "compromised, commercial" axis. This is similar to Barry Shank's reconfiguring of Sixties history through the lens of minstrelsy; in fact, Shank and Frank's arguments are related. Both are about artists recognizing that subversive commentary can come from within capitalism; that not only can "hip" not escape the market, but that hip is in fact constituted by the market, at least in part.

Of course, Frank realizes that his argument may be criticized as too generous, even congratulatory, toward corporate culture. He anticipates this by clarifying that he is telling the story of the powerful in society: "[it is] a study of cultural production rather than reception, of power rather than resistance."¹⁶⁸ This is germane to Dylan's late-'60s career, because by 1969 he was one of the most powerful figures in popular music, releasing albums that topped the charts without touring or promotional interviews. Gregg M. Campbell articulates nicely the paradox of this power: "Dylan certainly was the vanguard of the counterculture. But if the

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1-33. See also Stephen doCarmo, "'Mad Men' and the Myth of Counterculture," *Up the Flagpole*, July 1, 2013, <http://stephendocarmo.blogspot.com/2013/07/mad-men-and-myth-of-counterculture.html>. doCarmo's discussion of a "Mad Men" advertising executive as "Bob Dylan hip" inspired my application of Frank's *hip capitalism* concept to Dylan's late-'60s work.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*, x.

counterculture is only a subcultural variant of the dominant society, then Dylan becomes something other than a revolutionary prophet or transcendent visionary. He becomes one of the leading or cutting edges of the dominant society.”¹⁶⁹ Campbell’s purposeful shift in perspective echoes the arguments of Peter Braunstein, Michael William Doyle, and Devon Powers mentioned at the beginning of this chapter; there never was a clear-cut line in the 1960s between “counterculture” and “mainstream”, much as arbiters of taste such as rock writers attempted to impose one. *Nashville Skyline*, with a bit of ironic distance of course, revels in the ambiguity.

I do not go so far as to claim that Dylan would have proudly labeled himself a “hip capitalist” in 1969; his tendency was more toward indirect inference as expressed via his recordings. While Dylan may not have *endorsed* hip capitalism, his ironized play with the commercial realities of genre on *Nashville Skyline* clearly demonstrates he knows that is the field he is working within. And this type of hip-capitalist-informed commentary could not have existed prior to the late 1960s. As Linda Hutcheon writes about the auteur in a post-Barthes-and-Foucault world, “Today’s turning to parody reflects...a crisis in the entire notion of the subject as a coherent and continuous source of signification. Parody’s overt turning to other art forms implicitly contests Romantic singularity and thereby forces a reassessment of the process of textual production.”¹⁷⁰ This “reassessment of the process of textual production” is essentially Hutcheon’s definition of postmodernism. As such, Dylan’s play with genre on *Nashville Skyline* is postmodern; intriguingly, I would argue it is also simply “modern.” Country music, as Aaron Fox argues, has long used robust irony and denaturalized language to express complex emotions

¹⁶⁹ Gregg M. Campbell, “Bob Dylan and the Pastoral Apocalypse,” in *The Bob Dylan Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, ed. Carl Benson (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), 106.

¹⁷⁰ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 4-5.

and situations in deceptively simple ways.¹⁷¹ This strategy of representation is absolutely within the broader envelope of classic 20th century modernism. Thus, *Nashville Skyline* straddles modernism and postmodernism; what it is *not* is anti-modern. And as I have sketched, from representations of Woodstock, to the steep rise in back-to-the-land communes, to the rapturous reception of the retro style of The Band, antimodernism was *the* hippie/rock orientation of 1969.

Considering this, it is in a way puzzling that in 1969 *Nashville Skyline* performed as well as it did commercially, with fans clamoring for Dylan to appear at Woodstock, and the Weather Underground using Dylan's lyrics to name their radical-left paramilitary group. Perhaps this can be explained in part by the subtlety and playfulness of the humor in *Nashville Skyline*, which meant that fans not attuned to Dylan's more scathing side could overlook the knife in the cotton candy. Additionally, to make a bit of an Adornian turn, perhaps *Nashville Skyline* sold well simply because Dylan was a huge celebrity, and the content itself mattered not so much. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Olivia Carter Mather points out that several rock bands preceded *John Wesley Harding* in a move toward country music, and as such Dylan cannot be considered the founder of country-rock. She argues, "Since few country rock projects took sonic cues from Dylan's work in Nashville, his significance for country rock lay mainly in his validation of country for a rock audience."¹⁷² I agree with Mather, but to this I would add: he validated country for a rock audience, but not because of specific things *Nashville Skyline* does musically or lyrically to educate and/or endear rock audiences to the pleasures of a genre of music new to them. Rather, he validated country for a rock audience simply by dint of his rock stardom, that aspect alone inspiring millions of rock fans to go out and buy a rock LP with some

¹⁷¹ See Fox, "The Jukebox of History," 53-72.

¹⁷² Mather, "Cosmic American Music," 144.

country-style music on it. As I have hopefully demonstrated throughout this chapter, Dylan does not use country music on *Nashville Skyline* to bring disparate groups of fans together, as in Gram Parsons' utopian vision of "Cosmic American Music;" he uses country music to make a statement about the suffocating nature of the auteur-star hybrid. This was a statement aimed squarely at the rock-critical establishment; however, the mostly rave reviews of *Nashville Skyline* seem to suggest they did not get the message. It took Dylan extending his middle finger even more aggressively toward the critics with 1970's *Self Portrait* for the angry, confused critical response to finally occur. It seems *Nashville Skyline*'s spoonful of treacle helped the medicine go down—too smoothly, perhaps—whereas *Self Portrait*'s entire bowlful (orchestras, choirs) finally induced the vomiting that Dylan was after.

Chapter 2

“I Come A Lot Closer Than Olivia Newton-John”: Country-Rock in the 1970s Popular Music Mainstream

"That poor guy, man, you've got to give him credit. He's been honest about every change he's gone through. If he's been into being a cynical, really not-very-nice person, he did it so honestly that he did it better than anyone else. And in the long run, he did it with some love in his heart, even when he was hating himself...He's got an old lady that he loves and he digs it and he's beginning to dig himself. And that's what he's saying now: forgive yourself. Give yourself a break...Forgive yourself for just three seconds; then maybe you can like yourself better and if you like yourself, maybe you can like other people. And that's the key to the whole thing. If everybody would like themselves, they'd go a long way in liking everybody else and it wouldn't occur to hang somebody else up.

"I think Dylan is trying real hard to show it. By being an example. I think the reason he stopped singing protest songs was that he realized you can't preach to people; you have to BE people. A mother can't say to her child 'You can't lie or you can't cheat' if she lies and cheats herself. They're going to learn by anything she does—not necessarily what she says. And Bob Dylan, because he's got so many people's attention and so many people are watching him and are going to imitate him... And if he does good things, they're going to do good things, too. It's going to be a good practice."

Country-rock singer Linda Ronstadt spoke these thoughts about Bob Dylan in a 1971 interview with *Hit Parader* magazine; they were part of a larger meditation upon the quality of “honesty” in songwriting which attracts her as an interpreter.¹ An articulation of the more optimistic side of Judeo-Christian philosophy, her statements also capture the “personal” turn of Dylan’s late-‘60s output. If momentarily gesturing toward Dylan’s defiant poses discussed in the previous chapter (“he’s been into being a cynical, really not-very-nice person”), she ultimately lauds him as “an example,” a role model we as music fans and individuals should emulate, for what she perceives as his self-reflexivity and consistency.

¹ Pete Senoff, “Linda Ronstadt: Sanity on the Line Every Show,” *Hit Parader*, February 1971. Linda Ronstadt articles/interviews archive: <http://ronstadt-linda.com/arthritis1.htm>. Accessed June 30, 2015.

Six years later, in an interview with her friend John Rockwell, Ronstadt offered a more ambiguous take on singer-songwriters' turn to the personal:

I think I'm a real Seventies person. Sixties protest songs always seemed too general to me—and hypocritical, too, if some guy was singing about mankind just after he'd left his wife and kids. Maybe I'm a very narrow person. But the experiences that move me deeply are the experiences I have with other individuals, whether it be friendship or romance. It's always traumatic on some levels, it's always uplifting on some levels—those are the things I like to express in my music.²

Here Ronstadt turns more pointedly than before to romantic relationships, but also to conceptions of personal happiness and identity which are more context-contingent, less rooted in belief in heroes or authentic selfhood. By this era of her career, Ronstadt had turned from recording the serious side of Dylan material to the jaunty side of material by Seventies tongue-in-cheek rockers like Warren Zevon and Elvis Costello. While continuing to also record plenty of the soft sad ballads which increasingly drew the ire of rock critics, Ronstadt's move to a variety of emotional colors was part of the direction she helped take country-rock over the decade—to great profit. In this chapter, I argue that Ronstadt, one of the biggest-selling artists of the 1970s, crossed over from pop-rock to the country charts in a manner very specific to changes in both fields of music. This Seventies Person's artistic choices embodied what Eric Weisbard calls “pop modernity,” implicitly challenging Romantic rock ideals of authenticity, *communitas* and protest, while remaining audibly country-rock.³

Though she consistently venerated rock singer-songwriters like Dylan, Ronstadt made her name as an interpreter, and it is her ability to utilize remarkable polish and precision in her vocal performances which situated her at the vital center of Seventies popular music. These

² John Rockwell, “Linda Ronstadt: Her Soft-Core Charms,” *New Times*, October 14, 1977. Linda Ronstadt articles/interviews archive: <http://ronstadt-linda.com/artnt77.htm>. Accessed June 30, 2015.

³ Eric Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 172. I will shortly go into further detail as to what is meant by this phrase.

skills, which I argue articulated a middle-class sensibility which caught the ear of country music's expanding audience, turned off rock listeners in a way that limns the boundaries of rock's own self-perceptions of marketplace accommodation. It's these ideological beliefs which have heretofore kept Ronstadt out of the retroactive alternative country music canon of beloved progenitors like Gram Parsons and the Byrds.

Yet the irony is Ronstadt arose from the same Los Angeles scene as these two other performers, taking aspects of the scene's sound and style to an audience Parsons only dreamed of. To better understand why Ronstadt is typically considered apart from a movement she helped found, it is necessary for me to first outline the intensity with which an LA rock group such as the Byrds tackled country material. I suggest that this intensity—lightly detached yet deadly serious—arose from Bob Dylan's continued influence as songwriter upon young rock bands, despite his active efforts to remove himself from this role.

The Byrds' Straight-faced "Nothing Was Delivered"

Even while recording confrontational LPs such as *Self Portrait* and largely refusing to speak with journalists, perhaps one reason Bob Dylan stayed in rock critics' good graces so long was that he had emissaries—whether he desired them or not—all over the world. Dylan was one of the most covered artists of the 20th century, and by the late 1960s there were already hundreds of recorded Dylan covers, by musicians too numerous to fully keep track of, in genres ranging from folk, to rock, to the occasional soul cover. A small number of these, such as Austin psychedelic band the 13th Floor Elevators' 1967 version of "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," introduce aspects of irony, irreverence, and a general willingness to treat the original recording as a starting point for musical experimentation. But the majority of Dylan covers are rather reverent, with an emphasis on vocal production allowing the lyrics to be heard clearly. In the

1960s, a band or artist choosing to record a Dylan cover demonstrated they were taking themselves and rock music seriously, drawing on Dylan's household-name status as a poet-intellectual to impart some extra gravitas to their act. I argue here that the rock tradition of playing Dylan covers straight—sometimes even when the original tune was funny or ironic—stands as one example of the brooding, pensive vibe Dylan's influence wrought on rock and eventually alt.country, even though late-'60s and early-'70s albums such as *Nashville Skyline*, *Self Portrait*, and *New Morning* are actually quite cheerful. Here I briefly examine The Byrds' 1968 cover of Dylan's Basement Tapes song "Nothing Was Delivered," which rearranges Dylan's friendly Fats Domino-style stroll into a glamorously depressive anti-modern statement on the apparently irrevocable divide between country and rock music at the end of the 1960s.

As noted by Mather and Einarson, Dylan did not invent country-rock, especially since rock groups such as The Lovin' Spoonful and Buffalo Springfield were already experimenting with country styles prior to *John Wesley Harding*'s late 1967 release. But one aspect is difficult to deny: rock bands such as these who instigated the country-rock movement would not have initially existed without the folk-rock movement of the mid-'60s; furthermore, Dylan's 1965 decision to begin performing rock music is almost universally regarded, then and now, as the defining moment in the genesis of folk-rock. Thus in this rather obvious sense, Dylan laid some groundwork for country-rock, even as the degree of his *direct* involvement with rock bands engaging country styles circa 1966-8 is open to debate, and probably negligible.

Of the scores of folk-rock groups who eventually moved into country-rock as the 1960s progressed, I focus here on The Byrds because they are unique among these bands for being known as Dylan interpreters *equally* as much as writers and performers of their own material. Their April 1965 debut hit single, a trebly rock arrangement of "Mr. Tambourine Man," not only

established The Byrds as a nationally-known act, it introduced Dylan to the record-buying public on a level unmatched even by previous hit cover versions such as Peter, Paul, and Mary's "Blowin' in the Wind." And as Richie Unterberger notes, the band's initial reluctance to record Dylan songs paradoxically drew them closer to him, as their manager Jim Dickson arranged for Dylan to join the band in the studio as they worked up an arrangement of "Mr. Tambourine Man."⁴ The group struck up a friendship with Dylan, who reportedly admired their interpretation, and some fans even argue that Dylan's enjoyment of their 12-string Rickenbacker guitar arrangement helped inspire his own move to electrified rock. Regardless of whether or not this is actually true, what matters is that the Byrds' mutually-beneficial relationship with Dylan established them in the rock-critical imaginary as musicians who were considered part of Dylan's inner circle, privy to his private deliberations regarding where he would take the folk-rock world next. This perception is important when considering the role that bootlegs played in building a mystique around a Byrds Dylan cover such as "Nothing Was Delivered."

In July 1969, for hip young rock fans with access to a big-city record store, the must-have brand-new Dylan album was not *Nashville Skyline*, but *Great White Wonder*, an unauthorized 2-LP set of unreleased and live Dylan recordings that was the first commercial rock bootleg.⁵ *Great White Wonder* sold well at any record store that risked carrying it, and arguably the bootleg's boldest advertisement were its seven previously-unavailable Dylan originals, culled from summer-fall 1967 sessions recorded with The Band, part of the legendary "Basement Tapes." Specifically, the seven songs were part of a fourteen-song acetate registered to Dwarf Music, Dylan's publishing company; the songs were written and recorded during his Woodstock

⁴ Richie Unterberger, *Turn! Turn! Turn!: The '60s Folk-Rock Revolution* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2002), 102-4.

⁵ Heylin, *Behind the Shades Revisited*, 280.

exile when “I was being *pushed* again into coming up with some songs.”⁶ The songs were a bit different from prior Dylan material in that “they were vaguely written for other people,” with Columbia Records providing the acetate to select interested parties. Dylan fanatics learned about these songs in two different ways. Various rock, folk, and pop artists, beginning with Peter, Paul, and Mary’s November 1967 single “Too Much of Nothing,” began to release their versions of the acetate songs, typically with fuller arrangements than what was heard on the original demos. Fans also read rapturous, detailed reports in *Rolling Stone* from writers who had heard the acetate, with Jann Wenner going so far as to argue in a front-page June 1968 editorial, “Dylan’s Basement Tape Should Be Released”: “These tapes could easily be remastered and made into a record. The concept of a cohesive record is already present.”⁷

The tantalizing idea of a “lost” Dylan classic both fed into and was fed by his auteur-star status. For fans who had grown tired of longer gaps between Dylan albums since 1966, as well as Dylan’s general refusal to tour or give interviews, just knowing that said “album” existed gave hope to his followers that there was some kind of artistic intent behind the radio silence. Additionally, some of the acetate songs, particularly “Tears of Rage,” contained lyrical references that suggested Dylan might soon return with more directly politically-oriented material, offering comment on the increasingly frenzied Sixties that seemed to be missing his voice. That some of the recordings were completely unheard only added to the mythology.

When the Byrds released their cover of Dylan’s acetate song “Nothing Was Delivered” on August 1968’s *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, arriving as it did after Wenner’s editorial but well before *Great White Wonder*’s July 1969 release, it meant fans had heard *of* the song, but had not

⁶ Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: The Recording Sessions, 1960-1994* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995), 68.

⁷ Jann Wenner, “Dylan’s Basement Tape Should Be Released,” *Rolling Stone*, June 22, 1968, 1.

actually heard it. The Byrds' recording was the first to reach the public, adding to their reputation as musicians who had the inside track on Dylan. Essentially all that fans had previously heard of the song was Wenner's capsule review in his aforementioned editorial:

If this doesn't prove Dylan's sense of humor, little will. This sounds like 1956 vintage rock 'n' roll; the piano triplets (Dylan himself playing, I'm sure) are a direct cop from Fats Domino's "Blueberry Hill." Dylan is one of the few rock 'n' roll artists who uses both a piano and an organ.⁸

For all of Wenner's usual tendency to wax hyperbolic about the serious side of Dylan, in my estimation he is on target, here. Dylan's original Basement recording of the song, with its simple C-G-D progression, laconic, almost humorous lead vocals, harmonies from the Band on the chorus, and occasional electric guitar fills from Robbie Robertson, projects a feeling of self-amused, laid-back (even chemically enhanced) confidence. The lyrics in their most straightforward reading seem to suggest, as Greil Marcus puts it, "a few honest customers holding a dealer who took their money and failed to come up with the goods."⁹

The song's first verse begins with the speaker addressing the person or persons in trouble, offering advice: "Nothing was delivered/And I tell this truth to you/Not out of spite or anger/But simply because it's true/Now, I hope you won't object to this/Giving back all of what you owe/The fewer words you have to waste on this/The sooner you can go."¹⁰ The second and third verses are essentially variations on the same idea, with the narrator ending the final verse demanding an explanation: "As long as it takes to do this/Then that's how long that you'll remain." These lyrics on paper suggest a quiet menace, the threat of violent retribution thinly veiled by politeness. But when performed on the recording, they come off as rather joyous.

⁸ Wenner, "Dylan's Basement Tape Should Be Released," 19.

⁹ Greil Marcus, *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Picador, 1997), 256.

¹⁰ Bob Dylan & The Band, *The Basement Tapes*, Columbia Records C2 33682, 1975, vinyl LP.

This is likely because Dylan and the Band, as Wenner writes, do seem to consciously borrow from Fats Domino's version of "Blueberry Hill," itself a recording with a relaxed, happy (if wistful) feeling. The "Blueberry Hill" quotations are quite specific; for instance, Dylan and the Band briefly pause the music for a root-third-fifth vocal melody movement leading into each chorus, which is precisely the arrangement of Domino's famous introduction to "Blueberry Hill." Additionally, the piano triplets throughout the Dylan recording cannily recreate the triplet feel of Domino's song, even though Domino's recording is in 4/4, with the triplets added by the ride cymbal over the main beat. Finally, the way Dylan chooses to elongate certain vowels at unpredictable moments in his vocal performance, such as "now you must provide some aaaanswers" at 2:05-2:07, echoes Domino's deliberate drawing out the end of each verse phrase in "Blueberry Hill." By copying a classic recording and simply adding some imaginative new lyrics and a more lo-fi arrangement, Dylan and the Band's "Nothing Was Delivered" reads as a celebration of craft and making music with friends, a rhythm-and-blues genre exercise rather than a hostage story.

To say that the Byrds' 1968 recording takes the song in a different direction is an understatement. Lushly arranged and rhythmically propulsive where the Dylan original was sparse and languid, the Byrds' reworking is most notable for adding equal parts country and rock music to the song. That their arrangement neatly partitions the country music into the verses and the rock music into the choruses speaks to a certain musical "evolutionary" mindset I wish to briefly discuss in *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*. Country-rock historian Peter Doggett portrays the making of this album as somewhat a battle of wills between new member Gram Parsons, who according to Doggett wished to record as much country music as possible, and founding Byrd Jim McGuinn, who had a plan for the LP that included country but did not stop there:

A double album, a chronological album, starting with old-timey music—not bluegrass, but pre-bluegrass, dulcimers and nasal Appalachian stuff. Then to get into the advanced 1930s version of it, and move it up to modern country, the forties and fifties, with steel guitar and pedal steel guitar—do the evolution of that kind of music. Then cut it there and bring it up into electronic music and a kind of space music, and going into futuristic music.¹¹

McGuinn stated this ambitious concept, his chronological history-in-song of 20th century American popular music, before, during and after the making of the album, noting that it was important to him and that the concept at points almost came to fruition. Regarding the finished album, which featured almost entirely country music—mostly classic country covers—Doggett argues, “In its completed form, *Sweetheart* was an epic of self-effacement on McGuinn’s part.”¹² He notes that Parsons seemingly got his way in focusing on exclusively on country music, and that McGuinn wrote not one song on *Sweetheart* after co-writing the entire previous Byrds album—in a band where songwriting credits were perpetually an ego-driven issue.

However, upon careful consideration of the mix of country songs, styles, and vocal performances on *Sweetheart*, it seems to me that characterizing McGuinn’s presence as self-effacement is an overstatement. Although McGuinn’s idea to present American music chronologically did not win the day, a palpable awareness of the eras of country music history, and the passage of time, infuses this album nonetheless. This is communicated mainly via the juxtaposition of different styles of country music, albeit not in chronological order, ranging from honky-tonk to bluegrass to straightforward country-rock—even one country-soul tune. Plus, the two Dylan covers bookending the project, to quote Robert Christgau, serve as “twin talismans of

¹¹ Quoted in Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country*, 56.

¹² Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country*, 59.

modernity” (I will elaborate on this idea vis-à-vis “Nothing Was Delivered” momentarily).¹³

Olivia Carter Mather characterizes the stylistic mix:

Their project is less about the Nashville sound or about their attempts to write new songs in country style, and more about their understanding of the history of country music...The Byrds do not imitate these styles or stage a representation of them; they refer to them and claim them as included within the sphere of country music. But instead of simply covering well-known versions of songs that include a set of characteristics consistent to one style, for example gospel lyrics with gospel instrumentation and vocal style by a known gospel writer, the tracks fold in references to several styles within a single recording.¹⁴

I agree overall with Mather’s analysis, here; the Byrds blend and juxtapose styles on *Sweetheart* not to demonstrate what is good, bad, or easily reproducible about modern country music, but instead to legitimate a wide variety of styles as equally “country.” This claim to relevance includes the straight-ahead country-rock of a song like Gram Parsons’ “One Hundred Years from Now”; implicitly, the band is suggesting that their country-rock belongs within the larger, evolving country music canon. In contrast, as we have seen, these types of canon and legitimacy questions seem not to interest Bob Dylan in the slightest on *Nashville Skyline*.

While I agree with Mather’s take, there are two *Sweetheart* songs which do not quite fit this template, because they express the band’s concept of “country history” in a manner more directly inflected by rock. One of these two is their Louvin Brothers cover “The Christian Life,” arguably the only *Sweetheart* song that employs irony and parody in the sense discussed by Linda Hutcheon. The song is a first-person narrative of redemption from sin, wherein the speaker expresses continued fondness for his former drinking buddies, but notes that he is glad he has given up drinking, and hopes to serve as an example to his friends to move toward God.

¹³ Robert Christgau, “Columns, November 1968: country-western, minstrels, Jeff and Janis, addictions and corrections,” *Esquire*, November 1968.

¹⁴ Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 148.

The song's consistent refrain is, "Others take pleasure in things I despise/I like the Christian life."¹⁵ Unlike almost all other songs on *Sweetheart*, because "The Christian Life" covers such explicit religious territory of sin and salvation, I believe that a certain irony would not have escaped the Byrds' rock audience. The irony here is entirely contextual, drawing on knowledge beyond the lyrics. Even casual fans of the band were likely aware of their public image as a psychedelic group, known for writing "drug trip" songs such as "Eight Miles High." On the Byrds album preceding *Sweetheart*, they had written songs about amphetamine abuse, the Vietnam War, and outer space; thus, by definition "The Christian Life" is quite a shift. Even if the listener works off a baseline assumption that the narrator of the song and the actual musician singing it are not the same person, it seems unlikely that most listeners of the late '60s would fail to note at least a touch of contextual irony: rock stars known for hippie hedonism singing about the reassuring pleasures of a strict moral code, a life governed by a patriarchal God.

Beyond simply the "real-person" context, Roger McGuinn's lead performance on the song is arguably the only vocal performance on *Sweetheart* that is noticeably parodic; his approximation of a Southern accent, switched on for this one song only, seems to (gently) parody a honky-tonk vocal style, at least as imagined by a rock musician. Examples include his opening line, "My buddies tell me that I should have waited" (0:14-0:19), wherein his pitch wavers in a seemingly studied manner; see also his pronunciation "Jay-sus" in "turned to Jesus" (1:26-1:28), and his nasal timbre and head voice singing "walk in the light" (1:37-1:41). McGuinn's vocal choices here are so different from the rest of the album, it makes the parody seem intentional.

¹⁵ The Louvin Brothers, *Satan Is Real*, Capitol Records T1277, 1959, vinyl LP.

And yet, fans familiar with the story of the making of *Sweetheart* know that McGuinn and producers replaced several of Gram Parsons' vocal takes after the album was mostly complete, due to contractual issues still a bit unclear to this day.¹⁶ Listening to Parsons' original vocal performance of "The Christian Life," presumably originally considered for inclusion on the album, there are numerous similarities with McGuinn's version, from the phrasing and timbre of "I sing with pride" (0:53-0:57), to the same inflections singing "a whole world of fun" (0:48-0:50), among many other examples.¹⁷ Given this, it seems highly likely that McGuinn studied the tape of Parsons' recording, complete with Parson's native-born Southerner's accent, and worked to get his vocal performance into similar form.

This raises the question as to what, if anything, was being parodied, if—using Hutcheon's definition of parody as repetition of a text with difference—McGuinn's goal was to precisely replicate Parsons.¹⁸ Additionally, it is worth considering that the Byrds' personal relationship to country music was more complex than most 1960s rock bands. Arguably most of folk-rock's founding figures began their pre-rock musical careers in the early-'60s folk revival, including John Sebastian, Jerry Garcia, and the Byrds' own Roger McGuinn and Gene Clark. But by the time they recorded *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* in 1968, the Byrds boasted among their expanded ranks professional bluegrass musicians Chris Hillman and Clarence White, both of whom had achieved some degree of country music success before joining the Byrds. Because the Byrds thus had an actual connection to the country business, it complicates the question of whether they would or even *could* be in the position of a rock band haughtily poking fun at the earnest

¹⁶ For an overview, see Doggett, *Are You Ready for the Country*, 60-1.

¹⁷ Parson's version is included as a bonus track in a reissue of *Sweetheart* from 1997.

¹⁸ Although, it should be noted: my question here raises another question, in turn: Why would McGuinn wish to copy exactly Parson's vocals in the first place?

Southern Baptist fervor of the Louvin Brothers. As I see it, this ambiguity of identification, this unresolved balancing act between rock-inflected irony and country (faux-)sincerity, is precisely what has made the Byrds' recording of the song compelling and influential for alt.country fans.

As for the other *Sweetheart* song which complicates the Byrds' notion of country music vis-à-vis rock, I return finally to their cover of Dylan's "Nothing Was Delivered," which closes the album in dramatic fashion. Unlike the ambiguities of genre and intent in "The Christian Life," what is notable about their "Nothing Was Delivered" arrangement is the way it draws a rather clear line between country and rock, and then uses that line to make a statement about rock in the present day. The song can be read as a microcosmic playing out of McGuinn's hoped-for history of U.S. popular music in song, a trajectory wherein '60s rock wins the day, but at a cost.

What is immediately most striking about the Byrds' arrangement in comparison with Dylan's is how, following an elegiac pedal steel descending-and-then-ascending introductory figure, the song quickly settles into a "classic" (1940s and '50s) style honky-tonk groove, complete with quarter-note walking bass line and stripped-down country 4/4 dance drum pattern, marking all three of the song's verses as unmistakably "country." McGuinn's lead vocal in these verses is notable not for a robust Southern accent à la "The Christian Life," but instead for a kind of opposite: performed vulnerability. At several points in the song's verses, we hear his voice quiver with subtle vibrato, for instance while singing "not out of spite or anger" at 0:15-0:18, or "when you made everybody pay" at 1:11-1:15. At times, this slight vibrato gives the impression of a narrator, a hostage-taker in this song's obtuse story, who is barely keeping it together.

Roger McGuinn remarked in an August 1968 *Sing Out* interview with John Cohen about *Sweetheart* that, "The last song on the record is one [Dylan] wrote in an R&B flavor, which we

translated back to a white R&B kind of thing.”¹⁹ This statement is intriguing for at least two reasons, not least of which because it more-or-less articulates the equivalent of Jann Wenner’s “country and western music is the soul music of white people” from the same year; it seems that sentiment, that conceptualization of “white R & B” was on the minds of lots of rock musicians and writers in 1968. But beyond this, what strikes me about McGuinn’s characterization is how inaccurate it is, about his own music. The musical backing of their arrangement’s verses is pure honky-tonk, not country-soul and certainly not anything in the 6/8-feel 1950s R & B of Dylan’s original version. In fact, the honky-tonk music combines with McGuinn’s quavering vocals and the obliquely threatening lyrics to create a much creepier take on country music than one might initially expect. With the other Byrds adding three-part harmony every few phrases in the verses, seemingly telegraphing the bombast of the choruses and also serving as a kind of Greek Chorus, the listener gets the feeling this negligent drug dealer may be about to get his comeuppance in this dingy honky-tonk. Without changing a word of the lyrics, solely through differences in vocal style and musical arrangement, the Byrds convey a much more desperate emotional texture compared with Dylan’s laid-back original.

The differences from Dylan continue in the chorus sections, where the arrangement suddenly switches to driving psychedelic rock, in the style of Jefferson Airplane. The organ is brought up in the mix, the drum pattern switches to a straight 4/4 rock beat, and the bass player, still playing quarter notes, switches to vamping on the same four pitches each measure, noticeably amplifying the rock feeling. Speaking of amplification, the volume notches up a small bit in the choruses, as does the tempo. All of this rock power interacts with the lyrics to paradoxical effect. The sole lyrics of the chorus, as written by Dylan and performed by both he

¹⁹ John Cohen, “Interview with Roger (Jim) McGuinn of the Byrds,” *Sing Out*, December 1968/January 1969, 8.

and the Byrds are: “Nothing is better, nothing is best/Take care of your health and get plenty of rest.”²⁰ It is classic post-1965 Dylan: a seemingly profound statement about the human condition punctured and rendered humorously mysterious by the nonsense that immediately follows it.

Looking closer, however, what this is more precisely is the language of philosophy, the calm language of moral reasoning, paired strangely and intimately with the warmth of familial speech, advice for a son or daughter. This kind of purposely jarring juxtaposition, this bundling of speech genres which do not typically go together, is *heteroglossic* in the sense discussed by literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In his essay “On Dialogism and Heteroglossia,” Bakhtin defines heteroglossia, approximately:

And finally, at any given moment, languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit with one another... Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form...Therefore languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways.²¹

Bakhtin suggests in his work defining heteroglossia that in a work of fiction such as a novel (or song), we see mixtures of speech genres not just in dialogue between characters, but especially within the author/narrator’s voice itself. Authors may think they speak for themselves, and they do; but in the act of writing, the author inevitably invokes a wide variety of historical modes of address, only some of which s/he may be fully conscious of.

As the reader may have already guessed, Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia has been utilized successfully by later scholars of postmodernism, who seek like Foucault did to expand

²⁰ Bob Dylan & The Band, *The Basement Tapes*. I should note that sometimes the second part of the chorus is performed by Dylan as “*take heed of this* and get plenty of rest.”

²¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 291.

our understanding of authorship, to embrace the potential that authorship is collective and contextual, that an author should be more than just a solitary, adored figure of genius. Certainly, as I have hopefully demonstrated in the previous chapter, Dylan in his post-1965 work, and especially within the lyrics of *Nashville Skyline*, embraces this potential, likely because it offers him freedom from the auteur-star hybrid which at the time felt like a trap. The juxtaposition of philosophical and quotidian familial language in “Nothing Was Delivered”’s chorus is so jarring it seems purposefully humorous, as if Dylan is actively working to stick a whoopee cushion under the potential profundity of the song’s story and “message.” That the words of the chorus are delivered with the same relaxed smoothness as the verses, and the entire mood of the performance itself mimics the laid-back, romantic vibe of “Blueberry Hill” suggests yet another dimension of heteroglossia at work. Dylan’s version of “Nothing Was Delivered” treats Domino’s recording as a kind of oral tradition from which he can freely borrow, their psychic communication over time and space enriching his craft as an idiosyncratic modern artist, but also providing some of musical tradition’s comfort of anonymity.

The Byrds’ rock arrangement of Dylan’s chorus lyrics, in contrast, is essentially about *rupture* instead of continuity. While both the Dylan and Byrds recordings of the song feature harmony vocals in the choruses, in the Byrds’ version the harmonies are thicker and louder, particularly when leading up to the moment singing “Nothing is better, nothing is best.” And interestingly, in a musical detail nowhere to be found in Dylan’s original, in the spare moment of each chorus between the two lines “Nothing is better, nothing is best” and “Take care of yourself and get plenty of rest”, a rather outrageous drum fill ties the chorus together (1:42-1:44 is a good example). Between the intensity of the swelling vocal harmonies and the climactic crash of this drum fill, the Byrds’ arrangement reaches an emotional peak in the middle of each of these

choruses. On the one hand, it sounds a bit like relief of frustration, as if the hookwinked customers-turned-captors have suddenly grown tired of this game and are releasing their prisoner. But perhaps even more than that, the combination of musical arrangement and lyric reads as a kind of resignation. “Take care of yourself and get plenty of rest,” a sentiment as aggressive as a warm hug, when sung over a pounding psychedelic rock backing, seems to be the auditory incarnation of shrugged shoulders, a hip weariness and melancholia infusing every inch of the musical moment.

Seeing as the Byrds’ arrangement so pointedly juxtaposes country and rock, setting the two genres side-by-side and never interacting much at all beyond that, it is not unreasonable to suggest that some of this weary resignation applies to the relationship of country and rock in 1968, at least according to the Byrds. In their version, after the final chorus, the song continues in full rock mode, with a soaring steel guitar solo ending everything on an almost overwhelming note. It seems that if McGuinn won a smaller battle and this song itself does play out in miniature the history of 20th century popular music he was hoping to document, in that case then, rock has won the evolutionary battle. The Byrds seem to accept this (rock, after all, is their generic home), but also on some level mourn musical traditions that have to “die” for contemporary rock to reign. In this feeling of melancholia, a questioning of what progress has taken away from us, I detect a real feeling of antimodernism, albeit with a touch of ironic distance.

This antimodernism could even be interpreted in a political light, considering a striking print ad which was used by Columbia Records in October 1968 to market *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* to the readership of countercultural rock magazines. The advertisement is visually simple: a dark brick wall exterior, framed relatively in close-up, with a vinyl LP copy of

Sweetheart on the sidewalk, leaning up against the wall. Scrawled on the wall in giant letters of white paint, the revolutionary slogan, “This country’s for the Byrds.”²² Besides satisfying the obvious requirement of namechecking the band, the deeper message is obvious: with the disheartening turmoil and rapid changes taking place in 1968 America, if you’ve had enough, resign from the modern world and join us in the country. Regardless as to whether or not these were the Byrds’ personal feelings, the ad speaks volumes regarding countercultural frustration, resignation, and antimodernism at the end of the 1960s, as refracted through Frank’s “hip capitalism,” in this instance publishing a subversive message in that most compromised of formats, an advertisement.

That Bob Dylan and the Byrds could create such different statements from the same exact song demonstrates the “proliferation of meaning” which sparked from most of his late 1960s songs, whether or not he approved of the new directions in which his acolytes took his material. Dylan’s influence on country-rock and alt.country, as a mega-star of rock, was essentially out of his hands at a certain point; indeed, I am suggesting that the “brooding intellectual” vibe associated with some of his followers from the 1970s forward is actually the opposite of the perversely cheerful *Nashville Skyline*. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, that album was not about establishing a new genre (country-rock), but was instead about delivering a bleakly funny state-of-the-union for the rapidly maturing genre of rock in which Dylan found himself—at the center.

The Myth of (Sixties) Rock Expressivity in Decline; Alt.Country Origin Myths

²² “This Country’s For the Birds,” Print Advertisement, *Rolling Stone*, October 12, 1968, 22.

As noted in the previous chapter, in spite of its stand against the tenor of its times, by dint of Dylan's celebrity *Nashville Skyline* became one of his best-selling albums. The Byrds covering Dylan in 1968 were not as lucky. *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* peaked at Number 77 on the *Billboard* album charts, making it the Byrds' lowest-selling LP up to that point.²³ The album's relative lack of success at the time of its release has become an important aspect of its canonization as a formative influence among alternative country musicians and fans from the 1980s forward. Arguably part of the album's underdog-cult reputation is tied up in fans' interest in the brief life and dramatic early death of Gram Parsons, a member of the Byrds for this album only. I agree with Olivia Carter Mather that to fans Parsons "was country when and where 'country wasn't cool,'" and accordingly the prophetic instigator of both alt.country and the more commercially successful 1970s country rock of artists like the Eagles and Linda Ronstadt. Accompanying Parsons' underground popularity is that which attends other cult figures in rock history, especially those who die young: a stockpile of anecdotes and legends attesting to the subject's genius.²⁴ In Parsons' case, perceived genius-bordering-on-madness is a strongly Romantic notion which fits easily within broader Romantic 1960s rock narratives of authentic expression, blind to commercial imperatives.

Mather notes that while not all after-the-fact accounts of Parsons' life and career in the late '60s portray him as the inventor of country-rock, most do.²⁵ Byrds biographer Johnny Rogan, while acknowledging that members of the group such as Hillman and White were professional bluegrass musicians prior to *Sweetheart*, characterizes Parsons as "an exotic country

²³ David Meyer, *Twenty Thousand Roads: The Ballad of Gram Parsons and his Cosmic American Music* (New York: Random House, 2007), 265.

²⁴ Mather, "Cosmic American Music", 70.

²⁵ Mather, "Cosmic American Music," 84.

singer, whose background resembled the scarred pages of a Tennessee Williams play,” and whose advocacy pushed the Byrds definitively into country.²⁶ He quotes Roger McGuinn stating that “We thought country was a fun place to dabble in, but Gram wanted to go there the whole hog. It was a burning desire on his part.”²⁷ Under Parsons’ guidance, Rogan argues of *Sweetheart* “here was a work that strove for those essential qualities of honesty and perspective that had been lost amid the musical saturnalias of the Summer of Love and the yippie yelps of the politically disillusioned. In a time of shifting moral values and self-questioning, *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* provided a sense of place and a love of tradition.”²⁸

Although this assessment was written in 2011, it reads similarly to Jann Wenner’s 1968 *Rolling Stone* editorial discussed in the previous chapter, wherein he praises the country music played by the Byrds as “a music of reconciliation” between classes and generations, delivering “the soul of music tradition” in “a time when the frivolous and the bullshit in rock and roll comes faster than royalty checks.”²⁹ This fretting that rock has become captive to moneyed interests and needs to return to roots is an articulation of a “death of rock” lament or warning, part of a cautionary tale of commercialism and co-optation which, as Johan Fornäs notes, has been a narrative within rock critical discourse from nearly its beginning, repeating periodically.³⁰

²⁶ Johnny Rogan, *Byrds: Requiem for the Timeless, Volume 1* (Ipswich UK: Rogan House, 2011), 415.

²⁷ Ibid, 423.

²⁸ Ibid, 481-2. Besides Mather’s work to put hero worship of Parsons in broader context, see also John F. Stanislawski, “Grievous Angel: Gram Parsons and the Country Rock Movement” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana, 2014). In this dissertation, Stanislawski argues that while Parsons’ biography is important to his legacy, scholars must put it in conversation with his musical innovations and efforts to bridge class and cultural divides with his “Cosmic American Music” vision.

²⁹ Wenner, “Country Tradition Goes to Heart of Dylan Songs,” 14.

³⁰ Johan Fornäs, “The Future of Rock: Discourses That Struggle to Define a Genre,” *Popular Music* 14:1 (1995): 113, 118-9.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that 1990s alternative country music utilized, almost wholly intact, rock ideology's already-extant insistence that radically creative individuals succeed in making musical statements against the tenor of their times, mainstream musical currents which are perennially in danger of smoothing out rough edges and bastardizing auteurs' visions in a push to reach mass audiences. To better understand how and why '90s alt.country boosters turned these rock critiques onto mainstream country music of their own time, we need to contextualize the historical moment from *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* to Ronstadt and the Eagles' big success, a trajectory many '90s roots-rock partisans later perceived as a decline. In the origin mythology of 1990s alt.country, the connection between the two eras—and the reaction against where country-rock went in the '70s—looms large. While Diane Pecknold adroitly points out in “Selling Out or Buying In?: Alt.Country's Politics of Commercialism” that the critically underexplored 1980s boasted thriving U.S. cowpunk scenes, scenes whose successes and failures helped lay the groundwork for the 1990s alternative country “revolution,”³¹ it is hard to deny that for alt.country fans, Parsons and his early '70s milieu are often a fixation.

In the Fall 1995 founding issue of *No Depression* magazine, the staff in an unsigned mission statement, tongue somewhat in cheek but also speaking with the proselytizing zeal of fans, argued:

We declare, first, that there is such a thing as alternative country music. There has to be when new country radio busily presents Billy Ray Cyrus and Garth Brooks as superstars, and declines to even notice Willie Nelson, George Jones and other still living, still vibrant legends of the genre. We claim them as our spiritual ancestors, and Gram Parsons as our unholy ghost, minister to the shotgun wedding of country and rock 'n' roll, long before the Eagles crashed the reception.³²

³¹ Diane Pecknold, “Selling Out or Buying In?: Alt.Country's Politics of Commercialism,” 29-30.

³² “The difference between this...and this...is often this...*No Depression*,” *No Depression* 1 (1995): 21. To the credit of *No Depression*'s editors, by 2013 the magazine's perspective on the Eagles' place in the country-rock canon had broadened to the point where on August 25, 2013, they published on their website an editorial by Mike Seely

In the editors' formulation, even though Jones' songs featured strings and were much bigger radio hits than Parsons' or Nelson's, the three men can share the alt.country ancestors' pantheon, presumably due to their shared hedonism and the important point all three wrote the majority of their own material. Contemporary alt.country singer-songwriter Thad Cockrell offered a similar formulation of this common refrain to journalist Monte Dutton in 2006, adding a more forceful articulation that a rebel spirit is the quality of '70s performers in short supply now:

I'm just trying to balance out the stuff that's on the radio... The thing is, why can't Willie Nelson get on the radio anymore? Tell me you can't sell him. 'Is my tractor sexy?' Why in the world would a grown man have anything to do with music like what's on the radio right now? It's such a dumb song. It's soulless music. It all sounds like a business proposal to me. What Nashville doesn't realize is this. Johnny Cash was a badass. He was a rebel. He was a renegade. So was Waylon Jennings. So is Merle Haggard. So was Charlie Rich. The people who have made country music what it is today had unbelievable renegade personalities. The music today is too comfortable, at least the part of it that gets widespread airplay.³³

Dutton, in his introduction to trade guide *True to the Roots* takes Cockrell's logic further:

Remember when hillbilly songwriters drove the dusty back roads, handing out sample copies of their 45-RPM singles to disc jockeys at AM radio stations? Such scenes pepper the plots of movies like the 1980 biopic *Coal Miner's Daughter* and, more recently, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. Nowadays it's next to impossible for the fans even to find a radio station willing to take their requests. Playlists are computer generated, market researched, demographically focused, centrally devised, and virtually unchangeable.³⁴

In Dutton's argument, an era of populist accessibility wherein an ordinary "hillbilly" could become a country star extended fully into the Nashville Sound era of Loretta Lynn's success.

entitled "It's Time to Take it Easy on the Eagles." Seely argues that while true that the Eagles dabbled in disco and flaunted their arrogance and hedonism, so did the Rolling Stones, respected '70s country-rockers themselves; "Americana is nothing if not a mutt's genre," he concludes. Mike Seely, "It's Time to Take it Easy on the Eagles," *No Depression*, August 25, 2013, <http://nodepression.com/article/its-time-take-it-easy-eagles>, accessed October 24, 2015.

³³ Monte Dutton, *True to the Roots: Americana Music Revealed* (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 61.

³⁴ Dutton, *True to the Roots*, x.

The irony here is that, as recent work by Kim Simpson and Eric Weisbard amply demonstrates, the early-to-mid 1970s, prime time for the Outlaw movement, was also a period of unprecedented formatting of multiple styles of American radio, with rock and country programmers taking their lessons directly from supposedly reviled Top 40.³⁵ Whether actual or feigned, ignorance of that phenomenon by Cockrell and Dutton demonstrates an ideological mindset which is, of course, genre thinking—primarily an alt.country genre rhetoric of anti-commercialism. As Diane Pecknold points out, this anti-commercialism is paradoxical and partial, since alt.country boosters also take great pride in the modest successes of Americana radio and releases by stars in the field, such as Lucinda Williams and Ryan Adams.³⁶

To this an alt.country genre adherent might answer that it is a matter of scale, and that as Dutton suggests what they value is a democratization of the making of roots-inspired music. To that end, when fleshing out the pre-history of alternative country music, historian Peter Doggett does admirable work in his 2000 monograph *Are You Read for the Country*, focusing mostly on the '60s and '70s and arguing that what he calls “the roots of country rock” can include artists as wildly wide-ranging as Jerry Lee Lewis, Michael Nesmith, and Van Dyke Parks. While valorizing obscure folkies, Gram Parsons, and the Outlaw performers championed by Cockrell and Dutton, Doggett is more predictable in his treatment of commercially successful LA bands such as the Eagles and late-career Poco, arguing that in these two “and a host of imitators, country-rock gradually shed all recognizable traces of its hillbilly origins, and mutated into little more than a parody of its mid-sixties roots” (xiii). Doggett’s take on the trajectory of '70s country-rock is similar to British journalist Barney Hoskyns, who in his two books on the LA

³⁵ See Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, and Kim Simpson, *Early '70s Radio: The American Format Revolution* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

³⁶ Pecknold, “Selling Out or Buying In,” 40.

scene goes even further, arguing that cocaine-fueled social snobbery, a move toward arena tours, and the Elektra-Asylum label merger were all symptomatic of—here he quotes Don Henley directly—“a society that was concerned with our brothers and our fellow man [moving] into a society that was very self-centered, about money and power.”³⁷ Here the 1970s music business inevitably leads fans and musicians out of the Edenic cross-class rebellion of Parsons and the Outlaws, and into the consumerist dancefloor solipsism of the Eagles’ “One of These Nights.”

A popular music scholar’s task is not simply to question by default a genre-based logic of “selling out,” as a corrective against romanticization or demonization by journalists. Indeed, Olivia Carter Mather’s reappraisal of the Eagles in her 2006 dissertation on country-rock is more interesting and important than that, in that she moves beyond a “commercial” versus “non-commercial” binary to uncover a wider array of connotations of “country” as seventies rock rolled on. Mather argues that musically and lyrically the Eagles both dovetailed *with* and helped articulate a vision of a newly ascendant Sunbelt South, suggesting that the group helped soften big rock audiences to country music by coloring it with Southwestern accents.³⁸ Here I look to build on her approach, engaging with recent work by Motti Regev and Eric Weisbard to take seriously the music of Linda Ronstadt, the vocalist whose backing band became the Eagles. Ronstadt matters because she answers the “too country for rock, too rock for country” question

³⁷ Henley in Barney Hoskyns, *Hotel California: The true-life adventures of Crosby, Stills, Nash, Young, Mitchell, Taylor, Browne, Ronstadt, Geffen, the Eagles, and their many friends* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 256. See also Hoskyns, *Waiting for the Sun: A Rock ‘n’ Roll History of Los Angeles* (New York: Backbeat Books, 2009), which makes a similar argument regarding the artistic decline of commercially successful LA country-rock music, weaving this argument into a larger narrative of the death and rebirth of LA rock creativity with the advent of the local punk scene. See also Michael Walker, *Laurel Canyon: The Inside Story of Rock-and-Roll’s Legendary Neighborhood* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2006), 65-66, 157, 186, 205-224, 239-248. Walker makes a similar argument that LA musicians’ pursuit of pleasure and money helped doom their ‘70s country-rock scene, but tempers his pessimism by also arguing that the physical geography of Laurel Canyon is more responsible for its artistic success than previously noted, and that Laurel Canyon’s raw materials for creativity are still with us today.

³⁸ Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 232-9, 254-7.

which purportedly plagued many a country-rocker on the fringes of success. Answer: no, she wasn't too much of either.

Ronstadt became the consummate popular music industry insider of the 1970s, not only sending 22 singles into the Billboard Hot 100 over the course of the decade, but also crossing over to the country charts with 16 of those same hits. With the exception of just one Eagles country hit ("Lyin' Eyes"), Ronstadt was the only artist from the famed LA country-rock scene to cross over to the '70s country charts.³⁹ Coming as she did from rock, her massive country chart success was made possible by a more expansive pop-rock aesthetic and business that she both benefitted from and helped create. Though nostalgic at times, her approach in a country #5 hit such as "Love is a Rose" embodied a "pop modernity" (to borrow Weisbard's phrase) shared at least in part by both '70s format country and format (pop-)rock. Ronstadt's meticulous studio craft and "relatable" image appealed to an adult middle-class demographic increasingly shared between AC, country, and even AOR radio formats of the '70s. Her arrangements ticked enough boxes of novelty to satisfy what Motti Regev calls commercially successful pop-rock's "inner logic of eclecticism," but with lyrical themes of painful love firmly in the country music wheelhouse.⁴⁰ Understanding better a country-pop-rocker who succeeded in country and

³⁹ "Linda Ronstadt: Awards: Billboard Singles," All Music Guide, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/linda-ronstadt-mn0000686897/awards>. "Eagles: Awards: Billboard Singles," All Music Guide, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/eagles-mn0000144847/awards>. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, originating from Long Beach, had some overlap with the LA country-rock scene, but were established in the bluegrass/country market from essentially the start of their career. See "The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band: Awards: Billboard Singles," All Music Guide, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-nitty-gritty-dirt-band-mn0000718907/awards>. Pure Prairie League and Poco each had one and two singles (respectively) on the absolute lowest rungs of the country charts (mid-90s position), which I argue is not "charting" in any meaningful sense. See "Pure Prairie League: Awards: Billboard Singles," All Music Guide, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/pure-prairie-league-mn0000371879/awards>, and "Poco: Awards: Billboard Singles," All Music Guide, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/poco-mn0000297894/awards>.

⁴⁰ Motti Regev, "The 'pop-rockization' of popular music," in *Popular Music Studies*, eds. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 261.

arguably captured her decade's zeitgeist should, I hope, complicate in productive ways alt.country's genre logic of anti-commercialism and antimodernism.

A framework for "pop modernity"

Though in a moment I will sketch the nature of both the rock and country industries' respective statuses circa the mid-1970s, when contextualizing Ronstadt's crossover success it is appropriate to begin by noting that the 1970s was an era of exponential growth in the record industry as a whole. As Paul Friedlander notes, "Record sales, which had topped \$1 billion for the first time in 1967, reached \$2 billion in 1973 and \$4 billion in 1978. Record and tape sales revenues also surpassed other types of entertainment earnings, including sports and movies."⁴¹ Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman attribute this growth to factors including the rise in 8-track and cassette tapes (accounting for almost a third of U.S. music sales by 1975), the explosion in FM radio stations, and an AM/FM radio industry increasingly skilled at reaching distinct demographics via new or retooled formats such as Adult Contemporary.⁴² To this we can certainly add the continued emphasis in sales of LPs over 45 RPM singles; Reebee Garofalo notes that "by the early 1970s, about 80 percent of the sales dollars... [were] in albums."⁴³ In 1976, the Recording Industry Association of America acknowledged the industry's immense growth with the creation of a new sales award: Platinum, for sales of one million units. Ronstadt's LA contemporaries the Eagles were the first artists to earn this award, scoring Platinum with an early greatest hits compilation.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll: A Social History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2006), 233. 2nd edition.

⁴² Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to Mp3* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 317-9. 3rd edition.

⁴³ Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the U.S.A.* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2011), 215. 5th edition.

⁴⁴ "History of the Awards," Recording Industry Association of America, accessed October 30, 2015, https://riaa.com/goldandplatinum.php?content_selector=historyx.

Many commentators on the 1970s music industry note the large number of mergers and acquisitions that took place; as Friedlander notes, “by 1973 the top six record corporations were selling approximately 66 percent of all Hot 100 singles and albums;” by 1980 this had increased to 82 percent. Friedlander attributes what he calls the dissipation of the “melodious creativity” characterizing the late-‘60s “golden era of rock/pop” to these mergers.⁴⁵ Two caveats are important when considering such statements of cause and effect. Although Garofalo and Steve Chapple’s 1977 music business survey *Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Pay* is on the whole rather pessimistic about the industry, the authors make the point that even in the initial “golden era” of 1947-57, with an explosion of independent labels releasing early rock ‘n’ roll, a handful of the biggest labels still controlled over half the music industry; the industry has been highly concentrated since its beginnings.⁴⁶

Part of industry concentration is about mitigating risk; Starr/Waterman point out that the 1970s was the decade wherein the music industry began to rely on a small number of platinum-selling “superstars” (including Ronstadt) to ensure profits in the face of uncertainty.⁴⁷ However, as Will Straw notes in his article “Characterizing Rock Music Culture” about the ‘70s industry, to assume that corporate centralization automatically resulted in a tightening of divisions of creative labor is to ignore the strong role of long-time industry insiders, whether Carole King or David Geffen, in securing an autonomous space for select fortunate, talented artists within that corporate structure.⁴⁸ Indeed, Ronstadt has stated on numerous occasions that the moment in her

⁴⁵ Friedlander, *Rock and Roll*, 232, 233.

⁴⁶ Reebee Garofalo and Steve Chapple, *Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here to Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry* (Chicago: Burnham, 1977), 92-3.

⁴⁷ Starr and Waterman, *American Popular Music*, 317.

⁴⁸ Will Straw, “Characterizing Rock Music Culture: The Case of Heavy Metal,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 99.

career where she took creative control and began realizing her best work was her pairing in 1974 with producer Peter Asher on her commercial breakthrough LP *Heart Like a Wheel*; Asher was a consummate industry insider, first as a 1960s U.K. teen pop star as half of duo Peter & Gordon, and then as an A & R executive and artist manager. It was the beginning of a co-producing partnership lasting fourteen albums, as Ronstadt repeatedly noted that Asher was the first and only of her producers to treat her as an artistic equal.⁴⁹ And it was a partnership begun around the same time that David Geffen sold his famously artist-friendly boutique label Asylum, having recently signed Ronstadt, to the much larger Warner/Elektra.⁵⁰

True, Will Straw concedes, the label mergers and focus on superstar earners contributed to “standardization on FM radio and in the rock press”—a process many rock partisans would call blanden-ing. But it was, arguably, also “a triumph of craft-production.”⁵¹ This is how Mitchell Morris and other recent “poptimist” re-interpreters of 1970s popular music tend to see the stylistic evolution. In his 2013 work *The Persistence of Sentiment*, Morris analyzes hits by vocalists such as Diana Ross, Barry Manilow and Cher to build an argument that 1970s popular music featured a burgeoning of artists and audiences who “began to think of themselves as able

⁴⁹ Regarding Asher’s background as musician, executive, and producer, see Ben Fong-Torres, “Peter Asher Presents Platinum Diggers of ’77, Staring James Taylor and Linda Ronstadt,” *Rolling Stone*, December 29, 1977, 42. For Ronstadt’s comments on her relationship of trust with Asher, see *ibid*, 42-45. See also Ben Fong-Torres, “Linda Ronstadt: Heartbreak on Wheels,” *Rolling Stone*, March 27, 1975, 63-64, and Barney Hoskyns, *Waiting for the Sun*, 237.

⁵⁰ In her autobiography, Ronstadt describes beginning the process of signing with Asylum in late 1972, drawn to their reputation for paying personal attention to their artists, and to the fact that many of her LA country-rock peers were on the label. She describes a meeting wherein Bhaskar Menon, president of her then-label Capitol Records tried to convince her to stay; however, Menon’s insistence in the meeting that she pick between being presented as a country or rock artist drove her decisively to Asylum, as “I didn’t want to choose” a genre. She also explains that in order to join Asylum she still owed Capitol a final album, which turned out to be *Heart Like a Wheel*; she suggests that both Capitol and Asylum competing with one another over promotional dollars spent on the album was big part of her breakthrough success in 1974. See Ronstadt, *Simple Dreams: A Musical Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 75-6, 95. Barney Hoskyns describes how David Geffen sold Asylum to Warner/Elektra in 1973 and, proceeding to cut Elektra’s roster to just thirteen artists, arguably made the new merged label the world’s most profitable by 1975. Hoskyns, *Waiting for the Sun*, 249.

⁵¹ Will Straw, “Characterizing Rock Music Culture,” 100.

to insist that their social positions be renegotiated;" these included women, people of color, gay and gender-fluid people, all of whom had been marginalized to varying degrees within the late-'60s rock scene.⁵² That these former margin-dwellers brought new subjectivities to mass '70s audiences, often in the form of highly-studio-produced, "inauthentic" sounds, is part of why rock historians have had a tendency to view the period as a "sell-out." But by "refusing to restrict our sense of canon," scholars gain a clearer sense of the proliferation of meaning (to echo my prior usage) which blossomed once the myth of a "unified generational [rock] audience...speaking truth to power" had crumbled.⁵³

Eric Weisbard's recent *Top 40 Democracy* consciously builds on the work of scholars such as Morris and Keir Keightley who have questioned the narrative of a tragic 1970s commercialization and/or "death" of rock; in his articulation of a "multiple mainstreams" concept, he has written the best and most comprehensive work yet on the intersecting trajectories of seventies popular music.⁵⁴ Weisbard argues that while genre as organizing structure is perhaps over-theorized, formats are under-theorized; "formats" here refers to radio formats such as album-oriented rock (AOR), country, R & B, and adult contemporary which flourished in the 1970s, utilizing the successful methods of playlist standardization innovated by Top 40 in the 1950s and '60s.⁵⁵ In the case of rock, for instance, he tracks the development of AOR as a format targeted broadly at working-class white males, challenging '70s rock genre histories which typically focus more on the innovations of punk. Genres, Weisbard argues, match songs

⁵² Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 25.

⁵³ *ibid*, 15, 18.

⁵⁴ See Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, 7-8 on his concept of "multiple mainstreams." See also Keir Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rock and Pop*, eds. Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 125-6.

⁵⁵ Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, 17.

with ideologies, whereas radio formats match songs with emerging audiences.⁵⁶ In his book's best chapter, he demonstrates how Dolly Parton—one of Ronstadt's musical inspirations and, later, collaborators—was able to “take country music with her” in helping the genre cross over to the Top 40 and adult contemporary radio formats in the 1970s. He argues she did this through a complex performance of feminine pop modernity, while still continuing to talk publicly about her Appalachian origins that made her distinctly “country.” She recognized inherent pop qualities in country music and brought that to pop radio.⁵⁷

As I will illustrate shortly, though their crossover trajectories differed, Parton provided an important model to Ronstadt vis-à-vis performance of celebrity and sexuality. Both Weisbard and Kim Simpson have pointed out that female performers such as Parton led the growth of formats including country and adult contemporary, and Ronstadt's hits were a notable contribution to this “feminization” of ‘70s pop radio.⁵⁸ Weisbard's application of Lauren Berlant's “juxtapolitical” affect concept helps us better understand how soft ballads such as Ronstadt's, derided by some rock critics for being message-free, could and did resonate with middle-class women in particular, fostering a shared aesthetic approaching community while not conforming to strict homological understandings of a “public;” in fact, he calls these oft-underestimated pink-collar office listeners and transistor-radio-toting teens “counterpublics.”⁵⁹

In Weisbard's formulation, counterpublics of the 1970s felt acknowledged by the “structured eclecticism” central to commercial radio formats like Adult Contemporary and Top 40, which in their openness to new sounds and lovestruck lyrics resisted the “folkloric

⁵⁶ See *ibid*, *Top 40 Democracy*, 21-22, for discussion of the match between audiences, songs, and ideologies. See *ibid*, 17-18, for Weisbard's assertion that radio formats are under-theorized.

⁵⁷ See *ibid*, 84-5.

⁵⁸ See Simpson, *Early '70s Radio*, 55-89.

⁵⁹ Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, 27-9.

authenticity” (here he borrows from Karl Hagstrom Miller) of genre-based communities.⁶⁰ At times, Weisbard’s distinction between genre and format for sake of argument seems to skirt the point that, as demonstrated in the work of Simon Frith, Keith Negus, and Jason Toynbee, genres themselves are often highly contested categories, historically contingent, and—depending on the type of music—in many cases just as much crafted by record label executives as by fans and musicians.⁶¹ And while he repeatedly acknowledges that his “multiple mainstreams” do (did) overlap, the distinctly mid-‘70s blurring of clear lines between soft rock (Adult Contemporary), Top 40, and country formats—and the role this blurring played in Ronstadt’s success—perhaps cannot be fully explained using this framework. Consider, for instance, a December 26, 1974 *Billboard* think-piece by Bill Williams entitled, “Country Cross-Over to Pop Grows,” which notes the development of the title, but also the concurrent development of pop-rockers like Olivia Newton-John crossing over to the country charts. After noting the additional mid-‘70s trend wherein more country artists are recording “oldies,” similar to what “other fields” had already recently done, Williams writes, “A cursory study of jukeboxes also will verify the homogenization going on. Boxes which once were exclusively a single type of music today

⁶⁰ Ibid, 16. See Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Duke University Press, 2010), 5-11, for Miller’s discussion of folkloric authenticity, one of the central concepts explored in his book.

⁶¹ To be fair, in Weisbard’s 2013 *Journal of Popular Music Studies* review of Jennifer Lena’s *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genre in Popular Music* and John Shepherd and David Horn’s *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World Volume VIII: Genres: North America*, he acknowledges “Genres can never be fully defined in popular music because different eras use them for different purposes. The tensions lurking within that epistemology give us some of our best clues about the contradictions that propel popular music: between songwriting pop pragmatism and a notion that, as Lena’s subtitle wants to have it, genres are communal creations; between localized and bigger music publics; between categories developed by musicians and categories imposed by marketing (and/or needed by listeners).” Eric Weisbard, “Beyond Category? Never! The Game of Genres in Popular Music,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25: 3 (September 2013), 401-405. Regarding the contested nature of genre labels and corporations’ role in their creation, see Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1999), Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 76-86, and Jason Toynbee, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity, and Institutions* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 103-4.

contain a strange mixture of rock, MOR and country.”⁶² Here, though three formats side-by-side on a jukebox chimes with Weisbard’s “multiple mainstreams,” that Williams would use the word “homogenization” to describe the formats together indicates the degree to which acoustic guitars, polished arrangements and vocals, and perhaps even a touch of pedal steel in many ways defined the sound of commercially-successful mid-’70s popular music, at least across three formats.

Olivia Carter Mather ends her analysis of the Eagles’ broad success by suggesting that, “in the seventies, country music, in multiple forms and in multiple combinations with other styles, saturated the pop market, making it difficult to distinguish between country and non-country in many instances.”⁶³ And in what I consider an inter-related development, Kim Simpson argues in his study of format radio, “Soft rock ruled the early 1970s,” noting that “Out of the 122 #1 hits listed in *Billboard* between 1970 and 1974, 75 of those also appeared on *Billboard*’s easy listening charts and at least that many could safely be categorized as ‘soft rock.’”⁶⁴ Although in his book Weisbard draws subtle but important distinctions between Adult Contemporary and Top 40 in order to highlight Top 40 as a showcase for social mobility and under-represented voices (women, people of color, sexual minorities), it’s worth noting that our perception of easy listening and soft rock continues to evolve with historical perspective. In a 2011 *Billboard* retrospective of fifty years of the format, Gary Trust notes that although we sometimes think of AC as a graveyard for passé older artists, the ‘70s brought innovation to the

⁶² Bill Williams, “Country Cross-Over to Pop Grows,” *Billboard*, December 26, 1974, “Talent in Action” pullout page 4.

⁶³ Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 257. I agree with Mather’s point, but to it I would add that actual crossover by pop-rock stars *into* the country charts—to be fair, not the focus of Mather’s study—was rare enough that it merits an attempt to better understand how this country-pop-rock hybrid sound manifested on ‘70s charts.

⁶⁴ Simpson, *Early ‘70s Radio*, 56.

format, “welcome[ing] uptempo hits more regularly,” and playing rock-associated acts like the Eagles, Elton John, and Chicago, relatively early in their careers.⁶⁵

I cite Mather, Simpson, and Trust here to argue that though Weisbard’s concept of multiple mainstream formats is crucial to understanding Ronstadt’s success, and I continue to draw on it in the remainder of this chapter, there was enough formal haziness in “the soft center of American music” (as Weisbard calls AC) where she flourished to warrant my inclusion of additional perspectives on 1970s genre, formats, and industry. This is where sociologist Motti Regev’s notion of what he calls “the pop-rock-ization of popular music” can be put in productive dialogue with Weisbard’s study.⁶⁶ Like Weisbard, Regev urges moving beyond a “rock versus pop” binary; however, in a slight distinction, in his 2013 book *Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity*, he encourages the reader to think globally, considering what he calls pop-rock as a worldwide field of aesthetic production, and also a business. He broadly defines pop-rock as almost any music created with electrified instruments, recorded in a studio with up-to-date production technologies.⁶⁷ Furthermore, he contrasts pop-rock with indigenous styles of music such as Spanish *flamenco* or French *chanson*, thus arguing that pop-rock does not, in fact, constitute all of popular music.⁶⁸ Pop-rock’s defining characteristic is that its musicians and fans conceive of its music as embodying *the new*, “a constant incentive towards stylistic innovation, driven either by artistic exploration or commercial interests.” In pop-rock, aspects of regional specificity and “traditional” culture remain, blending productively with pop-rock idioms, but Regev suggests that pop-rock has a kind of *au courant* global intelligibility.

⁶⁵ Gary Trust, “Vanilla is Licking the Competition: 50 Years of the Adult Contemporary Chart,” *Billboard*, July 23, 2011, 14. See also Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, 170.

⁶⁶ Regev, *Pop-Rock Music*, 22.

⁶⁷ Regev, *Pop-Rock Music*, 18.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 20-1.

I find Regev's discussion of what he calls "the central sub-field" of pop-rock, a field he says "parallels the sphere of music production and consumption often referred to as *mainstream*," similar to Weisbard's discussion of Top 40: youth-oriented, often glamorous, and embodying what Weisbard calls "aspirational modernity."⁶⁹ At the same time, though, I'm also struck by how Regev's discussion of an artistic hierarchy in the central sub-field, "topped by those consecrated as the great artists of pop-rock, and bottomed by phenomenal market successes deemed artistically worthless by critical discourse," is reminiscent of the canonization seen, for instance, in the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Regev's discussion elsewhere in the book of the "pop-rock auteur" seems to me largely taken from rock critical discourse.⁷¹ This indicates that even in an artistic and business meta-field such as pop-rock, standards of aesthetic judgment borrowed from genres, particularly genres associated with upper-middle-class white males and much critical attention such as rock, can be difficult to leave behind. Put more colloquially, as Don Henley once said, "We were judged by our early work...Our early stuff was country rock, so we were immediately labeled a country-rock band. I knew we would never escape that category." In other words, critical discourse matters in the rise and fall of recording artists' fortunes, even in the "Top 40 democracy" of a macro-category like Regev's pop-rock. For this reason it's important that I now briefly sketch Ronstadt's critical standing among both the rock and country establishments at the point of her mid-1970s commercial breakthrough.

Formatting, Formula, and Ronstadt in '70s (Pop-) Rock

⁶⁹ Ibid, 86. See also Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, 171.

⁷⁰ Regev, *Pop-Rock Music*, 86.

⁷¹ *ibid*, 35-7.

Though Eric Weisbard and Motti Regev appear to disagree slightly whether there exists multiple mainstreams or just one central sub-field, the point of their strongest agreement is also the point most useful to my discussion of Ronstadt's success: 1970s powerhouse formats like Top 40, MOR/AC, and (I would argue) country embraced *modernity*, leaving behind Sixties back-to-the-land sentiments and embracing the full technological potential of the recording studio. As previously noted, Weisbard and Regev also agree that artistic fields like "pop-rock" and the "multiple mainstreams" of Top 40, Adult Contemporary, and so on structured musical eclecticism in ways that were satisfying to large audiences, and therefore profitable. In the case of 1970s rock, the question for tastemakers like the editors and writers of *Rolling Stone* magazine was just how eclectic and commercially successful rock could become while still addressing near-mythic genre ideals of community and political protest established just a few years prior.

While Ronstadt's aforementioned 16 U.S. country chart hits of the 1970s unambiguously position her as a country star—albeit a crossover one—it is important to note her rock beginnings to understand the nature and scope of her crossover. This is true first of all in regard to her upbringing—in many ways the archetypal upbringing of a musician entering the 1960s Los Angeles folk-rock scene. While Ronstadt grew up in Tucson Arizona listening to some performers like Hank Williams shared between country and early rock 'n' roll fans, due to her 1946 birth she arrived late enough in the development of rock that she recalls listening to groups like the Beach Boys as an adolescent.⁷² Furthermore, like many musicians whose work constituted the shift from rock 'n' roll to rock, Ronstadt came from relative privilege.⁷³ Her father Gilbert Ronstadt was the son of a cattle rancher-turned hardware store owner, with Gilbert

⁷² Ben Fong-Torres, "Linda Ronstadt: Heartbreak on Wheels," 38.

⁷³ On the working-class/middle-class dynamics in the shift from rock 'n' roll to rock, see for instance Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 61-88, 249-272.

eventually assuming the business; her mother Ruth was the daughter of Lloyd Copeman, the inventor of the electric stove; both Gilbert and Ruth attended the University of Arizona, as did Ronstadt herself for one semester. Though Ronstadt downplayed her family's means in her 2013 memoir ("There was never any extra cash, but we had what we needed"), some profiles by '70s rock journalists discussed her participation in debutante balls as a young woman, and her mother's membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution.⁷⁴

Upon leaving university and moving to Los Angeles, Ronstadt followed the career trajectory shared by so many '60s rock musicians raised on the urban folk revival, making her professional debut performing in a folk trio who eventually added folk-rock accents, the Stone Poneys. The group's preferred venue was LA's The Troubadour, by many accounts the center of Southern California's folk-rock scene, and soon after its country-rock scene. Though booking many full-on rock acts, the club was known for its acoustic "Hoot Night" open mic Mondays, which featured a singer-songwriter aesthetic in Ronstadt's wheelhouse, though she herself was not a songwriter.⁷⁵ Barney Hoskyns and Michael Walker place Ronstadt squarely at the center of this scene in their accounts of the Troubadour; Walker cites an anecdote wherein Don Henley spotted Ronstadt (then a stranger to him) in the crowd at the club his first night in LA, and took this as a sign he had "arrived" in the country-rock scene.⁷⁶ Hoskyns, calling Ronstadt the "sweetheart queen of the scene" in spite of her generally shy, self-effacing nature, quotes LA music historian Domenic Priore citing sets by Ronstadt, Poco, and Dillard & Clark as *the*

⁷⁴ Ronstadt, *Simple Dreams*, 6. John Rockwell, "Linda Ronstadt: Her Soft-Core Charms," *New Times*, October 14, 1977. Accessed November 10, 2015, <http://ronstadt-linda.com/artnt77.htm>.

⁷⁵ Though Ronstadt would later co-write a handful of the songs she recorded, she was clear throughout her career that she considered herself primarily an interpreter, not a songwriter.

⁷⁶ Walker, *Laurel Canyon*, 4-5, 142.

“seminal events” of the Troubadour’s maturation.⁷⁷ The club, particularly on its Hoot Nights, became renowned as an industry showcase for artists hoping to be signed, and Ronstadt, acting as her own talent scout, hired as her band the then-unknown musicians of the future Eagles when impressed by their ability to re-create her own well-known arrangement of the song “Silver Threads and Golden Needles” during the Troubadour’s open mic.⁷⁸

In her memoir, Ronstadt recalls fondly that the club’s limited backstage space, multiple-night artist residencies, and bar setting meant that LA country-rock musicians spent a lot of time socializing together, listening to one another’s sets, and soaking up a “vigorous cross-pollination of musical styles.”⁷⁹ This description of a social in-group with its own rules, centered largely around a single venue, with relatively limited resources at hand, reads like sociologist Jennifer Lena’s description of what she calls a “scene-based” genre in her 2012 book on genre trajectories, *Banding Together*.⁸⁰ However, at the same time, as Will Straw notes, many musicians and businesspeople involved in the country-rock scene of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s had been industry insiders and employees of record labels for several years.⁸¹ Ronstadt herself was a part of this; having been signed to Capitol Records since the mid-‘60s with the Stone Poneys as a folk trio, she experienced consistent label pressure to jettison her bandmates and record as a more squarely pop-rock solo act, pressure to which she eventually acquiesced.⁸² This music business dimension reads more like a description of Lena’s “industry-based” genres,

⁷⁷ Hoskyns, *Hotel California*, 66, 70

⁷⁸ Ronstadt, *Simple Dreams*, 69-70.

⁷⁹ Ronstadt, *Simple Dreams*, 117.

⁸⁰ Jennifer Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 35-36, 63.

⁸¹ Straw, “Characterizing Rock Music Culture,” 99.

⁸² Ronstadt, *Simple Dreams*, 37-8, 43.

wherein new musical forms can come from experienced musicians operating within pre-existing larger corporate structures.⁸³

Although admittedly Lena notes that genres can sometimes exist in multiple forms at once, in the particular case of LA country-rock, I see a degree of schizophrenia in terms of generic identity in the early-to-mid-1970s. On one hand, there were artier Ronstadt contemporaries like Neil Young and Joni Mitchell whose work Lena labels an “avant-garde” genre, which she argues was soon absorbed into the rock mainstream; on the other hand, there were young country-rock bands performing every Monday at the Troubadour, willing to do almost anything to be signed by Capitol or Warner/Elektra Records post-haste.⁸⁴ Due to these disjunctures (aspects of avant-garde, scene, and industry all in one), I agree with Olivia Carter Mather’s assertion that LA country-rock was a movement, not a genre unto itself; perhaps we could call it a “stream” (to use Jennifer Lena’s terminology) within the larger genre world of ‘70s rock.⁸⁵ And since country-rock was not a fully-fledged genre, it cannot be said to have developed a clear genre ideology—at least in the years following the “back to the land” tenor of late-‘60s countercultural rock. Instead, country-rock performers like Ronstadt moved within a broader rock world whose genre ideals and format audiences were rapidly expanding.

As Kim Simpson and Eric Weisbard document, by the mid-1970s, Album Oriented Rock (AOR) had become one of the “next big things” in the music business, applying Top 40 practices of tightened playlists and DJ personalities to what had been known as “freeform” (i.e. hippie) FM radio at the turn of the decade. Simpson argues that the “progressive” and, then, AOR

⁸³ Lena, *Banding Together*, 76-84. Lena cites the career trajectories of James Brown and Sly Stone as creators of the funk genre, having begun as soul musicians and signed to major labels, (initially) recording in that style.

⁸⁴ Lena, *Banding Together*, 86-9.

⁸⁵ Mather, “Cosmic American Music,” 13. Lena, *Banding Together*, 55.

format were a smart business move on the part of programmers, keeping hard rock and its sometimes raunchy lyrics away from MOR listeners while increasingly capturing the lucrative white male teenage audience.⁸⁶ Weisbard argues that this new business model made ‘70s rock “the Uncola of formats: a lucrative format posing as a rebel genre.”⁸⁷ Weisbard sees in the AOR success of a mid-decade breakthrough superstar like Bruce Springsteen the kind of story the format was trying to sell its listeners: “a realm of cross-class freedom rooted in temporal abundance and a sonic multiplicity always harkening back to the dominant texture of full-on rock,” a rebellious heavy music both “progressive” and “populist,” and—it should be added, often white, male, and heterosexual in the time of the rise of disco.⁸⁸

In this macho format, besides the group Heart, Ronstadt was one of the few women to occasionally chart in AOR, demonstrating her massive reach; *Radio & Records* listed her album *Prisoner in Disguise* as the 18th most programmed LP on AOR in 1975.⁸⁹ Robert Christgau, a fan of Springsteen but not so much Ronstadt, saw in the increased industry focus on superstar earners and what he called “rationalization” (i.e. business practices like AOR) a case of an “audience too big for the genre.” In his survey of ‘70s rock for the *Village Voice*, he noted an end to the aforementioned mythology of generational unity, as pop-rock audiences skewed younger, but nonetheless had faith in the ability of an occasional smart rock star to make the system work for them. Ending his 1977 piece by searching for the next rock “vanguard,” Christgau calls “Lou’s children” (punk followers of the Velvet Underground) “elitists” with a

⁸⁶ Simpson, *Early ‘70s Radio*, 92.

⁸⁷ Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, 9.

⁸⁸ Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, 229.

⁸⁹ “Radio and Records Magazine’s Top Rock (AOR) Albums of 1975,” *Radio & Records*, December 27, 1975. Accessed November 11, 2015, http://hitsofalldecades.com/chart_hits/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2246&Itemid=54

nostalgic streak, but nonetheless praises their manic new bands as a necessary reaction to corporate rock.⁹⁰ This chimes quite neatly with Steve Waksman's argument in *This Ain't the Summer of Love*, that the development of both punk and heavy metal in the 1970s was in many ways, counterintuitively, an effort "to reinvest rock with meaning after the perceived demise of the 1960s counterculture."⁹¹

Waksman notes that proto-punk musicians who were also members of the rock critical establishment, such as Lenny Kaye and Lester Bangs, were directly inspired in the creation of their own music by the short, sharp, stripped-down garage band sounds of the Sixties obscurities in Kaye's *Nuggets* box set—songs with a rawness young punk rockers gleefully found opposite the long Yes and Led Zeppelin jams increasingly heard on progressive/AOR radio.⁹² In 1971 Bangs wrote a famously "gonzo" piece for *Bomp!* rock fanzine extolling his love for '60s Troggs' garage chestnut "Wild Thing," tracking its influence on heavy new bands like the MC5. The piece is titled "James Taylor Marked for Death," giving the reader a crystal-clear idea of Bangs' feelings on sensitive California folk-rockers (while never mentioning Taylor or his LA contemporaries directly within the piece).

And yet, in one of the many paradoxes of Seventies pop-rock music, despite his focus on the underground, Bangs also wrote for *Rolling Stone*, already by the early '70s the voice of the rock mainstream. He even wrote on Ronstadt's work and had some positive things to say about it.⁹³ As Kim Simpson notes, as the decade progressed *Rolling Stone* opened up its definition of

⁹⁰ Robert Christgau, "How the Rock Audience Got Too Big for Its Own Good," *Village Voice*, May 2, 1977. Accessed November 11, 2015, <http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/audience-77.php>.

⁹¹ Steve Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Crossover and Conflict in Heavy Metal and Punk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 18.

⁹² Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love*, 22.

⁹³ Lester Bangs, "Advice to the Linda Column," *Creem*, November 1976.

what a rock magazine could cover, eventually putting Adult Contemporary (soft rock) stars John Denver and the Carpenters on its cover.⁹⁴ They also took the soft sounds of a pop-rock artist like Ronstadt relatively seriously in their reviews, even when they disapproved of her aesthetic. This breadth indicates to me that while Weisbard's focus on the "uncola" format of AOR in his book is useful most of all for understanding the class tensions in '70s rock, this focus by default excludes the fuller picture, which included loads of soft rock. For this reason, when considering '70s rock I find most relevant Regev's discussion of what he calls "autonomy" and "commercialism...two sides on an axis of creativity that infuse each other in a dynamic of expansion which is typical of almost any art form in modernity."⁹⁵ Regev argues that these forces are not in opposition to one another, and I find his formulation apt to describe the expanding pop-rock universe of the '70s I have sketched thus far. One notes this aesthetic push and pull in the evolution of the rock press coverage of Ronstadt's work.

From early in the 1970s, many of Ronstadt's positive pop-rock reviews focused on the perceived emotional authenticity of her interpretive powers. For instance, Stephen Holden's 1973 *Rolling Stone* review of *Don't Cry Now* heard a "throb that hurts and soothes at the same time" in her recorded vocals, "enhanc[ing] the musical-emotional authenticity of the material...this is the most we can demand of any interpretive artist."⁹⁶ Peter Reilly's 1974 rave review of *Heart Like a Wheel* took a similar tack, adding that Ronstadt's emotional enhancements elevated what he perceived as otherwise maudlin country material; of her take on Hank Williams' "I Can't Help It If I'm Still in Love With You," he writes, "it's done with all the standard c-&-w trimmings, but Ronstadt's performance is so unaffected, so artfully artless, so

⁹⁴ Simpson, *Early '70s Radio*, 71.

⁹⁵ Regev, *Pop-Rock Music*, 58.

⁹⁶ Stephen Holden, "Don't Cry Now: Linda Ronstadt," *Rolling Stone*, November 8, 1973, 70.

sure and so true that it is immediately lifted above the level of whiny jukebox lament to that of a folk song about a woman's human dignity."⁹⁷ Stephen Holden went further in his praise of *Heart Like a Wheel*, arguing that "its expansion of repertoire beyond country and folk-rock," into what he labels "pop," "blues," and "folk," demonstrated Ronstadt's imagination, via musical versatility; in his view, the parts are unified into a whole by the "throbbing edge" of her voice, an edge "between vulnerability and willfulness that I find totally, irresistibly sexy," perfectly embodying "the Western mythical girl/woman, heartbroken yet resilient and entirely feminine in the traditional sense."⁹⁸ Here Holden's characterization of her voice places her in a kind of "virgin whore" archetype familiar within hippie counterculture, attributing her skill at bridging genres to her embodied, sensual femininity. It is one of many Seventies rock press depictions linking Ronstadt's appearance and body to her interpretive powers.

However, at the same mid-'70s moment Ronstadt's stock in the country world was noticeably rising, rock critics who had praised her earlier work began to take a second, harsher, look. *Rolling Stone*, which had in the past spoken warmly of Ronstadt's ability to imbue a lyric with emotion, suggested in late 1975 that in concert "While Ronstadt executed every song perfectly, it was impossible to determine her degree of personal involvement."⁹⁹ Dave Marsh's *Rolling Stone* review of 1975's *Prisoner in Disguise* criticized what he perceived as a mismatch between her voice and the chosen material, in particular her attempt at reggae material, raising

⁹⁷ Peter Reilly, "The Return of Linda Ronstadt, Honeyed to a Womanly Richness," *Stereo Review*, April 1975. It should be noted that this type of rhetoric is consistent with the "seriousness" of (at least the prescriptivist side of) the "rock" aesthetic described in Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," 129.

⁹⁸ Stephen Holden, "Heart Like a Wheel," *Rolling Stone*, January 16, 1975, 52-3.

⁹⁹ Stephen Holden, "Linda Ronstadt: Perfection Just This Side of Magic," *Rolling Stone*, January 29, 1976, 62. Despite the review's title reading as rather positive, Holden's assessment overall is mostly negative, returning a third time to the "throb" of her voice while paradoxically also arguing that her vocals are too polished, her live arrangements too much like the record, and that she takes too few chances on stage.

authenticity concerns common to rock rhetoric.¹⁰⁰ Mitchell Glazer in *Crawdaddy* went further, arguing that 1974's *Heart like a Wheel*, her sales breakthrough, "was an event. The ideal synthesis of R & B classics, Little Feat funk and weepy country ballads. And Linda really sang, flashing unseen corners of her voice...The next album, *Prisoner in Disguise*, carefully followed the same recipe but the flavor was beginning to dull. It was too familiar; the R & B covers done better the first time."¹⁰¹ While Glazer does articulate a common criticism of Ronstadt's seventies albums post-*Heart Like a Wheel*, it is interesting that the charge is formula.

Weisbard in *Top 40 Democracy* makes the key point that intensely calculated formatting in even ostensibly "free" music such as early '70s "progressive" radio rock was central to format success. It is clear to me that Ronstadt and her producer Peter Asher applied this same logic to the song choices and sequencing of her hit mid-'70s records, to spectacular *Billboard* album chart and country music chart sales success. Rock journalists were correct in noticing the change which commenced upon her collaboration with Asher; from 1974 forward, an unbroken procession of five albums reduced her typical use of compositions by LA singer-songwriter contemporaries like J.D. Souther, leaning instead toward a consistent mix of "classic" country standards, rock 'n' roll "oldies" from the '50s and early '60s, and the occasional soul and reggae tune. Ronstadt appeared at the time quite self-aware how a certain mannered, formatted eclecticism made sense for her artistic and commercial trajectory; in 1974, her comments to a *Melody Maker* journalist suggested that she understood her purposeful career movement toward what Regev calls the central sub-field: "In the past I've always had albums with country songs

¹⁰⁰ Dave Marsh, "Prisoner in Disguise," *Rolling Stone*, November 20, 1975, 71.

¹⁰¹ Mitchell Glazer, "Lovely Linda: Once More with Feeling," *Crawdaddy*, October 1976, 67. See also Ben Edmonds' review of *Prisoner in Disguise* for very specific criticisms of formula in Ronstadt's work. Ben Edmonds, "Linda Ronstadt: Prisoner in Disguise," *Phonograph Record*, October 1975, accessed November 17, 2015, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com.proxy.its.virginia.edu/Library/Article/linda-ronstadt-iprisoner-in-disguisei-2>.

and rock songs sitting next to each other.’ From the two tracks heard at Trident, the new album is an attempt to synthesize both styles into one and give the album a “complete” mood. ‘Also I think the album is a lot more “poppy,”’ adds Linda.”¹⁰²

A Country Landscape More Open to Pop (with Reservations)

Ronstadt’s lack of fear or shame in taking her recorded work in an unabashedly more “pop” direction, while maintaining audible links to country and (soft) rock music, happened to fit much more comfortably within the mainstream U.S. country music world of the mid-‘70s, than it did in rock. A key aspect in understanding how Ronstadt “crossed over” is realizing that 1970s country music met her more than half way in the journey. In many ways, this was a continuation and consolidation of country music trends originating during the heyday of the 1950-60s Nashville Sound and, looking further back and broadening the picture, the interplay between “hard core” and “soft shell” dynamics which Richard Peterson argues has been a cyclical generating force within mainstream country music since its recorded beginnings.¹⁰³

Joli Jensen’s seminal *The Nashville Sound* builds on the work of Peterson’s arguments about the social construction of country authenticity, analyzing recorded sound, visual image and industry rhetoric to argue that while the industry was and is commercial from its beginning (and thus cannot be “sold out”), boosters of the Nashville Sound in the 1950s and early ‘60s sought to justify a more “pop” turn to the music by naturalizing change in their appeals to fans who preferred honky-tonk. Jensen argues that Nashville Sound boosters cleverly authenticated the highly routinized Nashville recording studio as a site of “home” for musical performance, akin to

¹⁰² Geoff Brown, “Heart Like a Wheel: Linda Ronstadt Talks to Geoff Brown,” *Melody Maker*, July 24, 1974, 25.

¹⁰³ Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 137-8, 150-55.

the Grand Ole Opry; furthermore, she argues that boosters of the Sound repeatedly made their case to fans that upon the mid-‘50s rise of rock ‘n’ roll, the country music industry was forced to adapt country’s sound somewhat, in order to “save” country when the young buying public’s attention turned to Elvis Presley et al. Though industry leaders like Chet Atkins portrayed a threat to the genre from outside in the form of rock ‘n’ roll, Jensen works to counter narratives which anthropomorphize genres and place them in peril, instead portraying the drama of the rise of the Nashville Sound as largely a battle from within, a struggle (gradually won) for country to come to terms with the “soft shell” elements baked into the genre from its beginnings.¹⁰⁴

At the same time, Jensen notes that “the rise of format radio (in response to the rise of television) changed conditions for *all* genres of music—the music industry as a whole was in flux, and rock ‘n’ roll was one outcome of that flux.”¹⁰⁵ Here, Kim Simpson and Eric Weisbard agree with Jensen that Top 40-inspired radio industry standardization was helping drive growth and blur boundaries across all genres of American popular music—even somewhat already by the Sixties. And it can be easily argued that the drive toward standardization did not only flow in a “pop-rock to country” direction; indeed, as Jocelyn Neal has noted, part of the Nashville Sound’s success was a highly regimented studio recording system which began to draw major recording artists from across the pop spectrum solely by dint of its renown professionalism.¹⁰⁶

The Nashville Sound and its success, particularly when seen in retrospect, demonstrated that country music was very much a part of the broader world of modern popular music. As the 1970s rolled in, at times this manifested in features in national publications on country music as

¹⁰⁴ Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialism, and Country Music* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 1998), 1-17, 54-64.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, 65.

¹⁰⁶ Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 197.

a kind of “lifestyle” trend; for instance, in 1973 the *Wall Street Journal* featured a Manhattan steakhouse where Porsche-driving lawyers in suede jackets “complaining about the complexity of life” sat quietly and appreciated live country music in the mode of jazz.¹⁰⁷ The piece prompted an angry rebuke in industry newsletter *CMA Closeup*, which in an unsigned editorial countered that a loyal country music audience was not a passing trend but rather a substantial, ongoing social fact.¹⁰⁸ In her analysis of CMA promotional materials as country music matured in the 1960s and ‘70s, Diane Pecknold notes that although many long-time country fans feared that Nashville was abandoning them to court wealthy white-collar new fans, in fact “the country industry worked to revise understandings of its traditional audience: the rural-to-urban white migrants from the South and Midwest who made up a significant portion of the newly affluent blue-collar middle class.”¹⁰⁹ Jocelyn Neal concurs: due to post-World War II socioeconomic changes, many country music fans were lifted into the middle class, and arguably the increasing alignment of country music with the pop mainstream “was a result of a shared audience between country and pop; many country listeners identified with the mainstream middle class.”¹¹⁰

One strong piece of evidence that the country market was expanding as the Seventies progressed was the explosive growth in country-formatted radio; Kim Simpson cites a 1977 market research study which demonstrated that country radio market share had grown 52.3% from 1972 to ’77. As Simpson puts it, country stations were growing so quickly in number, the demand for disc jockeys outpaced supply, and as such many DJs from Top 40 and “progressive”

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin Stein, “Forget the Beatles, Here’s Tom T. Hall,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 24, 1973, 4.

¹⁰⁸ “Wall Street Journal Says Country Here ‘For a While,’” *CMA Closeup*, Volume XV, Number 10, February 1974.

¹⁰⁹ Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 135.

¹¹⁰ Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History*, 247, 275.

rock were drawn into country announcer jobs.¹¹¹ Though it is difficult to determine a definitive causal link between DJs coming from these varied backgrounds and an infusion of pop-rock songs into the mid-‘70s country charts, *Billboard* magazine in late 1974 explicitly made the connection, in a piece pointedly titled “What is Country Music? Charts Reflect Confusion.”¹¹² It was an amorphous time for country music, though arguably little had changed since the late 1960s in terms of the polished sound of the music itself. Dolly Parton’s singles were crossing over from the country to the Adult Contemporary charts, AC being the format which Eric Weisbard argues, through its emphasis on “personalities,” was best suited to her crossover and the female country stars who followed her onto AC as the decade continued.¹¹³ Conway Twitty was crossing over to the Hot 100. The same ‘70s moment saw “Outlaws” Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson staging a free concert at the Nashville Sheraton in symbolic opposition to the Country Music Association (CMA) Awards—and the slicker sounds usually celebrated there—being held that same night in 1973.¹¹⁴

But among these various developments it was the so-called “invasion” of pop music onto the country charts which received the lion’s share of industry attention.¹¹⁵ Although Kim Simpson notes that there was a shorter period in the late 1950s when some pop songs appeared on the country charts, he characterized the 1970s era of pop-to-country crossover as “unprecedented” in its scope.¹¹⁶ As the editors of *Country Music Magazine* put it in their 1979 *Illustrated History of Country Music*, “Out of the top ten *Billboard* country music chart-winner

¹¹¹ Simpson, *Early ‘70s Radio*, 155.

¹¹² “What is Country Music? Charts Reflect Confusion,” *Billboard*, December 7, 1974, 42.

¹¹³ Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, 104.

¹¹⁴ Simpson, *Early ‘70s Radio*, 182.

¹¹⁵ Patrick Carr, ed. *The Illustrated History of Country Music, by the editors of Country Music Magazine* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 295.

¹¹⁶ Simpson, *Early ‘70s Radio*, 163.

albums for 1975, six were by former pop artists,” and country radio by the mid-‘70s was regularly programming artists like John Denver, Olivia Newton-John, Ronstadt, and Elvis Presley.¹¹⁷ Though occasionally the crossover was lauded for exposing broader, younger audiences to country music, on the whole, the country industry reaction was fairly negative.¹¹⁸ As *Variety* noted, the crossover phenomenon was experienced as asymmetrical, benefitting pop-rock over country; since pop hit singles were (and are) expensive to produce and promote, the country industry perceived itself at a comparative disadvantage vis-à-vis economic and human capital in “breaking” records.¹¹⁹

In the mid-‘70s it became apparent that the industry’s negative reactions to the pop-to-country crossover were in part generational, and in part concerned the established careers of Nashville stars—including, paradoxically, some of the same stars whose careers had benefited from the Nashville Sound just a few years prior. Porter Wagoner, complaining about the phenomenon to *Country Song Roundup* in May 1975, stated that he felt a screening board should be established to help disc jockeys distinguish between country and what he called “MOR,” even invoking troubling racial logic: “I don’t think it would be good for country music, or pop music, to mix it all together...It’s kind of like mixing all the races...It should all have equal opportunity but there should be a separation.”¹²⁰

Wagoner’s misgivings, seemingly shared by many of his colleagues, did not prevent Olivia Newton-John from being awarded the CMA Vocalist of the Year award in 1974, nor prevent John Denver from being awarded CMA Entertainer of the Year 1975. However, these

¹¹⁷ Carr, *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, 294-5.

¹¹⁸ See the following for an instance of positive coverage of the crossover phenomenon: Colleen Clark, “Country Sales Up Because of Crossovers,” *Billboard*, February 14, 1976, 40.

¹¹⁹ Ed Fishbein, “You Can Take Pop Into Country, But Not the Other Way Around,” *Variety*, December 29, 1976, 46.

¹²⁰ As quoted in Weisbard, *Top 40 Democracy*, 99.

two awards have gone down in country music infamy, due to actions surrounding the awarding in both cases; presenter Charlie Rich burned on stage the card announcing Denver's win, and Olivia Newton-John's win so infuriated some leading country musicians that almost immediately they formed their own rival organization, the Association of Country Entertainers (ACE). It was as if the feared "invasion" of country by rock 'n' roll from the 1950s had actually come to pass, in the form of pop infiltrating the country charts, snagging sales and awards from genuinely country performers. However, among the many deep ironies of such positioning was that Charlie Rich began his career in rockabilly, blues, and pop before transitioning to country music; in fact, his win as CMA Entertainer of the Year just one year prior had upset some purists in the industry. Furthermore, many of the performers who hurriedly formed the ACE as if country music's life were on the line were poppy stars like Dolly Parton, suggesting that this new organization was in fact more about the self-interest of an extant in-group than anything else.¹²¹

Though clearly this situational outrage conveniently overlooked the social construction of country authenticity—also sometimes known as showbiz artifice—which these elder performers were themselves engaged in, this did not prevent the Nashville establishment from generally trashing Newton-John for her very real faux-pas. Jocelyn Neal notes that upon winning the 1974 CMA award, Newton-John (who was not present at the ceremony) released a statement saying that she looked forward to traveling to Nashville to meet Hank Williams; later, upon playing the Grand Ole Opry she expressed confusion over which night of the week it is typically broadcast.¹²² Furthermore—and, of course, over this last aspect she had no control—Newton-John spoke with an accent of her native Australia, marking her audibly as "other" in a way

¹²¹ Neal, *Country Music*, 271-5; Carr, *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, 295-8.

¹²² Neal, *Country Music*, 274-5; Carr, *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, 296.

perhaps even Charley Pride did not experience. As Joli Jensen notes, the notion of “home” (or “down home,” as compared with “uptown”) is central to country music mythology; one important aspect of this on a metaphorical level is a country performer’s ability to situate his or her personal ancestry within the “family tree” of prior performers and touchstones of the genre.¹²³ Though Ronstadt came originally from the Los Angeles rock scene, in comparison with Newton-John she demonstrated real savvy in deploying these codes when speaking with the country press from early on in her career, telling *Country Song Roundup* in 1970 that her influences included Kitty Wells and Hank Williams, though admittedly she lately preferred listening to Bob Dylan and the Beatles.¹²⁴

This subtle distinction did not stop the country music establishment from generally embracing Ronstadt with open arms. As early as 1971, *Country Western Stars* magazine raved:

Linda is beautiful! She doesn’t wear shoes and has an abundance of dark lustrous hair, large look-right-at-you eyes, and wears no make-up. She wears “funky” tee-shirts, old jeans and short dresses. She’s country, but she’s a stranger too. When she hit Nashville a lot of people started staring!..Linda Ronstadt is a trend setter. She bridges the gap between country and rock. People like her because she likes them. Ask her about Jerry Lee Lewis or Johnny Cash and her eyes light up. Ask them about her and they’ll return the compliment. “Linda’s a little like North and South saying hello,” a close friend confided once.¹²⁵

Ronstadt’s ability to make influential friends in the country music industry, such as Dolly Parton, served her well. She was nominated for her first ACM (American Country Music) Award—Top Female Vocalist—as early as 1971, and when her actual country sales figures began to pick up (1973’s *Don’t Cry Now* went to Number 5 on the country album charts), she scored an ACM

¹²³ Jensen, *The Nashville Sound*, 14-17.

¹²⁴ “Linda Ronstadt: An Exclusive Interview,” *Country Song Roundup*, October 1970, accessed November 18, 2015, <http://www.ronstadt-linda.com/artcsr70.htm>.

¹²⁵ “Linda Ronstadt: It Took a Long, Long Time...,” *Country Western Stars*, May 1971, 11.

win: 1974's Most Promising Female Vocalist.¹²⁶ Regarding this honor, Ronstadt remarked to *People* magazine in 1975, "I'm very country derivative, but I'm not really country. It's just that I come a lot closer than Olivia Newton-John."¹²⁷

While it is true that early in her career Ronstadt played North Hollywood's Palomino club, known as an important venue for making a name in the West Coast country music business, generally speaking she achieved her critical acceptance and massive sales in the country community without engaging in some of the typical duties of mainstream country stars, such as participating in the annual Fan Fair held each year in Nashville.¹²⁸ In the remainder of this chapter I consider how a performer framed in some ways as a relative outsider to the genre ("She's country, but she's a stranger too") in fact precisely targeted the beating heart of mid-'70s pop-country with her personal musical aesthetic. The following 1979 critical assessment from the editors of *Country Music* magazine demonstrates how the success of her aesthetic is bound up in white middle-class femininity, in that I believe they mischaracterize a bit her work:

She feels no guilt or hesitancy about appropriating material from any genre, be it country, rock, reggae, Tex-Mex, folk, jazz, or soul. This is because the key to her success may lie in the fact that, unlike many performers today who stress original material, Linda is a supremely skilled interpreter of songs. Though she has resisted it, her youth and good looks have made her a country music sex symbol, a sort of female counterpart to Kristofferson. Although she is very much a product of rock-generation values—she is casual about both drugs and sex—she seems remarkably open and even vulnerable as a performer. There is no distance between her and her songs...The great women singers of country music had always sung realistically about life, but the older singers had been products of a southern morality that frustrated their identifying too closely with the lyrics of the songs. No woman singer had really committed herself to a performance as did, for

¹²⁶ "Winners Search Results," American Country Music Awards, accessed November 18, 2015, <https://www.acmcountry.com/winners>.

¹²⁷ Robert Windeler, "When Will She Be Loved? Linda Ronstadt Finds the Time, at Last, Is Now." *People*, November 17, 1975, accessed November 18, 2015, <http://www.ronstadt-linda.com/artpeo75.htm>.

¹²⁸ Robert Hilburn, "Linda Ronstadt in Her Palomino Bow," *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 1971, accessed November 18, 2015, <http://www.ronstadt-linda.com/artlat71.htm>. Regarding Ronstadt's lack of participation in Fan Fair, I have come to this conclusion from my review of the annual Fan Fair program in *CMA Country Music Roundup* magazine, 1973 through 1977.

example, the great blues singers like Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday. Linda Ronstadt was able to make such a commitment, and to make it at precisely the right moment in music development.¹²⁹

Country Music's editors here conflate female sexuality with emotional aptitude (read: personal authenticity) of vocal interpretation. Furthermore, the conflation is explicitly racialized, in that they imply only African-American women blues singers can adequately identify with the emotion of a lyric, "committing" to the moment of performance in a manner seemingly both technically skilled and transparent to the point of artlessness. As historian Michael Streissguth notes, *Country Music* was known as a country publication that focused on the "Outlaw" movement side of the '70s, eager to document overlap between country and rock worlds and highlight what was "progressive" and "funky" in the genre.¹³⁰ In their celebration of Ronstadt as a "blues"-inspired performer, I note the lingering influence of a Sixties rock critical perspective that conceives of white female vocal/authorial power as gritty, emotionally unhinged, and defined by its narrow relationship to performed black female sexuality.

A White Middle-Class Aesthetic in Ronstadt's "Tracks of My Tears"

The problem with this critical rhetoric is that it matches neither Ronstadt's stated conception of her own racial identity as a singer, nor arguably her recorded vocal performances as described by her most accurate chronicler, her friend the music journalist John Rockwell. While in the 1980s Ronstadt would explicitly champion her partial Mexican-American heritage in the promotion of her famous mariachi albums, in the 1970s on several occasions, for reasons

¹²⁹ Carr, *The Illustrated History of Country Music*, 329-330.

¹³⁰ Michael Streissguth, *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville* (New York: itbooks, 2013), 206.

unknown precisely, she chose to represent herself straightforwardly as white to journalists, describing herself as “hopelessly” or “incurably white as a singer.”¹³¹

Ronstadt’s characterization of herself as a white singer is related in subtle but important ways to the manner in which she has described her feelings on rock music, rock singing, and images of “rock women,” particularly with the benefit of hindsight in her 2013 memoir. In her memoir, Ronstadt relates an anecdote wherein early in her career, she struck up a conversation at the Troubadour bar with friend Janis Joplin, widely considered the master of white female blues-rock singing. Upon watching the sensual Maria Muldaur on stage together,

We got into a discussion about what we liked to wear onstage and immediately agreed that Maria was the gold standard of glamour for the hippie/earthy segment of our society. Because of the phenomenal success of artists like the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan, earthy funk was God, and the female performers in the folk pop genre were genuinely confused about how to present themselves. Did we want to be nurturing, stay-at-home earth mothers who cooked and nursed babies, or did we want to be funky mamas in the Troubadour bar, our boot heels to be wandering an independent course just like our male counterparts? We didn’t know. Later, I did my own exasperated send-up of our confusion by posing for an album cover in a pen with pigs in the style of the character Moonbeam McSwine from the comic strip *Lil’ Abner* that I had read in the *Tucson Daily Citizen*.¹³²

Ronstadt’s implication here is that Sixties counterculture presented aspiring female rock singers with impossible choices, archetypes of white hippie sexless mother or black “funky mama” which no woman, even Joplin, could fully inhabit convincingly and unproblematically. Ronstadt then symbolically resolves her own anxiety over this racialized schism by representing herself as a white retro “bombshell” character in a pointedly white “hillbilly” cultural milieu.

¹³¹ Chris Charlesworth, “Linda’s Liberation,” *Melody Maker*, November 24, 1973, 23. Katherine Orloff, “From the book *Rock ‘n’ Roll Woman: Interview with Linda Ronstadt*,” 1974, accessed November 18, 2015, <http://www.ronstadt-linda.com/intwom2.htm>.

¹³² Ronstadt, *Simple Dreams*, 41-2.

Ronstadt returns at several points in the memoir to her discomfort with rock culture, finally making the point very explicit toward the book's end:

I never felt that rock and roll defined me. There was an unyielding attitude that came with the music that involved being confrontational, dismissive, aggressive—or, as my mother would say, ungracious. These attitudes came at a time when the culture was in a profoundly dynamic state. Kids were coming of age, searching for an identity, and casting off many of the values and customs embraced by previous generations. This wasn't all bad; many of these things needed changing...Still, I cringe when I think of some of the times I was less than gracious. It wasn't how I was brought up, and I didn't wear the attitude well. Being considered, for a period in the Seventies, as the Queen of Rock made me uneasy, as my musical devotions often lay elsewhere.¹³³

Ronstadt's thoughts here connect nicely with Weisbard's aforementioned arguments about baby boomer rock audience identity in flux in the 1970s, though she squarely rejects personal generational association with that phenomenon. Certainly, her claims of discomfort with rock's genre strictures are borne out by her willfully eclectic movement in the 1980s between New Wave, mariachi, and Nelson Riddle-arranged midcentury pop standards. But furthermore, in her insistence that "that wasn't how I was brought up," and based on what we know of her relatively privileged upbringing, I notice a forceful articulation of middle-class identity that warmly embraces Motti Regev's "central sub-field" as its musical home. In examining Ronstadt's 1976 version of Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' 1965 Motown hit "The Tracks of My Tears," we discover a recorded performance that in its even-handed trading of a black middle-class aesthetic for a white middle-class aesthetic, appealed directly to the middle-class audience shared between country and pop-rock in the mid-'70s.

The primary aspect to note about Ronstadt's vocal performance on this track is her high degree of control. One notices this first in terms of control of timbre; for instance, 0:58-1:07 in

¹³³ *ibid*, 158.

the song (“Since you left me if you see me with another guy, lookin’ like I’m havin’ fun...”)) features a remarkably smooth, consistent vocal timbre free of vibrato, wherein Ronstadt still manages to pronounce each syllable of the lyric with the precision typically mandated by country radio. Her vocal timbre remains exceeding smooth, with just the slightest hint of grit at 2:31-2:33 (“my smile”). This breakdown—99% smooth—is consistent with John Rockwell’s characterization of Ronstadt’s vocal timbre as largely free of the usual popular music huskiness, deploying grit only at “specific [rare] syllables as coloration.”¹³⁴

Second, one notes Ronstadt’s control when considering her pointed lack of melisma in her vocal performance; this becomes clear when comparing her vocals to Smokey Robinson’s in his original recording. Perhaps instead of “control” this can be called a streamlining of pitch in Ronstadt’s interpretation of the song. For instance, in the Miracles’ original 1965 version, at 0:31-0:32, Robinson breaks the word “laughing” into at least 4 distinct pitches, in a descending melismatic line. In Ronstadt’s version, the same word in the same place is divided simply into two pitches. Ronstadt’s backing singers also feature less variation in pitch in their individual harmonizing voices. For instance, at 2:05-2:07 in the Miracles’ version, on the word “justified,” the backing singer with the highest harmony can be heard loudest in the mix, wavering in pitch ever so slightly. In comparison in Ronstadt’s version, in the singing of the same word (“justified”) at the same point in the song, there is audibly a filter applied in production that renders the backing vocals uniformly mixed and smooth in their harmony, in the style of the Eagles (though, it should be noted, none of those band members appear on this track).

¹³⁴ John Rockwell, “Living in the U.S.A.,” in *Stranded: Rock and Roll for a Desert Island*, ed. Greil Marcus (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 191.

Finally, Ronstadt's vocal restraint in the majority of the song is drawn into sharper relief by her strategic deployment of falsetto at the key climactic moment in the song; at 2:10-2:11 wherein she sings "smile," her voice rockets up to an unexpected high F#. While Robinson's original version also features a memorable bit of falsetto at 2:39-2:41 ("oooh yeah"), Ronstadt's version pays homage to Robinson with her similar 5-note, wordless descending falsetto figure at 2:44-2:47; however, her additional aforementioned falsetto at 2:10-2:11 is unexpected, pleasantly catching the listener by surprise with an emotional emphasis one had not been conditioned to expect at that particular moment in the song. Of this falsetto, John Rockwell writes, "This is really a delicate version, thin and tenuously supported, of the operatic head voice she *could* develop if she so chose."¹³⁵

Rockwell, in his longform essay appreciation of Ronstadt's career-to-date in Greil Marcus' 1979 anthology *Stranded*, muses on her aforementioned self-description of her singing as "hopelessly" white and, upon surveying her body of recorded work, finds that he must agree with this assessment, however adding that at her best "she has developed a most convincing solution to her black material, with a style that simultaneously evokes the original interpreters yet remains honorably white."¹³⁶ Rockwell notes in detail the operatic and jazz-inflected pop qualities of her singing which other critics would not discover until the '80s, and then states:

There's another basic bias to consider before we go on. It isn't just that contemporary rock critics prefer husky, untrained voices over more polished varieties, or that they tend sometimes unthinkingly to doubt that any interpretation can conceivably equal the composer's original. There is a widespread prejudice against beauty per se in present-day popular music. People are so appalled by our culture's tendencies toward slickness and surface packaging that they seize hold of almost any rougher alternative. Pretty voices, pretty faces, pretty songs all become suspect to such a sensibility. Yet surely we have to allow for that part of life if the rebellious alternatives are to have meaning...For better or

¹³⁵ Rockwell, "Living in the U.S.A.," 193.

¹³⁶ *ibid*, 196.

for worse, I have always been the kind of person that tries to keep things in balance. I may be drawn to extremes in art and behavior, but I find them most desirable when contained within the sum total of human experience. And with my longtime fascination for German art and thought, I ultimately conceive of extremes in terms of the dialectical tension between them.¹³⁷

I quote Rockwell at length here because in his evocation of this dialectical tension, I see for Ronstadt a pop-rock-into-country genre/format tension similar to what Dolly Parton experienced in her own crossover journey. Rockwell uses Ronstadt's delicate sound to argue against the rockist veneration of aesthetic extremes, suggesting that that conservative approaches to singing and playing can be beautiful in the way they mirror and expand upon the pleasures of everyday life. Rockwell's larger point is that audiences may respond to the pleasures of well-polished vocals in ways a critic cannot anticipate, and to discount this may be to miss out on notable developments—such as Ronstadt's version of “Tracks of My Tears” charting #25 on Top 40, #11 on the country charts, and #4 on Adult Contemporary, a hat trick for the biggest woman in American popular music circa 1976.¹³⁸

In his discussion of Ronstadt's music as “honorably white,” Rockwell cautions the reader to remember that terms like “black” and “white” are vague to the point that they can at times allow racist generalizations to be made regarding the “essence” of a particular type of music. On the other hand, however, he also reminds us that “Blacks have represented the principal symbols and agents of passion, spontaneity, and rebellion in recent white American culture, and most of the best white rock singers have not only built their music on black foundations, but assumed similar attitudes.” Thus, he argues, when Ronstadt's singing is criticized by some journalists as too precise, too polite, too mannered, not gritty enough, she is being judged by a rock standard

¹³⁷ *ibid*, 198.

¹³⁸ “Linda Ronstadt: Awards: Billboard Singles,” All Music Guide, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/linda-ronstadt-mn0000686897/awards>.

which foregrounds black female subjectivities in particular, while simultaneously eliding them.¹³⁹ Here Rockwell's argument anticipates the case Michael Coyle makes in his article "Hijacked Hits and Antic Authenticity: Cover Songs, Race, and Postwar Marketing." Coyle argues that unlike earlier phenomena where singers would "hijack" contemporary hit songs with a piggybacking profit imperative front and center, cover songs from white British Invasion bands on forward have often "valorized 'blackness' by positing it as the embodiment of difference from or resistance to the mainstream"—to help tell a personal origin story of a band or artist, a narrative whose drama is enhanced by the differential between an imagined, "othered" past and the present day, placing the performer in the role of intermediary.¹⁴⁰

In contrast, Ronstadt's cover version does not suggest an origin story or conjure a forgotten era; rather, it pays affectionate tribute to Robinson's original while simultaneously—via Ronstadt's vocal polish and precision—foregrounding racial difference in the present moment. That Ronstadt's sung persona does not resolve said difference but merely sits with it, means that she steps out of a minstrel-inspired paradigm, and is the reason Rockwell calls her interpretation "honorably white." What is intriguing here is that although racial difference is highlighted, the similarities in terms of a middle-class aesthetic—expressed via that same polish and precision—are consistent between the two versions. In other words, while Robinson's original does include aspects such as vocal melisma and gospel-inspired backing vocals generally associated with the African-American musical experience, Robinson's suave lead singer persona offers what Gerald Early calls "a black bourgeois ambition that sought to

¹³⁹ Rockwell, "Living in the U.S.A.," 196.

¹⁴⁰ Michael Coyle, "Hijacked Hits and Antic Authenticity: Cover Songs, Race, and Postwar Marketing," in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, eds. Roger Beebe et al (Durham: Duke University Press 2002), 133-160.

consolidate, not rebel...a middle-brow impulse to respectability without abandoning [one's] sense of origin."¹⁴¹ Early's book on Motown *One Nation Under a Groove* pointedly leaves behind the usual journalistic questions as to why white people embraced the label's music so much, focusing instead on Motown's fostering of "a modern black urban community built on technology, on the American bourgeois principles of consumption and production."¹⁴²

Perhaps not entirely coincidentally, readers of *Rolling Stone* learned in late 1975 that during sessions for the *Prisoner in Disguise* LP, Ronstadt and band actually recorded lead single "Heat Wave" using Motown-style assembly-line production techniques, to great effect; furthermore, as already noted, Ronstadt and Peter Asher were enthusiastic in general to utilize the full technological potential of the recording studio.¹⁴³ Thus, I would argue that with a shared approach to record-making and a shared appreciation of professional Motown songwriters like Robinson, Ronstadt and team were able to approach a song like "Tracks of My Tears" with less baggage than your typical rock musicians. Instead of a colonialist rock covers aesthetic aiming to "improve upon" source material, a present-tense "pop-rock" aesthetic takes pleasure in what Jason Toynbee articulates as a tension between repetition and difference, with genre functioning to "control repetition and difference in such a way that desire is maintained *across* texts within a certain range of variation."¹⁴⁴ I hear this in the playful way Ronstadt and Asher precisely switch out the backing horn section from Robinson's original, replaced with a pedal steel guitar playing essentially the same figures. In Robinson's original version, from 1:25-1:39 we hear the same 8-note descending and then ascending figure repeated three times during the chorus by a horn

¹⁴¹ Gerald Early, *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 117. 2nd edition.

¹⁴² *ibid*, 114.

¹⁴³ Todd Everett, "'Heat Wave': The Long Hot Sessions," *Rolling Stone*, December 18, 1975, 21.

¹⁴⁴ Toynbee, *Making Popular Music*, 106.

section. In Ronstadt's version, because a pedal steel guitar is played by bending pitches, from 1:19-1:39 a similar backing melody is played, but with a bit of a conscious wink since the two instruments being compared literally cannot hit precisely the same notes.

The substitution of the pedal steel for the horn section does not "make" Ronstadt's version from a Motown song "into" a country song. Rather, the immediate mental comparison and contrast conjured by hearing a pedal steel instead of horns "become[s] the object of...aesthetic practice" of genre, within the larger pop-rock central sub-field.¹⁴⁵ The fact that both the horns and the pedal steel are tasteful background texture rather than something dominant in the mix fits within the larger middle-class aesthetic shared by both versions. This is an arrangement that could be and was played on radio stations all ages and backgrounds of 1970s listeners. That it was also considered a kind of country music says more about the (relatively) open status of the country music industry in that era than anything to do with Ronstadt's specific artistic choices or lack thereof.

Having said that, the very fact that Ronstadt chose to cover a hit song (creating in turn her own hit version) that was 11 years old was yet another move toward the zeitgeist in a mid-'70s moment when *Billboard* reported that fifteen percent of then-current top 100 country singles were remakes of old rock or country tunes.¹⁴⁶ Though *Billboard*'s feature on this "oldies" phenomenon did not attempt to unpack the reasons behind it, Simon Reynolds suggests in his 2011 book *Retromania* two possible impulses: nostalgists sought a return to an imagined Edenic America prior to the political and cultural tumult of the 1960s (see, for instance, 1973's *American Graffiti*); on the other hand, ironists like The Cramps sought to mine 1950s camp for

¹⁴⁵ Toynbee, *Making Popular Music*, 106.

¹⁴⁶ Bob Kirsch, "Old Rock, Country Hits Enjoy New Chart Life," *Billboard*, August 30, 1975, 34.

its strange and macabre undercurrents.¹⁴⁷ Refreshingly, I find none of the above in Ronstadt's decision to cover "Tracks of My Tears." Arriving as it first did in 1965 when the cultural "revolution" of the 1960s was already underway, it cannot be easily slotted into one particular worldview or another. My guess is Ronstadt selected the tune because its lyrics fit well with country music themes of lost love, and it was a song well-suited to the middle range of her voice.

In October 1970, when a reporter for *Country Song Roundup* suggested to Ronstadt that "people are getting into the country thing because there is a desire among people to get back to a more uncomplicated way of living," she replied:

Oh, I agree. I agree one hundred percent. Everybody's going to the country. Everybody's trying to get some air. It's just part of an overall trend. I think music is a reflection of what's going on in people's heads. Obviously we screwed it up where, pretty badly for human beings. They're trying to seek shelter in any way they can. I think the music is just an imitation of that.¹⁴⁸

Here Ronstadt articulates in a succinct and persuasive fashion the anti-modern rationale for rock fans drawn to country music in the late '60s and early '70s. That Ronstadt would move in just roughly six years to performing country music not escape the modern world but to engage with country songcraft as a professional studio musician demonstrates how the genre had progressed—in many good ways. Country music, and in particular the soft country-rock innovated by Ronstadt, had become the sound of the Seventies, enjoyed by millions. Recognizing this, including that the music was indeed "legitimate" by its own set of standards, necessitates a re-thinking of the anti-commercial genre logic of contemporary alt.country.

¹⁴⁷ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2011), 294.

¹⁴⁸ "Linda Ronstadt: An Exclusive Interview," *Country Song Roundup*, October 1970, accessed November 18, 2015, <http://ronstadt-linda.com/artcsr70.htm>.

Chapter Three:

“They Want Us Kinder and Gentler at their Feet”: Uncle Tupelo’s Revivalist

Antimodernism

The homemade, Xeroxed flyer advertising a Saturday November 28, 1987 concert by Uncle Tupelo in their hometown of Belleville, Illinois features information common to most flyers of the punk/indie genre culture in that era (and ours): location, cover charge, and exhortation that the show will be “ALL AGES.” But the image on the flyer speaks with great specificity to the young band’s rapidly evolving relationship to the “alternative country” genre they were helping create: a garish cartoon sketch of Elvis Presley, whose birthplace inspired the “Tupelo” in the group’s name.¹ This is not Elvis in his prime, but rather “Fat Elvis” of the superstar’s declining years, complete with gut stretching his white jumpsuit, cigarette hanging from his lips, and beer in hand as he props his boots up on a La-Z-Boy recliner. It’s the very picture of a late 20th-century U.S. postindustrial popular culture in decline, its tongue-in-cheek rendering transforming even the pop star dynamo into a passive TV consumer.

The band members reportedly enjoyed the goofy cartoon image, drawn by their friend and crew member Chuck, so much so that it featured on flyers for the band’s initial set of gigs. Journalist Greg Kot, whose biography *Wilco: Learning How to Die* includes the most substantive

¹ Greg Kot, *Wilco: Learning How to Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), 23. Kot recounts that the band arrived at their name in the manner employed by many a rock band: choosing two different nouns at random out of two columns written on a yellow legal pad. However, Tim Grierson, in his biography *Wilco: Sunken Treasure*, notes that though the selection of the words was random, the inclusion of “Tupelo” on the list was not; Grierson quotes drummer Mike Heindorn as recalling that the word was included specifically as a nod to Presley’s birthplace. Tim Grierson, *Wilco: Sunken Treasure* (London: Omnibus Press, 2013), 12. Also of note: a scanned reproduction of the flyer I describe can be found in the photo pullout in the center of Kot’s book.

published work on Uncle Tupelo to date, suggests that while “Fat Elvis” may have served the younger band well—their early incarnation as The Primitives played mostly dance-party Sixties garage-rock covers like “Hang on Sloopy”—such a humorous image made much less sense once Uncle Tupelo began writing original songs, songs with titles immediately suggestive of their ruminative oeuvre: “Flatness,” “Factory Belt,” “Graveyard Shift,” “Whiskey Bottle.” Kot quotes the band’s friend Nick Sakes: “The Primitives were all about let’s go crazy and dance...With Uncle Tupelo it’s like they discovered sadness, and the songs all of a sudden became way more serious.”² Indeed, by 1992, just five years after the band’s founding, Fat Elvis was long gone, the band focused instead on recording *March 16-20, 1992*, an all-acoustic album of originals and covers, songs full of dead babies, murderers, alcoholics, Christian evangelists, and striking coal miners; Jason Ankeny of *All Music Guide* called it “relentlessly grim.”³ By the time of their 1994 breakup, the band’s rapid evolution from tongue-in-cheek to earnest is perhaps best captured by *Pitchfork* journalist William Bowers, who recalls a record store coworker throwing *March 16-20, 1992* to the floor and exclaiming, “I can’t take their seriousness anymore, man: I’m trying to digest a hot dog, and I gotta live.”⁴

Critics and scholars have insufficiently explored the political dimensions of this seriousness, which in my view are the band’s legacy. Many publications, mostly popular but some scholarly, cite Uncle Tupelo as the founders of “alternative country” music, even though as Diane Pecknold notes, many underground country-punk bands of the 1980s were making music

² Kot, *Wilco: Learning How to Die*, 23.

³ Jason Ankeny, “*March 16-20, 1992*,” *All Music Guide*, accessed May 23, 2016, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/march-16-20-1992-mw0000092740>.

⁴ William Bowers, “*No Depression, Still Feel Gone, March 16-20, 1992*,” *Pitchfork Media*, April 24, 2003, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/8344-no-depression-still-feel-gone-and-march-16-20-1992/>.

quite similar to Tupelo's many years prior to the band's 1990 debut LP.⁵ How to account for their posthumous lionization, a proliferating fanbase which spawned an email listserv and from that listserv *No Depression* magazine in 1995, the flagship publication of the genre? Aside from certain miniscule sonic innovations (louder guitars than most '80s country punks had captured on record), and a riotous live show that drew new converts, I suggest the main reason Tupelo were and are celebrated and seen as genre figureheads is that, more comprehensively than any similar band, they articulated a left-wing populist political vision that tentatively proposed solutions to the ravages of post-industrial capitalism, not just stating the problem like many a country-rock singer-songwriter.⁶ And they did so in a way that drew on older forms of country music, and the band's own liminal status as small-town midwesterners, to *entertain* while rousing. Their ability to do this inspired zealous, almost spiritual devotion in their fans, positioning them as an "only band that mattered" in the mode of The Clash or Bruce Springsteen.

I call this populist vision they articulated *revivalist antimodernism*. My concept draws on Allen Hertzke's observation of the paradox that rational actions in populist politics are often

⁵ For example, David Goodman, in his book *Modern Twang*, while acknowledging prior country-rock bands, calls Tupelo "without a doubt, the most influential group of the period," developers of what he calls the "No Depression" sound, another name for 1990s alt.country. David Goodman, *Modern Twang: An Alternative Country Music Guide & Directory* (Nashville: Dowling Press, 1999), v, 309. John Molinaro's 1998 master's thesis for the University of Virginia on alt.country posits Cowboy Junkies and Uncle Tupelo as dual founders of the alt.country genre. John Molinaro, "Urbane Cowboys: Alt.Country in the 1990s" (MA thesis, University of Virginia, 1998), <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma98/molinaro/alt.country/jm-thesis.html>. For a discussion of how Uncle-Tupelo-as-founders as a trope limits historical understandings of alt.country, see Robert Austin Russell, "Looking for a Way Out: The Politics and Places of Alternative Country Music" (PhD diss, University of Iowa, 2009), 33-4. For a reassessment of the genre's origins apart from Uncle Tupelo, see: Diane Pecknold, "Selling Out or Buying In?: Alt.Country's Cultural Politics of Commercialism," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, eds. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 28.

⁶ For a discussion of Tupelo's renown as a live band, see Kot, *Wilco: Learning How to Die*, 31-34, 50-52. See also Richard Byrne Jr., "The Men from Uncle," *The Riverfront Times*, 1989, accessed May 20, 2016, http://gumbopages.com/music/uncle-tupelo/text/men_from_uncle.html. For an early articulation of the complaint among alt.country's detractors that the genre's artists are more interested in complaining about the state of the nation than in proposing solutions, see Jon Pareles, "Heartland Rock: Bruce's Children," *New York Times*, August 30, 1987, Arts 12.

underlaid with irrationalism, that “liberal societies work best (or perhaps work at all) only when nonliberal underpinnings support them.”⁷ This is the underexplored link between American populism and antimodernism. Specifically, I argue that on *March 16-20, 1992*, Uncle Tupelo explore in-depth, via a series of sincere covers, mostly of Christian-based material, both the populist political power of collective action, and its related drawbacks—the impositions on the individual’s freedom and power by that same moral community. Because I argue Tupelo contextualize this statement fully in the sonic language of modern rock “liveness,” they made a serious strategic intervention to bring left political passion “back” to rock, at a moment when both rock and populist left politics were being redefined.⁸ They doubled down on the well-established aesthetic of rock seriousness based on “the differentiation of taste,” while also imbuing that distinction with a moral collectivist political passion more typically associated with folk and punk.⁹ Furthermore, their pointed earnestness, their implicit insistence that popular music could matter as more than merely a vehicle for personal identity via consumption choices, was their weapon of differentiation within a burgeoning alternative rock universe that was famously self-aware about its potential for being commercially co-opted.

Alt.Country as Ironic and Postmodern

⁷ Allen D. Hertzke, *Echoes of Discontent: Jesse Jackson, Pat Robertson, and the Resurgence of Populism* (Washington DC: CQ Press, 1993), 259. I will explore later in more depth Hertzke’s arguments about the relationship between left and right populisms and Christianity in late ‘80s/early ‘90s American politics.

⁸ Here I reference and respond to Lawrence Grossberg’s contention in his 1992 monograph on rock culture and politics, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place*, that as of the late ‘80s/early ‘90s rock was “losing its power to encapsulate and articulate resistance and opposition.” I will expand upon Grossberg’s very period-specific argument, as well as Hertzke’s discussion of changes in left-wing populism, in later sections. Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 9.

⁹ The portion of this sentence in quotes is drawn from Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rock and Pop*, eds. Simon Frith, Will Straw, John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 129. I will expand upon Keightley’s argument about rock and its taste distinctions shortly.

To understand why Uncle Tupelo's seriousness is meaningful within the history of the alt.country genre, it is important to first understand how observers of the genre have often defined it as *ironic* in character. From *No Depression* magazine's cheeky appropriations of early-1960s retro-futurist "space-age" graphic design, to Neko Case's kitschy vocal affectations on her early records, it is fairly common within alt.country music and media to find examples of performers delivering country material with tongue in cheek, drawing on the perceived distance between their performance persona and the provenance of the music.¹⁰ At times, the irony can be more diffuse, as found in the pleasures of classic country wordplay and tropes jutting jauntily up against the instrumentation and attitude of rock in an alt.country song, playing with the paradoxes of the "rustic" within the "modern." In their introduction to the first (and only) scholarly anthology on alternative country music, editors Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching argue that postmodern irony is the constitutive dynamic of alt.country as a genre:

While many country songs self-consciously equate rustic suffering with the detritus of consumer culture, alt.country takes the opposite approach. We maintain that an *ironized* conflict between commodification and authenticity serves as its truly defining feature. Although fetishization constitutes commodities by hiding the human labor that created them in order to highlight the desirability of ownership, the converse—self-consciousness about good taste, craftsmanship, and artistry—can also mask the mediation of the marketplace. Irony, so pervasive in contemporary culture, allows alt.country to persevere in looking for a way out of this market-bound impasse.¹¹

Because alt.country as a genre "has not foresworn the cultural cachet of rock's urban modernity even as it seeks to revitalize older strains of country music," Fox and Ching argue that the genre's distance from the musical traditions it worships leaves it "self-consciously attuned to

¹⁰ I draw these examples from Jon Smith's essay "Growing Up and Out of Alt.Country: On Gen X, Wearing Vintage, and Neko Case," in Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching, *Old Roots, New Routes*, 67, 79.

¹¹ Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching, "Introduction: The Importance of Being Ironic—Toward a Theory and Critique of Alt.Country Music," in *Old Roots, New Routes*, 4.

questions of aesthetic value and national politics yet apparently blind to its investments in dominant class and gender identity politics.”¹²

Other scholars have agreed with the broad critical paradigm established by Fox and Ching, such as Jon Smith in his essay in the same anthology, “Growing Up and Out of Alt.Country: On Gen X, Wearing Vintage, and Neko Case,” wherein he links alt.country’s at-times humorously “retro” affectations to what he considers a classic Generation X move: young adults’ ironic appropriation of outdated styles as a means of symbolic protest against perceived lack of choice and commodification of everyday life within a postmodern, post-industrial capitalist society.¹³ Similarly, in his book *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, Ryan Moore situates alt.country on a continuum between “dialogic uses of the past (beginning with Uncle Tupelo, the forefathers of ‘alternative country’) to the forms of blank parody associated with postmodern pastiche (ending with the hyperironic Supersuckers),” yet still existing within a broader “retro” framework, wherein rock hipsters continually look to the past for new subcultural capital when marketers have snatched up their extant styles to sell back to them.¹⁴ I will elaborate momentarily on the notion of “retro” which Moore borrows from Elizabeth Guffey, but the salient point here is that retro always contains aspects of ironic detachment.

Aaron Fox’s understanding of irony within alt.country moves beyond just the ironized aspects of style, taste, and consumption outlined above, into what he considers the constitutive

¹² Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching, “Introduction,” *Old Roots, New Routes*, 5 & 18.

¹³ Jon Smith, “Growing Up and Out of Alt.Country,” 60-70. To be fair, the second part of Smith’s argument is that as alt.country’s stars and audiences have grown older and its genre-world can no longer be considered “youth culture,” he feels the musicians, sensing less of a need for contrariness, now rely less on ironic affectations and instead approach country material with a seriousness of craft.

¹⁴ Ryan Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture, and Social Crisis* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 156-196; 173 features the quoted passage. Moore’s use of “subcultural capital” draws on Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

postmodern irony of the performers' choices with country material relative to their personal background:

Hyper-modern, technologically sophisticated, well-capitalized, urban, cosmopolitan, well-educated deployments of archaic, low-tech, shoestring, rural, and ignorant images and expressive styles have been definitive features of alternative country since Exene Cervenka and John Doe (as the Knitters) caterwauled grotesque imitations of Kitty Wells and Hank Thompson (both technically polished country singers) in 1985.¹⁵

Referring to what performers such as Cervenka, Doe, and Gillian Welch do as “problematic [class] minstrelsy,” Fox concedes that “this sort of theater of poverty is not unique to alternative country,” but that “the ironies of alterative country...are second-order tropes, ironizing an already ironic country music history,” thereby making its irony uniquely postmodern.¹⁶ Though perhaps painting with a broad brush, the charge of Fox’s argument demands to be taken seriously, in that many alt.country performers are in fact college-educated and from urban backgrounds. Anne Kathryn Hohman engages with Fox in her 2012 ethnographic study of the Brooklyn alt.country scene, wherein she argues that scene participants “play the middle” in their alternation between ironic and sincere treatments of country music; however, she notes that even when urban alt.country musicians engage sincerely with more traditional country material, there is a degree of detachment akin to a deeper-level irony. Unlike Fox’s charge of minstrelsy, however, Hohman argues that irony in this scene is used to negotiate middle-class identity.¹⁷

I summarize these arguments on alt.country’s postmodern irony to illustrate that this is the current scholarly frame of reference on the genre, and to also note that I generally agree with

¹⁵ Aaron Fox, “‘Alternative’ to What? *O Brother*, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music,” in *Country Music Goes to War*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James Edward Akenson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 183.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 183-4.

¹⁷ Anne Kathryn Hohman, “Brooklyn Country: Class, Culture and the Politics of ‘Alternativity’ (PhD diss, Columbia University, 2012), 189-90.

it, particularly as it describes the alt.country genre that came into full commercial maturity in the late 1990s. To me an important takeaway from this discussion is that multiple forms of irony exist within alt.country, with various political intentions. When considering the most straightforward, humorously tongue-in-cheek alt.country irony, I think of a song such as Whiskeytown's "Matrimony," which Robert Russell cites as one of alt.country's signature songs espousing a left-wing cultural political perspective. Whereas Russell argues that the song "thumbs [its] nose" at the conservative politics associated with contemporary country music, I hear instead an ironized update on Carter Family lyrical motifs of the "fallen woman," and a suggestion of female sexual agency that in fact many contemporary country and rock listeners could agree on.¹⁸ My point here is that irony in alt.country does not always equate to denigration of contemporary country music. In the case of Uncle Tupelo, however, apart from the occasional genre-based dialogic irony of an early cover song such as the Carters' "No Depression in Heaven," I will demonstrate how the band's zeal for re-creating country's musical past in the present does not fit the dynamics of detachment and elision described above.

Furthermore, I agree with Fox and Ching's assertion that alt.country is often (if not always) postmodern, particularly in its core dynamic as described by Fredric Jameson, wherein postmodernity facilitates "the *decentering* of that formerly centered subject or psyche," and emphasizes representation and mediatized culture as "second nature."¹⁹ Having said that, it is important to note that Jameson himself concedes that not all cultural creations today are postmodern; rather, the postmodern is "the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses—what Raymond Williams has usefully termed 'residual' and 'emergent' forms of

¹⁸ For Russell's take on this song, see Russell, "Looking for a Way Out," 118.

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), ix-x, 14.

cultural production—must make their way.”²⁰ Incorporating both “residual” and “emergent” cultural forms, Tupelo’s revivalist antimodernism stood out all the more noticeably due to the broader postmodern cultural context in which it first appeared. And when considering postmodernism’s emergence as a hot topic in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it also encourages me to take note: arguments I make about Tupelo’s antimodernism are limited in scope to roughly this same time period, wherein “alternative country” was just beginning to transition from an avant-garde to a scene-based genre.²¹ Robert Russell provides a very useful framework when he argues that alt.country features “small-tent” and “big-tent” definitions, with the former tending more toward specific ancestry in 1980s punk/indie, foregrounding loud guitars and more pronounced left-wing politics.²² Conclusions I reach about Tupelo’s populist revivalism are limited to that historical moment when the “small tent” was the primary definition of the genre.

Not “Retro,” (Almost) Not Nostalgic

In continuing to define what I mean by *revivalist antimodernism*, it is necessary to briefly distinguish this antimodernism from “retro,” especially since Ryan Moore’s aforementioned discussion of Tupelo implicitly includes the band within that broader category. Moore draws on Elizabeth Guffey’s *Retro: The Culture of Revival*, wherein she analyzes phenomena as wide-ranging as Art Deco design and the dystopian retro-futurism of bands like Devo, arguing that all these 20th century “retro” artworks express a profound ambivalence about ideas of modernity, positivism, and progress. In this particular sense, “retro” is similar to Tupelo’s antimodernism,

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 6.

²¹ My use of the terms “avant-garde” and “scene-based” in this context is drawn from sociologist Jennifer Lena’s characterization of genre lifespan trajectories in her book *Banding Together*. Jennifer Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 27-64.

²² Russell, “Looking for a Way Out,” 46-50.

as well as in the sense that Guffey argues retro concerns itself with the recent past, as opposed to landscapes and lifestyles of distant agrarian centuries.²³

However, in its most central quality, bemused detachment, retro's constitutive irony differs substantially from the reverent approach Tupelo takes toward American music and culture of the first half of the 20th century. Contrasting retro with both postmodernism and earlier forms of revivalism, Guffey argues:

The seriousness of purpose that shaped older revivals destabilizes retro's non-serious and subversive instincts. Retro does not seek out proud examples of the past; it shuffles through history's unopened closets and unlit corners. Highlighting popular culture, it has adopted post-war American 'Googie' coffee-shop architecture and gangster-style pinstripe suits as easily as Eames chairs and Bauhaus type. But retro's non-seriousness should be distinguished from frivolity.²⁴

Indeed, she suggests, a retro aesthetic is borderline downbeat, implicitly questioning humankind's ability to enact genuine change.

Guffey argues that if there is any nostalgia present in "retro," it is tempered "with a healthy dose of cynicism or detachment," and for me this aversion to pure, untampered nostalgia raises the reasonable question if Tupelo's revivalist antimodernism is nostalgic. The answer is no, at least not nostalgia as defined by Svetlana Boym in her foundational *The Future of Nostalgia*. Again, as with retro, aspects of Boym's definition fit with Tupelo's project: a questioning of modernity, a tendency to dream of utopia.²⁵ Yet when Boym details what she sees as the two tendencies of nostalgia, restorative and reflective, differences from what Tupelo attempt on *March 16-20, 1992* become clear:

Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the

²³ Elizabeth Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 10, 13.

²⁴ *ibid*, 14.

²⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiv-xviii.

imperfect process of remembrance. The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgic characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories. Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time.²⁶

Boym goes on to clarify that while restorative nostalgia takes itself very seriously, reflective nostalgia can be humorous and ironic, and typically deals more with personal memories.²⁷ Thus, having ruled out reflective nostalgia, when considering restorative nostalgia initially the term, with Boym's mention of antimodernism and revivalism, sounds like it may apply to Tupelo's project of playing old cover songs with populist themes. Yet Boym emphasizes throughout her discussion of restorative nostalgia that its proponents are certain in their belief that through their efforts, a nation based on ultimate unerring human truths will be reborn—a rhetorical, seemingly propagandistic strategy which Alastair Bonnett notes, appears as a close cousin to what we typically recognize as fascism.²⁸ Thus, given that Tupelo's project embodies aspects of both kinds of nostalgia but ultimately jives with neither, perhaps their aesthetic is closer to what Boym calls *off-modern*, an “unfinished critical project of modernity, based on an alternate understanding of temporality, not as a teleology of progress or transcendence but as a superimposition and coexistence of heterogeneous times.”²⁹

If revivalist antimodernism is nostalgic at all, it is in the broadest sense articulated by political historian Alastair Bonnett, who argues in *Left in the Past* that despite an institutional rhetoric emphasizing the march of progress and the importance of not looking back, the post-Cold-War left of the US and UK actually acts from out of “a profound sense of loss...not a

²⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 49.

²⁸ Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 42-3.

²⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 30.

cancerous or alien intrusion but integral to the radical imagination,” overlapping with Romanticism in the left, but less glamorous, more awkward.³⁰ Defining left radicalism as a broad anti-capitalist egalitarianism, within that context, what is it we long for? According to Bonnett today “modernity itself is an object of nostalgia and the great utopian projects of the twentieth century have lost their bearings and most of their defenders (with the notable exception of capitalism).”³¹ In the face of that hopeless situation, Bonnett argues, radical left nostalgia, “cannot be named, yet it fulfils an important role, guiding us back to authenticity, to solidarity, to the culture of the people.”³² To a popular music scholar, the notion that authenticity is a place which can be returned to together is rather ludicrous; however, I don’t doubt that this is a motivating mythology for some on the left—witness the recent successes of Bernie Sanders, perceived by many on the left as authentic due to the consistency of his message assailing the rich and powerful. Bonnett’s mention of solidarity and “the culture of the people” calls to mind a populist vision of egalitarian community rooted in working-class culture, which he contrasts in intriguing fashion with the nostalgia of the countercultural left of the 1960s.

Writing on hippie antimodernism of that era, he argues:

Both conservatives and orthodox Marxist commentators found themselves united in a hostility towards the counter-culture’s ‘reactionary revulsion against modernity’ (to cite the conservative critic, Irving Kristol). Yet the nostalgia of critical theory and, more broadly, of the counter-culture, was always ambivalent. It cannot be adequately summarized as either elitist or populist. Indeed, it often acts to confound and confuse such designations and, by extension, the ability of radicals to ever be entirely ‘at home’ with either modernity or anti-modernity. Moreover, the challenge to modernity was already emerging as much more than a marginal, or residual, current.³³

³⁰ Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the Past*, 3-4.

³¹ *ibid*, 3.

³² *ibid*, 7.

³³ *ibid*, 33.

As noted in my Chapter 1, part of the counter-culture's power was found in its questioning of the rational, bureaucratic structures of modern society. However, one potential drawback of this approach was that the individual's personal growth could take priority, as the Sixties drew to a close. In contrast, Bonnett's nostalgia is typically for imagined or historically factual moments of left collective action. It is within this framework that Tupelo's revivalist antimodernism makes the most sense, seeing as their longing is for modes of collectivity (such as the Popular Front, or the more progressive side of the 1890s Populist movement), not imagined pre-agrarian landscapes or social worlds.

A Word on Definition

Having defined what revivalist antimodernism is *not*, it's appropriate to briefly state the sense in which I *am* using the two words within the term. By "revivalist," I draw on the word's resonances provided by Neil V. Rosenberg in his introduction to his edited anthology, *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*. Rosenberg notes that "revival" was first used widely among young urban folk revivalists of the early 1960s to describe their movement, although it also was used—less frequently—to describe the pre-World War Two folk revival in *Sing Out!* magazine, as well as by Cecil Sharp in the early 20th century to express his hope that his folk song collecting would lead to a "rebirth" of British culture.³⁴ Certainly, the pointed mass culture critique of the Sixties folk revival (more on this momentarily), and Sharp's antimodernism are ancestors feeding into my use of the term vis-à-vis Tupelo.

In discussing the resonances of "revivalism" Rosenberg also notes the common issue associated with folk revivals, in that often it is middle-class college-educated revivalists

³⁴ Neil V. Rosenberg, "Introduction," in *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed. Neil V. Rosenberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 17.

collecting and/or performing the music of rural working-class people. Noting that academics have differing opinions on the valences of this dynamic, Rosenberg writes that “some, stressing the social elite point of view, argue that revivals are commercial middle-class institutions that fall outside the definition of folk music proper. Others, holding to the social consensus point of view, respond that folk music is not and has never been the pure stream that the social elitists’ argument implies.”³⁵ Rosenberg’s discussion interests me here because Tupelo’s relationship to “folk culture,” as I will sketch momentarily, contained aspects of both trajectories, with the band members growing up on ‘70s arena rock but also relishing learning to play traditional songs from old Folkways records. They were insider/outside to country music in a way that informed their left-wing populist perspective on the genre and its traditions.

Finally, it’s also worth noting that for Rosenberg, “revival” also has resonance vis-à-vis Christianity, being used to describe religious re-awakenings, charismatic and evangelical Christianity since the 19th century in the U.S.³⁶ This is where Rosenberg’s discussion overlaps with T.J. Jackson Lears’ renowned work on American antimodernism, *No Place of Grace*. In his dissection of antimodernism at the turn of the last century, encompassing everything from Arts & Crafts furniture makers to folk song collectors, Lears argues that the primary aspect of then-contemporary capitalist culture these artists and activists rebelled against was *rationalization*, both in the sense of Taylorism in factory work, and in terms of what he calls “the Victorian ethic of self-control,” which he argues came to dictate a society anti-modernists increasingly perceived as frighteningly atomized and self-directed, drowning in new urban creature comforts and

³⁵ Rosenberg, “Introduction,” 20.

³⁶ *ibid*, 17.

avoidant of community responsibilities.³⁷ Within what Lears calls the rationalization and “secularization” of Protestant Christianity of the time, when Christians came to view Satan as merely a metaphor for life’s unproductive temptations, the possibility for true spiritual satisfaction diminished.³⁸ As such, he views the fire-and-brimstone of Pentecostals and other evangelical Christians of the era as embodying the quest for intensity of feeling and experience that characterized antimodernism then and—as he noted upon the publication of the book’s second edition—also in the excesses of the Reagan era, which he saw as parallel to the 1890s.³⁹ As I will show in my discussion of Tupelo’s covers of Christian-based material, the band—though avowed non-believers themselves—sought to use devotional songs to foster an intensity of feeling with a similarly anti-modern, populist political charge.

The Rock Context

To what extent Tupelo succeeded in their efforts depends on how much one believes that capitalism continually incorporates and (at least partly) neutralizes artistic protest movements against the status quo. T.J. Jackson Lears is rather downbeat on this question, noting that anti-modernists such as Arts & Crafts leader Gustav Stickley perceived do-it-yourself furniture-making not as a revolution but rather as a kind of personal therapy; Lears uses Stickley to illustrate his larger argument that ultimately turn-of-century antimodernism eased its followers’ accommodation into the rationalized capitalism they claimed to oppose.⁴⁰

³⁷ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the transformation of American culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 14.

³⁸ *ibid*, 42-44.

³⁹ *ibid*, xi.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, xiii.

In sketching the limits of counter-or-sub-cultural protest within broader capitalism, I notice parallels to Keir Keightley's discussion of rock's political valences in "Reconsidering Rock," an important theoretical piece grounding our understanding of how and why Tupelo sought to bring politics "back" to rock in the late '80s/early '90s. What Keightley asks the reader to reconsider about rock is the idea—despite many Sixties' rockers professions of hope that the music could spark a genuine revolution—that rock was ever truly outside the structures of mainstream capitalist society. Distinguishing "rock" from earlier "rock 'n' roll," Keightley notes rock's origins in middle-class youth culture, its presence on national charts from its inception, its ease in incorporating instrumentation which could catch the ears of pop listeners. In so doing, he argues against the common narrative that rock was "co-opted;" rock could not sell out when it was already at the center of the charts and most of the western world since the Sixties.⁴¹

As I briefly mentioned earlier, Keightley argues the defining value driving rock culture is seriousness; he believes that while rock pays lip service to "serious" political protest, the seriousness he refers to here is one of exclusion and differentiation in *taste*. Rock views itself as something "more" than just entertainment, an affective charge which Lawrence Grossberg rather uncritically says rock fans "know...distinguishes it from other music."⁴² Though rock fans are at times wary of being perceived as elitist in the mode of Western art music enthusiasts, they undoubtedly borrow from that tradition of evaluation and distinction, and even more so, he argues, from the mass-culture critique rock inherited from the Sixties folk revival, whose participants prized themselves on a sound and style that was "uncorrupted."⁴³

⁴¹ Kier Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," 122-6.

⁴² Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, 86.

⁴³ Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," 121.

Though Keightley focuses implicitly on the legacy of Sixties and Seventies classic rock, work by Wendy Fonarow and Ryan Hibbett on punk/indie music of the 1980s and '90s demonstrates that the ideology of "serious" taste distinction continues as a driving force behind this subgenre (within whose broader umbrella we would include Uncle Tupelo and alt.country). Fonarow notes that indie's veneration of guitar bands continues classic rock's celebration of the rebel archetype, "a positive model of individualism in the postwar years," whom rock ideology wields as an avatar of seriousness (i.e. authenticity) contra the technological innovations and perceived anonymity of pop genres like dance music.⁴⁴ Hibbett notes that in a world where rock music is now so ubiquitous as to be background muzak at the supermarket, punk/indie fans demonstrate their seriousness of intent by seeking out and championing increasingly obscure bands; the subcultural capital accrued via fans' curatorial labor marking them as members of the scene, contra the masses who "have no taste."⁴⁵

In her ethnographic study of the Brooklyn alternative country scene, a scene she readily identifies as more shaped by indie rock ideology than country, Anne Kathryn Hohman articulates so usefully how alt.country rhetoric utilizes country music to make taste distinctions which ultimately reinforce the rock-seriousness dynamic outlined by Keightley. Crucially, she argues that alt.country scene participants make distinctions between "good" (old) and "bad" (new) forms of country music which are loaded with class distinctions. She interviews alt.country musicians who insist they only play older forms of country which no longer receive radio airtime, and quotes a respondent who insists that, in contrast, only "clueless minions" enjoy and listen to the music on contemporary country radio. From these comments she argues that:

⁴⁴ Wendy Fonarow, *Empire of dirt: The aesthetics and rituals of British indie music* (Middletown: Wesley University Press, 2009), 73.

⁴⁵ Ryan Hibbett, "What is Indie Rock?", *Popular Music and Society* 28:1 (February 2005): 57.

In this discourse of prioritizing “classic” styles, and rejecting “mainstream” ones, there was an embedded simultaneous articulation of both *closeness and distance* to two different versions of lower class categories: a kind of “working-class,” “folk” category was identified with, and a “mass” category was strongly opposed. In the discourse against “mainstream,” “commercial” music, participants *additionally* called up, and opposed, something like a “corporate” or “moneyed” class.⁴⁶

In some ways this fascinating dynamic, the middle-class bifurcated imaginary of the working-class mind, predates rock. As Benjamin Filene notes in his book *Romancing the Folk*, famed early 20th-century British folk song collector Cecil Sharp expressed a fervent hope that his widespread popularization of old-sounding folk songs he collected from working-class respondents in Appalachia would help the very same respondents give up singing the more “course music-hall songs” he found “vulgar” on a day-to-day basis, “civilizing” them.⁴⁷

However, the rhetorical schizophrenia wherein one can view country music as both specifically “low-class” but also “corporate” seems unique to alt.country and, within a broader umbrella, certainly part of rock’s logic of serious distinction. Uncle Tupelo routinely delivered this precise rhetoric in interviews in the early 1990s, rhetoric that constitutes the genre:

As an old George Jones CD plays on a boom box, Uncle Tupelo's Jay Farrar, in a rare talkative spell, begins to bemoan the decline of mainstream country music. "Country was always around when we were growing up," he says. "We'd hear it through our parents, at family gatherings and stuff. But the definition of country we're talking about is definitely not the contemporary Nashville sound."

"What we used to hear sounded more like this stuff," adds Farrar's friend and partner, Jeff Tweedy, nodding towards the speakers, "or Hank Williams - late '50s and early '60s country. The stuff going on now doesn't have much to do with that anymore. There's something wrong when Garth Brooks lists one of his main inspirations as Journey."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Anne Kathryn Hohman, “Brooklyn Country,” 124.

⁴⁷ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 22-3.

⁴⁸ Jason Fine, “Heart of the Country,” *Option Magazine*, November/December 1993, accessed May 20, 2016, http://www.gumbopages.com/music/uncle-tupelo/text/heart_of_the_country.html.

At times, in interviews the band members even resisted use of the word *country* in any form to describe what they attempting musically, due to their perceived connotations of the term:

"Calling us country-rock is probably one of the worst things you could do, given today's standards," groans Uncle Tupelo bassist Jeff Tweedy, shuddering at the very mention of Garth Brooks. Of course, nobody would mistake the scrappy sound of this Belleville, Illinois trio for the mainstream ooze he calls "pop music marketed for Midwestern housewives."⁴⁹

The division is clear: George Jones was/is the music of working-class communitas, "the folk" (despite his many orchestra-laden country radio hits), whereas contemporary country takes its orders from Journey, and delivers its product to "Midwestern housewives," two cultural entities which can be read in this context as both "low-class" and corporate-controlled in some way.

Folk-Punk Populism and the Minutemen's Influence on Uncle Tupelo

Here I have hopefully established that not only does alt.country fully participate in rock's logic of serious distinction, but that Tupelo fully supported and reproduced this logic. Having said this, though, my purpose in this chapter is to demonstrate that Tupelo's innovation was to fuse this logic of distinction with an elaboration upon populist "folk" themes, in a sincere effort to advocate for political change that could help actual living working people. Despite of and in productive tension *with* the mass-culture-critique-inspired logic of distinction, there have long existed strands of folky rock and punk which actively, self-consciously seek to bridge the sizable gap between rock's middle- and working-class constituencies.

Looking back on rock's Sixties genesis, Simon Frith notes that the genre's founding critical voices argued in house organs like *Rolling Stone* that rock was a kind of folk music in that "firstly, the music was an authentic 'reflection of experience;' secondly, the music reflected

⁴⁹ Jon Young, "Uncle Tupelo," *Musician*, December 1993, 17.

the experience of a community—there was no distinction of social experience between performer and audience.”⁵⁰ When punk arrived in the mid-1970s, Frith argued in a related article, part of why it was celebrated by many left intellectuals is that it seemed to reinforce and amplify these earlier rock claims of representing community—and potentially even leading that community into direct cross-class political rebellion. This was particularly true in the British political punk that later helped inspire American hardcore, as Ryan Moore notes, glossing Frith’s argument:

The raw amateurism and emotional immediacy of the music were thought to reflect the status of working-class youth in late-1970s Britain. Frith argued that this was a “realist” aesthetic because it judged music as a medium of true or false representations about an external reality, and is thus derived from broader theories that suggest “media images represent reality as if through a window or in a mirror.” He maintained that this aesthetic was connected to a populist sensibility expressed in punk’s DIY ethic, which made amateurism and simplicity into virtues, because punk was imagined to be a new kind of folk music and the basis for a democratic community.⁵¹

What complicates this folk-as-punk romantic logic, Frith notes, is that most of the British punks interested in singing about working-class concerns had gone to art school and were quite conscious of punk as mediated interpretation of, not just a straightforward mirror to, “dole queue” life. As Frith puts it, a lyricist like Joe Strummer was well-aware of many a folk revival cliché about “bringing the people together” and in contrast sought to express an artier populism.⁵² Ryan Moore, building on Frith’s point, calls this a tension between “realist/populist” and “formalist/vanguard” poles in left-wing political ‘70s/’80s punk, with the Clash in the former camp, Gang of Four in the latter, and both groups inspiring Tupelo, who covered both bands’

⁵⁰ Simon Frith, “‘The Magic That Can Set You Free’: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community,” in *Popular Music: A Yearbook, Volume 1, Folk or Popular?: Distinctions, Influences, Continuities*, eds. Richard Middleton and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 159.

⁵¹ Ryan Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, 48.

⁵² Simon Frith, “Formalism, Realism, and Leisure: The Case of Punk,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), 167.

songs in concert.⁵³ In general, while a decent amount has been written on Tupelo's country influences, their populist inspiration from punk of this ilk has been under-acknowledged.

Consider the the Minutemen, a three-piece band comprised of the sons of soldiers and mechanics, from the blue-collar port town San Pedro (in Los Angeles), who started out in hardcore punk but self-consciously mixed folk, funk, and mariachi into their sound as the 1980s progressed. Fitting in some ways the mythic rock archetype of working-class kids who went to art school (but then dropped out), the Minutemen broke from rock tradition with their extremely short songs, avant-garde arrangements, and an ultra-low-budget DIY approach to touring that the band called "jamming econo."⁵⁴ Ryan Moore recalls that upon asking co-songwriter Mike Watt if the band sought to write working-class songs (implicitly, calls-to-arms), Watt told him instead that their hyper-political lyrics arose organically as direct reflections of their working-class lives. At the same time, though, the band's incorporation of arty influences, ranging from Captain Beefheart to Dada, guaranteed that their challenging songs landed them firmly between the "realist/populist" and "formalist/vanguard" punk polarities outlined above by Moore.⁵⁵

With provocative song titles such "Bob Dylan Wrote Propaganda Songs" surely chiming with Jay Farrar and Jeff Tweedy's twinned interests in left-wing politics and folk-rock tradition, the Minutemen figured as a huge inspiration for the young Uncle Tupelo, with the band covering many Minutemen songs in concert, adopting their "jam econo" approach to touring, and even penning a 1991 tribute song to recently-deceased frontman D. Boon, wherein Tweedy directly

⁵³ "Live Covers," Factory Belt: The Unofficial Uncle Tupelo Archives, accessed May 20, 2016, http://www.factorybelt.net/covers_live.htm. See also Ryan Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, 49.

⁵⁴ These general biographical details are culled from Michael Azerrad's excellent chapter on the Minutemen in his chronicle of the 1980s American punk/indie underground, *Our Band Could Be Your Life*. Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 2001), 61-84.

⁵⁵ Ryan Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, 73.

takes on their mantle: “Part of what he was is a part of me now.”⁵⁶ Though acknowledged in passing by a handful of journalists, the Minutemen’s influence on not only Tupelo’s left-populist lyrics but especially the *music* of the first two Tupelo albums is underexplored—particularly considering song structure.⁵⁷ The Minutemen were well-known in the hardcore punk community for short songs that stopped and started multiple times (within a song) in asymmetrical time signatures, drawing somewhat from the tight “breaks” of funk artists like James Brown, but also, Michael Azerrad notes, from the “irregular rhythms” of Captain Beefheart’s art-rock. Azerrad quotes Beefheart on his stop-start rhythms that “I’m doing a non-hypnotic music to break up the catatonic state;” Azerrad then draws a direct parallel to Mike Watt’s statement in 1985 that “Music can inspire people to wake up and say, ‘Somebody’s lying.’ This is the point I’d like to make with my music...Challenge...what’s expected of you.”

The Minutemen thus made a near-explicit connection between rhythms that jerk or stutter and lyrics which encouraged listeners to think hard about the ravages of post-industrial capitalism and their personal place within systems of oppression. I hear this musical/lyrical synthesis replicated quite clearly in several of the “rockers” from Uncle Tupelo’s first two albums. A noteworthy example is the opening track on Tupelo’s 1990 debut LP *No Depression*, “Graveyard Shift,” wherein the song’s narrator speaks with a friend who has just finished a night shift at work, informing him “there’s much you missed,” but acknowledging in the song’s chorus

⁵⁶ Uncle Tupelo, *Still Feel Gone*, Rockville Records 6070-2, 1991, compact disc. On Tupelo’s many live covers of Minutemen songs, please see the aforementioned “Live Covers” page at Factory Belt: The Unofficial Uncle Tupelo Archives. Regarding Tupelo’s adoption of the Minutemen’s “jam econo” philosophy, see Thomas Crone, “The Men From Uncle: Belleville’s Uncle Tupelo Goes Buck Naked,” *The Riverfront Times*, August 26-September 1, 1992, accessed May 20, 2016, http://www.factorybelt.net/articles/rft_8-92.htm. Crone, in an interview, notes the band’s low-budget approach, to which Jeff Tweedy replies, “We just want to stay out of debt and just operate on a break-even level. It’s really un-American, but it’s the way we try to do it.”

⁵⁷ For brief popular press references to the Minutemen vis-à-vis Tupelo, see: Jim Patterson, “Uncle Tupelo’s Sound Back in Circulation,” *Athens Banner Herald*, March 14, 2002, accessed May 20, 2016, http://onlineathens.com/stories/031402/ent_0314020023.shtml#.V0pJSpErLIV.

that “Well, time won’t wait/Better open the gate/Get out and start what needs to be done,” implicitly referring to making a living through manual or service-industry labor.⁵⁸ While singing these words in the chorus, at 0:39-0:41 and 0:46-0:48 the music dramatically drops out entirely, Farrar and Tweedy’s voices harmonizing with precision on “Get out and start what needs to be done” over silence, before the band breaks into a loud 8th-note riff from 0:48-0:51, as if in angry nonverbal response to the demands of their friend’s backbreaking job. The song features several other instances where a pointed break in the music seems to answer a lyric. For instance, at the end of the song’s chorus, the narrator reminds his friend “Can’t look away/The powers that be/Might take it all away,” the music cuts out entirely over Farrar’s “all away,” and at 2:15 (the end of the moment of silence) the bass guitar and drums are the sole instruments in the mix, the bass moving up from I to IV in a single, prominent quarter note that draws listener anticipation as to Farrar’s next line, seemingly in answer: “Together we burn/Together we’ll burn either way,” this time with the full band loud behind him.

A similar strong influence of the Minutemen’s song structures is heard in the hard-rocking track “Punch Drunk” on Tupelo’s 1991 sophomore album *Still Feel Gone*, which opens with an ascending then descending 16 quarter-note, loudly-amplified bass figure (0:03-0:09), while drummer Mike Heindorn plays complex syncopated fills emphasizing the almost percussive quality of the bass.⁵⁹ This is a dynamic which is heard on the many Minutemen songs where bass is the lead instrument, with similar ascending/descending patterns. The song also features more dramatic Minutemen-inspired moments where the music drops out entirely, such as at 0:28 when the band goes silent as Farrar finishes singing the very end of the line “Someone

⁵⁸ Uncle Tupelo, *No Depression*, Rockville Records 6050-2, 1990, compact disc.

⁵⁹ Uncle Tupelo, *Still Feel Gone*.

someday will say FOR WHAT?” (in response to the prior lyric “Everybody’s spending his time/Just building and making”). It seems evident that Tupelo was determined to not simply copy the Minutemen’s stop-start trick by this point but also embellish upon it, as Farrar sings the line in a noticeably rhythmically “free” fashion, with “someone someday” behind the beat and “FOR WHAT?” directly on it, the correction ramping up the intensity.

This fluidity of vocal delivery, seeming to lightly echo everything from the “talking blues” style of a Sixties folk singer to some of D. Boon’s more experimental Minutemen vocals, stands in stark contrast with the precision of the rhythm section’s stop-start moment. This combined musical effect emphasizes the exasperation of the lyric “FOR WHAT?”, a sentiment which in fact accurately describes the narrator’s perspective in the entire song. “Punch Drunk” is one of several Tupelo songs in which abstract characters (“you”) perform routinized menial labor, whether “9 to 5 in a blind alley,” or “working away on a rebuilt freeway,” Farrar seeming to suggest here that white, pink, and blue-collar workers are connected in their shared oppression by the relentless drive of modern capitalism’s work-day clock (a recurrent Farrar image). On the whole the song is notable for expanding upon “Graveyard Shift’s” simpler message of anger at capital’s exploitation of human labor, this time sketching a dystopian city where commerce has overpowered spirituality and anti-modern pastoral idylls are sought but definitely not found:

God still reads the headlines
 The front page: “Hope is missing”
 Working away on a rebuilt freeway
 Straight away from the slash and burn cities
 Hindsight is there
 On a road sign pointed nowhere
 No one gets off here
 No way to slow down
 There's peace of mind somewhere

For every someone that never thinks about it⁶⁰

Animating this lyric is some of Tupelo's noisiest music on record, with background squalls of guitar feedback (uncharacteristic in the band's oeuvre) beginning around 0:55 and continuing most of the rest of the song. Farrar pushes his typically rather sedate vocals to their near-breaking point at 1:06-7, his pitch unexpectedly jumping up an octave as he shouts out the end of the word "hindsight" with an audibly grainy, hoarse timbre.

The song's title is "Punch Drunk," suggesting a barroom setting common to many songs on Tupelo's first two albums. In this small-town barroom, Robert Russell notes in his perceptive analysis of Tupelo's drinking songs, alcohol is posited as solitary pursuit where working-class men young and old turn to quite literally numb the pain of their grueling workaday existence. He hears desperation in these songs, but lauds Tupelo for their subtle identification of the broader socioeconomic forces driving the misery behind the drinking within the song. For instance, in the quite-representative "I Got Drunk," the narrator, drunk himself, turns to a fellow drinker at the bar and remarks:

Another slow day in this damn town
Keep asking yourself, "Why am I still hangin' around?"
You spend half your time just staring into a beer
What you need, man, you can't find here⁶¹

Russell characterizes the sentiment, amplified by its suggestion of Rust Belt deindustrialization as the cause of the pain, as desperate, and I do agree. The aspect missing from his analysis is the righteous *anger* communicated by the music, in this song and other barroom rockers in Tupelo's oeuvre, including the two I just sketched above. "I Got Drunk" is loud, fast, and characterized by the straightforward duple-time feel associated with "classic" punk like the Ramones. Its

⁶⁰ Uncle Tupelo, *Still Feel Gone*.

⁶¹ Uncle Tupelo, "I Got Drunk," Rockville Records 6055-7, 1990, 7" vinyl single.

alternation between minor-key verses and major-key choruses (“I got drunk/And I fell down” being the simple refrain) is at once both distinctly early-Nineties alternative rock and also cathartic in the mode of a Bruce Springsteen song about similar small-town frustrations of young men, such as “Badlands” from 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town*.

My larger point here is that, following the pointed example of the Minutemen, Uncle Tupelo worked to inject anger into lyrics which otherwise read as fairly morose, entirely through stop-start rhythms, fast tempos, and loud guitars. A lyric such as “Punch Drunk” would appear rather pathetic on the page, but with the frenetic musical backdrop described above, the song instead expresses emotional resonances of frustration, catharsis, an urge to escape; the narrator is understood as angrily resenting the status quo. In this dynamic I find a marked contrast with a songwriting tradition which upon first glance would seem completely of a piece with Tupelo’s mission: the “hard country” drinking songs of performers such as George Jones.

In her seminal 2001 book on the subject, Barbara Ching argues that hard country performers such as Jones, Merle Haggard, and Hank Williams are in their own way just as engaged with the logic of “distinction” as are rock musicians, but that their type of distinction works to reassert the continued relevance of “low-class” status; as she sees it, hard country performers take “country” as an insult and run with it, drowning themselves in self-deprecation, refusing redemption as a tenet of the subgenre.⁶² Ching argues that hard country’s “incurable dis-ease” with the modern world finds its most textbook expression in what she calls the “burlesque abjection” of honky-tonk songs like David Allan Coe’s “This Bottle in My Hand.” In songs such as these, where decrepit male narrators make a spectacle of their drunkenness, reveling in self-loathing humorous wordplay while refusing to change their ways, a form of

⁶² Barbara Ching, *Wrong’s What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3, 16.

“low” culture is confrontationally presented to the listener.⁶³ But black humor is the key, and the source of the subgenre’s vibrancy and charm.

As sketched above, Tupelo’s barroom songs of hardship, in contrast, are deadly serious. Similar to hard country, the characters drown themselves in drink to deal with pain, but unlike in hard country Tupelo’s narrators are rarely self-deprecating, instead turning to their stoolmate to argue forcefully that the situation must change (“You spend half your time just staring into a beer/What you need, man, you can’t find here”). In these scenes of honky-tonk sermonizing, coupled with the angry energy of the music itself, Tupelo’s populism here comes not from country but from the punk-folk tradition I outlined above. In dramatizing the drunken pain of individuals who fail to confront the invisible hand of post-industrial capitalism that oppresses them, Tupelo’s early rock songs implicitly urge collective political action instead.

Inside/Outside the Screen Door

Though I have now explained how Tupelo harnessed underground rock traditions and musical energies to discuss working-class concerns on the uptempo side of their oeuvre, since the band mellowed a bit with their second (and final) two albums, incorporating more country-inspired material, it important to now explain how the band’s interpretation of “country” allowed them to bring additional angles on left-wing populism into the mix. Simply put, as outlined above within rock’s logic of distinction, the type of country music favored by Tupelo was of the “folk” variety—even if “folk” in their very selective vision included a George Jones record from the 1970s. Country music that was old-ish, rougher-sounding, and expressing *communitas* in some way seemed to fit their vague definition. Tupelo’s early song “Screen Door,” from their debut LP, presents on record musical attributes along these lines, in the service of a portrait of

⁶³ Barbara Ching, *Wrong’s What I Do Best*, 27, 36.

small-town music-making which Wilco/Tupelo biographer Greg Kot argues was autobiographical. One of the first songs Jeff Tweedy wrote, by the time of Kot's book in 2004 Tweedy dismissed the song's "stupid lyrics," suggesting that "the raw material back then that I had to work with was so little, so spartan." Kot agrees but argues, "Tweedy made a virtue of his limitations because they forced him to sing about the only world he knew; his own."⁶⁴

While Kot's narrative firmly links the artist's perceived "real" life with performance persona in a predictable bid for community "representation" within rock ideology, it is undeniably to Tweedy's credit as a songwriter that the first and last verses of the song evocatively draw the listener into and then out of a humid Southern town where "sweat drips from the tip of your nose," and where "sometimes it snows, but when it does, it doesn't last long," immediately grounding this world in regional specifics that feel "real." Describing a group of musician friends who "all still have a lot of fun" despite the fact they "never saw much school," the core of Tweedy's scene is the middle two verses:

Down here, where we're at
All we do is sit on the porch
Play our songs, and nothing's wrong
Sometimes friends come along
They all sing along

Down here, where we're at
Everybody is equally poor
Down here, we don't care
We don't care what happens outside the screen door⁶⁵

Aspects of the musical setting seem specifically designed to help the listener imagine she is being welcomed into the porch's song circle. For instance, from 0:00-0:03 there is a single track of strummed acoustic guitar performing solo; at 0:04 a harmonica and a second acoustic guitar,

⁶⁴ Greg Kot, *Wilco: Learning How to Die*, 27.

⁶⁵ Uncle Tupelo, *No Depression*.

double-tracked, jump in; the double-tracking and noticeable studio compression create the feeling that the listener is now fully surrounded by the rich resonances of acoustic guitars, the whole “group” strumming. Furthermore, though Tweedy performs the vocal on the song’s first verse completely by himself, at 0:40 Farrar joins in with a close harmony for the second verse, mixed at an equal level with Tweedy, creating the impression they are sitting side-by-side. At 1:08 Farrar’s harmony has dropped out, replaced by another harmony by Tupelo producer Sean Slade, this time mixed to sound as though he is off to Tweedy’s right, further in the distance. These musical choices are presented to give the impression of a group of individual musicians tentatively beginning a song introduced by one member of the circle, then gaining confidence.

Considering the song’s instrumentation, the presence of harmonica and fiddle may signify as “country” to listeners—particularly due to their absence on all other tracks of the album—but the fiddle playing features a rough timbre and is numbingly repetitive, mostly alternating between two pitches the entire course of the song, more in the style of a revivalist “old-time” band such as the Fuzzy Mountain String Band. This is one of Tupelo’s lowest-fidelity acoustic songs on record. The song’s harmony is fairly standard for a folk or country song as I-IV-I-V-IV-I, but the song’s repeated turnaround in the chorus is a bit more complex: V-vi-IV-V-vi-IV. This suggests a degree of architectural foresight in the song’s construction, as if to nudge it slightly closer in structure to a post-WWII commercially-released country song.

This slight, productive, tension between “country” and “folk” in the song’s arrangement to me speaks to the band’s own liminal status within the traditions they were at this point tentatively trying to represent and do justice to. Tweedy and Farrar both grew up to varying degrees with their parents listening to country music, although both have said that this was not their initial music of personal choice in their formative teen years (rather: mainstream rock, then

punk).⁶⁶ On one basic level of (auto)biographical detail, we cannot take “Screen Door” as a transparently “true” story, seeing as Tweedy told Kot that he wrote the lyrics while playing hooky from class one day at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, where he was a student.⁶⁷ In contrast, the song’s narrator, in an implied Southern dialect not shared by Tweedy, “never saw much school.”

As is well-known by alt.country fans the world over, Uncle Tupelo’s members were all born and raised in the small town of Belleville, Illinois, located in the southwest of the state about a 30 minute drive from the center of St. Louis. A town of about 40,000 when Tupelo’s members were in their teens, Belleville’s citizens—mostly white, of German descent, and working-class—found steady employment in the town’s many manufacturing centers, railroad-related industries, and the local Stag brewery.⁶⁸ Tweedy was the son of a railroad employee and an interior decorator, and Farrar’s father was a retired merchant marine. As Greg Kot notes, by the late 1980s Belleville had become a less economically-desirable place to live, due to the closure of the Stag brewery and other manufacturers; the center of Belleville came to resemble the look of many deindustrialized small towns in the Midwest and South to this day: boarded-up storefronts, and a general lack of opportunity and things to do for young people.⁶⁹

Despite this, it is evident from available biographical information that Tweedy and Farrar grew up on approximately the lower rungs of a middle-class existence. Tweedy’s father eventually became a supervisor on the railroad, and Farrar’s mother opened a used bookstore in

⁶⁶ See Tweedy’s comment in an interview, “It takes a while, I think, for a young person to admit they like country, much less play or try to play it,” in the context of their teenage years playing rock music. Ed Masley, “Mix of Punk and Country? Say Uncle,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 27, 1994, accessed May 20, 2016, http://www.factorybelt.net/articles/pit_02-27-94.htm.

⁶⁷ Greg Kot, *Wilco: Learning How to Die*, 27.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 12. Tim Grierson, *Wilco: Sunken Treasure*, 2.

⁶⁹ Greg Kot, *Wilco: Learning How to Die*, 13, 16.

town, where she employed her son; this was his day job during the early years of Tupelo. Greg Kot recounts how “Mostly, this required him to prop his feet up on the couch and plow through her collection of English lit classics and Beat novels.” Kot also notes that Tweedy secured a day job clerking at Euclid Records, “one of the few cutting-edge record stores in St. Louis,” where the band members also met their eventual manager Tony Margherita.⁷⁰ My point in recounting this information is that despite being raised in modest, nominally working-class small-town circumstances, both Tweedy and Farrar were in positions where they acquired considerable cultural capital, including extensive knowledge of art and music traditions from big cities; this was not typical of young men their age in Belleville. As mentioned earlier, both Tweedy and Farrar were raised by families with amateur music-makers who liked to sit at home playing country, folk, and (acoustic) Sixties rock songs; however, both families had just enough resources to provide basic electric guitars and garage practice space when the teens took an interest in playing rock music—the genre they focused on exclusively for more than five years.⁷¹

Despite their tendencies as fans to gleefully mythologize the larger-than-life qualities of performers like George Jones, Tweedy and Farrar were and are refreshingly straightforward in interviews about what they perceive as their own distance from the heart of country music tradition. In a 1997 interview with *Rolling Stone*, Tweedy remarked upon the over-enthusiastic response to *March 16-20, 1992* from some fans and how this made him uncomfortable:

"The *March* album was the one where people really went overboard," Tweedy says. "People really wanted to believe that we were coal miners: 'They've been sitting on the back porch playing these songs with their granddaddies.' No, man. We learned the songs at the library. Bought 'em on records." In fact, most of the public-domain material covered by Tupelo on the *March* album came from a Rounder Records compilation of old folk and country tunes, *High Atmosphere*.⁷²

⁷⁰ Greg Kot, *Wilco: Learning How to Die*, 25.

⁷¹ *ibid*, 14-18.

⁷² David Fricke, "Wilco: Not Just a Country Rock Band," *Rolling Stone*, March 20, 1997, 54-6.

This interview is one of many in which Tweedy expresses his love for reissue box sets of 1920s and '30s country music recordings, and his immersion in the back catalogues of Rounder and Folkways Records.⁷³ In Tweedy's (and Farrar's) enthusiasm for sifting through what are essentially archival materials as fans and songwriters, I detect notes of the punk/indie curatorial impulse as described above by Ryan Hibbett. Additionally, through their curatorial, tastemaking labor they can arguably be counted among the cultural middlemen who are the subject of Benjamin Filene's study of contemporary folk revivals, *Romancing the Folk*. Filene documents the intensive work undertaken by a cultural middleman such as Archive of American Folk Song director Alan Lomax, to attempt to mold performers such as Lead Belly into an image of "the primitive" for pre-World War Two folk revival audiences. Filene argues, "Revival audiences yearn to identify with folk figures, but that identification is premised on difference... 'The primitive' becomes a symbol that could encompass violence, sex, irrationality, and at the same time, noble innocence and childlike naïveté." This identification/othering dyad is part of what he calls the "outsider populism" of the 1930s: "a tendency...to locate America's strength and vibrancy in the margins of society," whether the hobo, the traveling bluesman, or the Okie migrant. Of course, Filene notes "outsider populism" is an intentionally oxymoronic term, because of the paradox: "how can one build populism around those outside 'the people'?"⁷⁴

In Tweedy's discomfort with being perceived as a "primitive" by alt.country fans—an actual coal miner, as he notes some believed—and his professed enjoyment of digging through libraries of sound, while also at times bragging about his roots in Belleville and the band's lack of desire to leave (which they did not, through their breakup in 1994), I note the band negotiating

⁷³ For instance, see Parry Gettelman, "Uncle Tupelo Country Vein," Mines Rock's *The Orlando Sentinel*, February 4, 1994, accessed May 29, 2016, http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1994-02-04/entertainment/9402030819_1_uncle-tupelo-tweedy-tangents.

⁷⁴ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 63-65.

an insider/outsider status to country and “folk” tradition which distinctly colored their revivalist antimodernism. In straddling the line between outsider populism and something more “universal”—an imagined American folk culture—it seems that the band’s aesthetic strategy was painstaking *sincerity* at almost all times. Tweedy expressed as much in a retrospective interview with Greg Kot in 2004, about the recording of *March 16-20, 1992*:

We had definitely made the connection that folk and country music was as direct and as raw as punk rock, but we respected it to the point that we didn’t feel comfortable playing it...We felt like we had to earn the right to play it. The only way to do that record was to not overthink it, to let it be what folk music was, as much a moment in a field recording as it could be. The only reason that a bunch of twenty-two-year-old kids could approach that music and have the audacity to play some of these songs that are eighty years old and have it sound at all sincere or real is that (a) we really believed it and (b) we didn’t go back and change it. We didn’t grow up in the hills; we weren’t removed from the mainstream society like someone sitting out on a porch singing the ‘Old Holler.’ But we felt pretty cut off from what everybody else was doing anyway.⁷⁵

I will say more momentarily about the band’s fixation on live recording (compared to a “field recording” here), but here it is worth noting Tweedy’s clever last sentence, in which he neatly articulates an insider/outsider subject position: the band may have been insiders to the burgeoning alt.country scene in the Belleville/St. Louis area, but as he sees it they were outsiders to both “backwoods” musical tradition and also loud alternative rock music (with their all-acoustic album at the moment grunge “broke”). But paradoxically, in identifying himself as a contemporary outsider, he implicitly aligns himself with the outsiders of “folk”-country tradition.

This perspective is notable in the sincere intensity with which Tweedy engages what are essentially abstract hillbilly stereotypes in “Screen Door.” S. Renee Dechert, in her analysis of *No Depression*, argues that “Screen Door” provides a rare respite from “the kinds of power relationships that...so dominat[e] *No Depression*,” because in this song circle as described by Tweedy’s narrator, “everybody is equally poor”. She notes, “there’s no mention of alcohol or

⁷⁵ Kot, *Wilco: Learning How to Die*, 60.

religion; instead community and music provide an answer.”⁷⁶ I agree, and in this way the song is important as one of Tupelo’s initial statements of belief regarding the implicit political power of musical community, which they would revisit with greater depth and specificity on *March 16-20, 1992*. Having said that, Dechert’s analysis doesn’t take note of the fact that aspects in the characterization of the song circle’s members edge close to “hillbilly” imagery: “Sweat drips from the tip of your nose,” “We all still have a lot of fun/Never saw much school,” “We don’t care what happens outside the screen door,” “All we do is sit out on the porch.” Since we cannot know with any certainty whether Tweedy “really” considered such lyrics descriptive of himself and his Belleville friends (though my guess is no, not completely), it is more productive instead to think about creative work within hillbilly archetypes as part of a historical tradition.

In Anthony Harkins’ *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, he notes that despite early Hollywood and the music industry’s vested commercial interest in promoting images of hillbillies as violent, irrational, drunken savages, or idiot savants and comic rubes, country musicians in particular who “recognize[ed] the term’s derisive connotations...also warily adopted the label as a marker of personal and cultural pride that reflected their sense of divided identity between a rural past and the industrial present.”⁷⁷ For country musicians who re-appropriated the term, it connoted “a strong rural tradition and a link to the land, basic values of home, family, and community, and a conception of self as one of the noble “plain folk” rather than as part of the indistinguishable urban masses or the cultural and economic elite.”⁷⁸

“Hillbilly” musicians, as some called themselves in the 1920s and ‘30s, knew that their positive

⁷⁶ S. Renee Dechert, “‘Oh What a Mess Life Can Be:’ Uncle Tupelo, Bahktin, and the Dialogue of Alternative Country Music,” in *Country Music Annual 2001*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James Akenson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 84.

⁷⁷ Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 72.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, 94.

use of the term was swimming against the stronger current of negative connotations in broader American society, but the potential to create a shorthand for an imagined community which stood outside both “the masses” and “the elite” was a strong enough lure to take a calculated risk with the name. Though the context and vectors of power are a bit different—a negotiation of middle-class habitus rather than a positive reconfiguration of working-class identity—this search for a “folk” insider/outsider populist community within commercial country music and hillbilly archetypes strikes me as similar to what alt.country genre rhetoric and Uncle Tupelo are/were reaching for. In “Screen Door” Tweedy does not seek to deny any of the negative connotations of “hillbilly;” in fact, he arguably subtly plays into them. But this in the strategic service of imbuing old archetypes with a fresh new dignity of “the folk”—and done so, in standard Tupelo methodology, with a resolutely straight face.

Rediscovering Left Populism

To better understand why Tupelo’s mix of covers and politicized originals on *March 16-20, 1992* constitute an intervention into the populist “folk” left, it is necessary to briefly contextualize what I mean by populism in this context. Specifically, I draw on political theorist Laura Grattan’s concept of *aspirational democratic populism*—a genuinely grassroots leftist populism where power is shared horizontally—to suggest that Tupelo promotes this philosophy through their choices on the album, while they also grapple with populism’s “crueler” aspirations, as Grattan puts it. First, it’s important to note that the three main scholars on left (or left-leaning) populism I briefly gloss here, Grattan, Michael Kazin, and Allen Hertzke, all acknowledge on some level that they are operating in response to the foundational work done on populism by historian Richard Hofstadter, who in his 1955 work *The Age of Reform* and well-known *Harper’s* article “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” analyzed the failures of the

1890s Populist party, failures to which he attributes in part unscrupulous leaders exploiting ordinary Americans' "nostalgic yearnings for the virtuous harmonies, real or imagined, of a traditional or agrarian past."⁷⁹ Grattan writes, "According to Hofstadter, populists and other paranoid groups fan the flames of status anxiety, in reaction to feeling displaced by market fluctuations and changing racial and ethnic demographics in liberal, free-market societies."⁸⁰ Grattan notes that in the lineage of this depiction, scholars worry that "whereas liberal democracy entails key norms and institutions, among them, individual rights, minority protections, deliberative procedures, and separation of powers, populism evokes reactionary, obstructionist masses and charismatic demagogues who usurp the people's power."⁸¹

These fears of a kind of groupthink, susceptible to the rhetorical overtures of charismatic leaders, are part of what Grattan calls populism's "cruel aspirations," wherein movements that seem at first to foster democratic uplift either displace their followers' dreams onto a demagogue, foster "defiant forms of individualism," or spawn groups that "claim equality-for-us, while denying recognition to outsiders."⁸² Grattan, Kazin, and Hertzke acknowledge that these strands of populism are a reality, including the racism and xenophobia they have fostered (and continue to). But all three, and Kazin, in particular, encourage readers to open up their historical understanding of populism as more than just 1890s Populist party politics, to see populism as a 19th and 20th century political current that, according to Kazin, prior to World War Two actually had more in common with what we now typically consider the political left.⁸³

⁷⁹ Laura Grattan, *Populism's power: Radical grassroots democracy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23.

⁸⁰ *ibid*, 23.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 19.

⁸² *ibid*, 24 & 41.

⁸³ Michael Kazin, *The populist persuasion: An American history* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 3.

Grattan, and Kazin in particular, develop the concept that the unique claims of America's founding creed, which promotes the individual's "pursuit of happiness" and seemingly denies class barriers, both empowers and neuters populist political potential. As Kazin formulates it:

Because the American Revolution has already occurred, advocating a new type of polity and a new constitution seems unnecessary, dangerous, close to treason. Radical transformations undertaken in other societies under banners such as socialism, fascism, and anticolonialism are thus impossible in the United States—at once the most idealistic and the most conservative nation on earth.⁸⁴

At times, the American dynamic Kazin describes could result in, paradoxically, left populist political actors and artists thinking too much about the successes or failures of people's movements—paradoxically—as measured by the goals and actions of the individual. This is Bryan Garman's point in his book *A Race of Singers*, which tracks a lineage of left-populist musicians from Woody Guthrie to Bruce Springsteen to argue that they are deeply influenced by Walt Whitman's edict, "Be radical—be radical—but not too damned radical." Garman argues that in the Whitman tradition of American democratic critique, "speakers framed their analyses in moral rather than structural terms," ensuring a moderate romanticism that while beautifully illustrating ordinary people's problems and dreams, could not change structural inequalities.⁸⁵

Yet in examining the broader history of populism sketched by Grattan and Kazin, I am unsure if Garman's belief that rhetorically placing the individual in moral relationship with an imagined community always equates a failure of courage or results. Both Grattan and Kazin demonstrate how opening up the definition of "the people" in left-leaning populism, by appealing to shared moral values, has periodically worked to inspire genuine radical actions against capitalism. Though Kazin notes that 19th century populism was seriously blinkered by

⁸⁴ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 12.

⁸⁵ Bryan Garman, *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3-4.

defining “the people” as “producers,” meant here as white male craftsmen and small businessmen, Grattan draws seeks to revise our historical understanding of 1890s Populism by bringing to our attention “the autonomous organizing of black farmers and laborers, and the groundswell of women’s rights activism in the movement,” tentatively (if momentarily) opening up the definition of “the people.”⁸⁶ This definitional opening up continued in the 1930s, when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) inspired tens of thousands of labor strikes, arguably due to their skill in “creatively evoking three identities, often simultaneously: the industrial worker as consumer, patriotic democrat, and vanguard of liberalism,” including, Kazin notes, workers of different nationalities and industries who banded together.⁸⁷

If left populism actually does work well—even best—when it draws upon shared moral authority, from where does it draw that authority? Often, in the American context, from the language and culture of Christianity, widely shared and understood even by nonbelievers. As Kazin notes, populist rhetoric often talks about a “real” America which must either be defended or restored, in a battle for cleansing and purification, with highly committed armies. As such, he argues it is not surprising that the Populist party movement of the late 19th century coincided with the third Great Awakening, a Christian revivalist movement which “rejected the conservative image of the individual miscreant left alone to face divine wrath...Purifying society mattered more than did personal piety.”⁸⁸ Laura Grattan notes that Christian revivalism’s association was so strong with Populism in the 1880s that even atheist labor organizers would routinely visit networks of progressive churches to mobilize new converts to their cause. And for believers, she argues, drawing on Jason Frank, evangelical and charismatic Christianity’s

⁸⁶ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 14. Laura Grattan, *Populism’s Power*, 53.

⁸⁷ Kazin, 143.

⁸⁸ *ibid*, 33.

camp meetings of the era, with their emphasis on “public enthusiasm” (shouting, dancing, speaking in tongues) seemed to routinely break down social and psychological barriers between “self” and “other,” fostering empathy which arguably helped fuel the collectivism of the burgeoning Populist cause.⁸⁹

The strategic uses of Christianity to promote a left-wing agenda didn’t end in the 1890s and wasn’t limited to the rhetoric of religious leaders or even just labor organizers. Kazin argues that Biblical themes were a key part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s rhetorical ability to explain and convince average Americans of the necessity of his New Deal economic policies:

FDR’s generous manner, his grasp of the civil religion, and his use of memorable populist phrases—like ‘economic royalists’ and ‘the forgotten man’—framed the rhetorical limits for social movements during the 1930s and World War II. Fluent in the Christian idiom familiar to most of his constituents, he sprinkled references to the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress* into numerous speeches. Time and again, he contrasted his defense of traditional ideals held by Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln with the ‘privileged’ minority that opposed him.⁹⁰

With FDR making such deft rhetorical moves here—suggesting himself as pious in the model of the founding fathers, and corporate executives as godless—it is interesting or even curious, in a way, that the association between righteous Christianity and the pursuit of economic justice is not made more often. Allen Hertzke, who in his 1993 book *Echoes of Discontent* explored Christianity’s implications on populism and vice versa, does not find the typical lack of association between figures like FDR and Christian rhetoric surprising. This is because, as he sees it, while populism in the 19th century was defined by a mix of “moral traditionalism with economic radicalism,” united by a common railing against elites and “rooted in a communalist understanding of society, over and against an individualist one,” around the time of William

⁸⁹ Laura Grattan, *Populism’s Power*, 64-69.

⁹⁰ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 112-3.

Jennings' Bryan's "Cross of Gold Speech" (1896), populism began a slow but seemingly irreversible split into two separate camps: the moral traditionalists and the economic crusaders.⁹¹

With this schism and with the rise of Richard Nixon's so-called "Silent Majority," and the partial success of figures like George Wallace, it is no surprise that for most of the second half of the 20th century, populism had become perceived as mostly a movement for the right. But as Hertzke explores in detail in his book, the late 1980s into the early 1990s were a fascinating time for a resurgence of Christian populisms on both the right *and* the left: namely the very visible presidential candidacies of spiritual leaders Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson. Hertzke argues that both candidates attracted so much media attention, controversy, and respect because they both revived the mix of moral traditionalism and economic justice rhetoric that characterized 19th century populism (Jackson, obviously, emphasizing economic justice and Robertson moral traditionalism, though both advocating aspects of both). Though neither candidate secured their party's nomination, Robertson and his Christian Coalition succeeded in helping make the Republican party's national party platform its most socially conservative ever in 1992, and Jackson's Rainbow Coalition grew into a force that the Democratic establishment was compelled to engage with substantively in both 1988 and 1992.⁹²

Tupelo's (Atheist) Spiritual Ruminations on Suffering, Fear, and Collective Resistance

This populist-religious excitement on both right and left framed a 1992 election season in which both Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush could occasionally slip phrases into their speeches with a slight populist charge, but in the final analysis promoted economic policies supporting the neoliberal status quo. Tupelo were apparently sufficiently intrigued by or hopeful about Clinton's potential as a leader that they eventually played at one of his 1993 inaugural

⁹¹ Allen Hertzke, *Echoes of Discontent*, 21.

⁹² *ibid*, 53, 72-3, 104, 168.

balls, but at the moment of the *March 16-20, 1992* recording sessions, he was still somewhat of an unknown quantity. What *was* politically on the radar in Tupelo's far-left punk/indie world was anxiety and anger over the economic recession, Bush's recent military invasion of Iraq, and attacks on cultural plurality by the Religious Right. What's striking is that not only is fear one of the dominant emotions on the album, but that Tupelo so explicitly—through their covers of several Christian-themed songs—expresses that fear in the language of populist religious revivalism. This in spite of the fact that they identified as atheists or agnostics, as this August 1992 interview, with some of their most extensive comments on the album, makes clear:

"I've always been inspired by old Folkways albums and stuff," Farrar said. "But for me, I just remained kind of removed from those songs thematically. I'm not religious at all, and I wouldn't want anybody to take the Jesus stuff literally. It's a lot more subjective than that for whoever happens to be listening to it." "What I really get from those songs," Tweedy added, "is that they're more about fear than they are about religion. They're really frightened-sounding songs. Ultimately, I'm more inspired by a song about Jesus than I am by Jesus himself."⁹³

Though at first glance these comments, particularly Tweedy's, read as a bit flip, even disrespectful, of the religious traditions they are engaging with through covering these songs, I hope to show how the lyrics of Farrar's originals (in particular) on the album, in dialogue with the covers, demonstrate a great deal of reverence toward Christianity's historical role in movements toward economic justice. Tupelo's populist perspective here is one akin to what Laura Grattan calls *aspirational democratic populism*, by which she means a (left) populism "which has historically cultivated people's rebellious aspirations to share in power, and to do so in more pluralistic, egalitarian ways," horizontal power-sharing which cultivates "the tensional relationships between contests over collective identity and experiments with enacting popular power."⁹⁴ At the same they couple these people-power aspirations with, as Allen Hertzke puts it,

⁹³ Daniel Durchholz, "Unplugging Uncle Tupelo," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 16, 1992, 3C.

⁹⁴ Laura Grattan, *Populism's Power*, 51.

the Christian discourse of redemptive suffering, wherein shared pain can inspired shared sacrifice, motivating individuals into collective action with empathetic resonances beyond the limits of rational thought.⁹⁵ And though this implied moral community is mostly a good thing in the world Tupelo creates on this album, at times they reveal its “crueler” side, highlighting the limits of this community in fostering change that benefits all.

This idea of the redemptive qualities of suffering, and the spiritual value in reflecting upon that, is literally the opening image of the entire album, with Farrar’s “Grindstone”—also one of the few songs to feature full-band instrumentation, albeit acoustic on this all-acoustic album. The first two verses and a chorus are worth quoting here, establishing Farrar’s message:

If you find yourself standing
At the end of your line
Looking for a piece of something
Maybe peace of mind
Fed up, lost, and run down
Nowhere to hold on
Tired of, take your place at the end, son
We'll get to you one by one

No light ever shines
Dead end tears that dry
Maybe a waste of words and time
Never a waste of life

Every hour will be spent
Filling a quota, just getting along
Handcuffs hurt worse
When you've done nothing wrong

No thanks to the treadmill
No thanks to the grindstone
There's plenty of dissent from
These rungs below
The clockwork of destruction
Hanging low over our heads
Always a smokestack cloud

⁹⁵ Allen Hertzke, *Echoes of Discontent*, 258.

Or a slow-walking death⁹⁶

Musically and lyrically, the song stands in fascinating—perhaps purposeful—dialogue with the lineage of Tupelo “rockers” I discussed above which deal with frustration over menial jobs. The song begins with imagery suggesting assembly lines running quickly out of control, atomized labor, and an individual lost in endless and soul-crushing bureaucracy. Although more specific in its elaboration of these details than a comparable song like “Graveyard Shift,” the sentiment expressed is more-or-less the same. Though fully acoustic and stripped down to bass, guitar, drums, and voice, there are two musical details which make the verses of the song read as “rock” or “punk”: the busily syncopated, ascending bass line (audible from 0:02-0:16), and drummer Mike Heindorn’s complex, lightning-fast fills at moments such as 0:15-0:16, played using brushes but with an intensity suited more to an electric full-band setting. These details suggest at first that Tupelo is delivering a fully “unplugged” yet otherwise representative iteration of one of their aforementioned punk-folk working-man’s-ragers. But the song then shifts into the chorus, quite notable for its drop to half the tempo, and introduction of pedal steel guitar. The bass switches quite audibly to a slow and very simple quarter-note walking line, which Heindorn complements with a simple “stroll” pattern using his brushes. The overall effect is a shift to a laid-back “country” feel, like an inverse (possibly intentional) of the Byrds’ “Nothing Was Delivered,” which I identified in Chapter Two as using up-tempo “rock” choruses to signal dissonance with the song’s slower “country” verses. Coupled with this contemplative musical interlude is Farrar’s observation that despite tears cried over the “waste of words and time” that is this person’s seemingly meaningless job, the effort he or she puts in every day is “Never a waste of life.”

⁹⁶ Uncle Tupelo, *March 16-20, 1992*, Rockville Records 6090-2, 1992, compact disc.

In its statement that all human labor has value and that suffering ultimately binds one in a moral community of redemption with others, the song illustrates the Christian left-populist theme outlined above by Hertzke. But returning my broader argument from earlier, why am I suggesting that somehow a song such as this is *anti-modern* in orientation? Aside from the obvious, that the lyrics depict the tragedy of humans at the mercy of machines or machine-like systems of bureaucracy, the deeper anti-modern sentiment is found in the song's clear *relationship* with two covers songs found on the album, one dating to the 1930s ("Coal Miners") and the other to 1951 ("Atomic Power").

Tupelo's cover of the Louvin Brothers' "Atomic Power" is significant first in that it helped generate the entire *March 16-20, 1992* recording project, first bringing together producer (and R.E.M. guitar player/songwriter) Peter Buck and the band members after a concert in Athens, Georgia one evening in 1990. As Greg Kot recounts, Tupelo opened their set with the cover, and this being the era prior to the Louvins' more widespread album reissues and popularization with a rock audience, Buck and the band bonded over their shared curatorial prowess: they were the only ones who knew that the song was "old," and its provenance.⁹⁷

The fact that Buck and the band derived pleasure from their shared "secret" knowledge also suggests to me that part of the pleasure was the deployment of the song's seemingly antiquated message in the context of the present day. The Louvins' song, as the title quite literally suggests, is about potential deployment of the atomic bomb, obviously a worldwide subject of concern in 1951 as the Cold War was ramping up. The song is quite standard within the gospel form in that a terrible, existential problem is presented (nuclear holocaust is on its way), the unsettling question is meditated upon ("Are you ready for that great atomic power?"),

⁹⁷ Greg Kot, *Wilco: Learning How to Die*, 61.

and then the clear solution is offered: give yourself over to Jesus, and upon the moment of Rapture you will go to heaven. What is less than completely clear is whether the Rapture arrives independently of any bomb blast, God punishing humankind for even considering such an action, or whether the human race triggers the Rapture by destroying the entire planet with a nuclear bomb. This ambiguity is evident in the song's second line, "Are we all in great confusion do we know the time or hour?"⁹⁸ Though nominally speaking about the atomic bomb, the language with its suggestion that our final end is imminent but also unknowable, clearly gestures to broader evangelical Christian worship themes that one must live a life so free of sin as to be prepared to die (and be judged) at any moment.

Charles K. Wolfe, in a fascinating historical essay on early depictions of nuclear war in country songs, argues that country songs discussing new technologies tend to follow a pattern wherein upon a new technology being introduced, panic, fear, or wonder is first expressed at the novelty, and then relatively quickly the technology is incorporated into songs as a ho-hum metaphor for any number of other issues in contemporary life. A clear example provided by Wolfe is early "train" song "Wreck of the Old 97," wherein a brave engineer dies at the helm of a runaway train; Wolfe contrasts this with just a few years later when positive metaphorical references to the "gospel train to heaven" begin to appear in country songs. Wolfe suggests that even if depictions of a given technology are initially negative in the songs, simply the technology's appearance for bad or good has usually been sufficient to begin easing the audience's accommodation to its presence in their everyday lives.⁹⁹ This argument strikes me as fundamentally related to T.J. Jackson Lears' argument discussed above that anti-modern arts and

⁹⁸ The Louvin Brothers, "The Great Atomic Power," MGM 11277, 1951, 7" vinyl single.

⁹⁹ Charles K. Wolfe, "'Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb:' Nuclear Warfare in Country Music 1944-56," in *Country Music Goes to War*, 102-125.

crafts protesting industrial capitalism often had the unintended effect of easing its audiences' accommodation into that modern system.

In the case of the Louvins' song, Wolfe interprets it as an example of the bomb already by 1951 having been integrated into the metaphorical imaginary of American life. He sees it in contrast with an earlier country song that treats nuclear technology more literally as "an awesome, barely controllable force," and more akin instead to another country song of the early Fifties threatening to visit God's wrath on Stalin.¹⁰⁰ That Wolfe situates the song this way is interesting when considering Tupelo's recontextualization of it on *March 16-20, 1992*. Not only does the cover appear on the album, in simple brother-team-harmony and acoustic guitar format, essentially identical to the original in arrangement, but the image of the nuclear bomb appears quite vividly in the lyrics of Farrar's original "Grindstone," as quoted above—seemingly self-consciously in dialogue with the Louvins' song.

Upon first listen one might suspect that the appearance of "the clockwork of destruction/hanging low over our heads" is a reference to lingering Cold War bomb fears, even in early 1992. But the fact that by this point the Soviet Union had disintegrated and capitalism was presumed by most to be the new world order, I suspect the nuclear bomb imagery appears here for a different reason. Coupled with "Always a smokestack cloud/Or a slow-walking death," here apocalypse is merged seamlessly with the existential terror of working-class workaday tedium, even hinting at metaphorical or literal cancer caused by said menial labor ("a slow-walking death"). In other words Farrar, fully aware of the way in which the Louvins utilized fears of nuclear holocaust to instead get listeners thinking about the danger of damnation in everyday life, seeks to take that narrative's anti-modern fire-and-brimstone quality and make it

¹⁰⁰ Charles K. Wolfe, "'Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb': Nuclear Warfare in Country Music 1944-56," in *Country Music Goes to War*, 117, 122.

new, strange, and unsettling again in a contemporary 1992 post-Cold War context. The bomb's appearance pointedly merged with the details of everyday factory work life ("a smokestack cloud") signals Farrar's suggestion that our truest existential threat is no longer nuclear holocaust but the spiritual enervation wrought by the imprint of industrial and post-industrial capitalism upon working people's lives. In suggesting that we will never be free from the technological regimes of oppression auto-generated by global capitalism, Farrar's antimodernism here seeks to disrupt and disturb, not to help listeners accommodate to contemporary life.

Besides "Grindstone's" relationship with the Louvin Brothers' song, it's also important to note its clearly foregrounded connection with the song that immediately follows it on the record, Sarah Ogan Gunning's "Come All You Coal Miners." Snapping on the heels of "Grindstone" with intentionally almost no customary moment of silence between tracks, Farrar, accompanying himself on acoustic guitar, with this stripped-down arrangement posits "Coal Miners" (credited merely and inaccurately to "Traditional" in *March's* liner notes) as a dramatic answer to the seeming hopelessness of contemporary working-class life sketched in the previous track. Simply put, the song stands out with its closing refrain encouraging "let's sink this capitalist system to the darkest pits of hell," offering to the listener a lucid if lofty solution to the moral crisis of endless drudgery described with such doom in the previous song.

Even though Tupelo failed to credit Gunning as the author of the song, upon discovering her work through the field recordings of Alan Lomax, perhaps they came to appreciate her life story as somewhat parallel to their own. Like Tweedy and Farrar, Gunning was a kind of insider/outsider to the 20th century folk revival tradition. Born in 1910 and raised in the coal fields of eastern Kentucky as part of a mining family, she participated in miners' strikes during the Great Depression, and turned to songwriting as a form of protest against the degradation of

working people she witnessed firsthand. But also of note is the fact that Gunning and her more famous half-sister, folk singer Aunt Molly Jackson, eventually moved to New York City and became early inspirations for participants in the post-World War II folk revival scene there.¹⁰¹ In the liner notes of the New World Records vinyl reissue from which Tupelo learned the song, archivist Archie Green writes:

Sarah regards “Come All You Coal Miners” less “as a polemical or protest song” than “as a personal statement of her deepest feelings and sorrow.” As such, the song combines personal experience and observation with traditional elements (such as the “Come all ye” opening) in a manner that exemplifies the finest of American labor folk songs—shy, perhaps, on economic theory, but bold and assertive in richly earned anger and righteous outrage.¹⁰²

Thus, with lyrical codes such as “Come all ye,” Gunning took note to couch her thoroughly 20th century message within the burgeoning American “ballad” imaginative tradition, as established not long before by cultural workers (song collectors) such as Sharp. Seemingly first recorded by Alan Lomax in 1937 for the Archive of American Folk Music, Gunning’s performance of the song similarly works to present her message within “ballad” tradition as established in (then newly-developing) field recording practice. She performs the song unaccompanied, singing an unembellished pentatonic melody, in a rhythmically “free” fashion. Though a cultural middleperson herself in the first major 20th century folk revival, Gunning’s decisions arranging this track seemingly render her part of “the folk,” and the recording posits her a cappella performance as unmediated by artifice. This impression is underscored in particular by the sound of a man whom can be heard coughing loudly throughout the track in the background, as if—completely by accident—chiming with Gunning’s argument-in-song that industrial coal

¹⁰¹ “Dreadful Memories: The Life of Sarah Ogan Gunning,” Appalshop, 1988, accessed May 20, 2016, <https://www.appalshop.org/media/dreadful-memories/>.

¹⁰² Sarah Ogan Gunning, “Come All Ye Coal Miners,” on *Oh My Little Darling: Folk Song Types*, New World Records 80245, 1977, vinyl LP.

mining literally “take[s] our very lifeblood,” consuming human bodies and leaving behind destroyed communities in its wake. After first imploring “coal miners won’t you organize” in response to this situation she presents as morally untenable, Gunning then moves to the broader picture, arguing “let’s sink this capitalist system in the darkest pits of hell.”¹⁰³

Although he maintains most of her original lyrics, Jay Farrar reimagines the song to make it more intelligible to a rock audience, particularly one familiar with folk music as seen through a rock lens. He adds a i-VII-V-i chord progression in D minor, providing moments of harmonic tension and release not possible in Gunning’s pentatonic original, often in dramatic fashion at the end of verses. For instance, at 0:10-0:18, as Farrar sings, “Won’t you open your eyes and see/What this dirty capitalist system has done to you and me,” the guitar’s shift from D minor to C major to A major contributes a more intense feeling of release and then (immediate) sadness that Gunning could unaccompanied.

Furthermore, Farrar’s acoustic guitar accompaniment, with a driving rhythm that alternates short finger-picked passages with propulsive strumming, catches the rock listener’s ear in the way it evokes the music and legacy of Woody Guthrie. Though Guthrie’s playing style evolved somewhat throughout his career, for those with a passing familiarity with his work, a song like “This Land Is Your Land,” its finger-picked melody interwoven with self-accompaniment, is representative. As John Shaw and others have noted, Guthrie’s style derived from the distinctive Carter Family guitar “scratch” style pioneered by Maybelle Carter.¹⁰⁴ In drawing this musical inspiration, Guthrie connected not only with early country commercial

¹⁰³ Sarah Ogan Gunning, “Come All Ye Coal Miners.”

¹⁰⁴ John Shaw, *This Land That I Love: Irving Berlin, Woody Guthrie, and the story of two American anthems* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 66. In *Country Music U.S.A.*, Bill Malone describes Maybelle Carter’s innovation as “her thumb-brush technique (in which the thumb picks the melody on the bass strings while the fingers provide rhythm with a downward stroke of the treble strings).” Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 66.

country music but also—as Shaw notes—anticipated the energy of post-WWII genres like rockabilly and rock that also drew on Maybelle Carter’s musical inspiration.¹⁰⁵ In the case of the Carter/Guthrie style utilized on Tupelo’s “Coal Miners,” I hear a retroactive “rock” touch in Farrar’s repeatedly hitting the two bass notes of his guitar with such force that they “twang,” almost to the point of buzzing or distortion. This bass-heavy version of Carter/Guthrie’s style is arguably associated most with Bob Dylan’s early acoustic playing; Dylan himself was famously inspired by and associated with Guthrie, perceived by many as part of an American vernacular tradition linking folk and rock in a “roots-to-rock” trajectory.

For better or worse, due to its cultural association with Guthrie, this guitar style signifies “protest.” A “fellow traveler” participant in the Popular Front during the Great Depression, Guthrie was known within the labor movement of the era for his songs which assailed the powers-that-be and championed the common man, in particular the “Okie” migrant community from which he rose.¹⁰⁶ Recent scholarship has illustrated how Guthrie’s “ramblin’ man” persona at times distanced him from the absolutist statements of a true political leader—in other words, that he spoke more to individualist than communitarian concerns.¹⁰⁷ This view on Guthrie has been bolstered by contemporary projects such as *Mermaid Avenue* Volumes 1 & 2, wherein Tupelo descendants Wilco recorded less overtly political, more quotidian Guthrie songs with Billy Bragg. But on the whole, I agree with Michael Denning’s suggestion that a Guthrie work such as *Dust Bowl Ballads* is an almost archetypally Popular Front cultural text: locating the heart of American identity in dispossessed people, castigating the rich, and optimistically

¹⁰⁵ John Shaw, *This Land that I Love*, 66.

¹⁰⁶ Bryan Garman, *A Race of Singers*, 85.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, 103, 129.

suggesting that through collective action, better times are coming.¹⁰⁸ It was music intended to inspire class struggle.

Furthermore, Denning and John Shaw both make clear that Guthrie's left-wing populism drew on spiritual (Christian) sources for moral authority even as he secularized them. For instance, the *Dust Bowl Ballads* centerpiece "I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore" was based on a Baptist hymn and maintained the hymn's line "I can't feel at home in this world anymore."¹⁰⁹ As John Shaw puts it, Guthrie displaced his primary musical influence the Carter Family's "Christian faith in heaven onto a secular faith in human action to bring about political change."¹¹⁰ It's in this sense that I find Tupelo's marriage of Sarah Ogan Gunning's lyric with Guthrie's musical style serving like an inverted mirror of "Grindstone"; whereas "Grindstone" invoked the Louvin Brothers' apocalyptic Christianity to decry technocratic capitalism's continued oppression of human labor, "Coal Miners" invokes a Christian-inspired moral community of workers which will rise up and destroy capitalism. Following "Grindstone" in sequence on *March 16-20, 1992*, their cover of the labor song is an intentional "answer song" to the despair outlined in the album's opening. I consider it revivalist anti-modern in that—through its utilization of lyrics and music associated with popular organizing of the 1930s—it looks to the recent past not with retro affectation, ironic detachment, or sorrowful nostalgia, but rather a sincere desire to bring prior musical invocations of community to bear on the politics of the present. If the cover song mourns or longs for anything, it is past modes of left-wing collective action, not pastoral pre-modern Edens.

A Moral Community (of Believers)

¹⁰⁸ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The laboring of American culture in the twentieth century* (New York: Verso, 1998), 270-2.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, 271-2.

¹¹⁰ John Shaw, *This Land That I Love*, 67.

Writing on what she feels to be the aspirational democratic populist spirit of Leonard Cohen's songwriting, Laura Grattan unintentionally echoes Alastair Bonnett's observation, discussed earlier, that left collective action often operates from a place of spiritual loss and longing. Grattan suggests that successful grassroots activism necessitates learning to "dwell in the brokenness that accompanies the human condition...cultivating rebellious aspirations to be more than fragments in our myriad collective efforts to enact democracy in our own lives."¹¹¹ Grattan argues that Cohen conceives of democracy as an imperfect process, arising from the bottom up, driven by "spiritual thirst," and never complete—always in the moment of "becoming."¹¹² Tupelo's conception of people-power is similar; however, the touch which makes their contribution to this body of political popular song unique is their insistence in *March 16-20, 1992* upon exploring the Christian roots, implicitly Southern, often underlying motives for collective action in an American 20th century context. Of the seven cover songs comprising *March's* fifteen total tracks, four songs discuss God or Jesus explicitly, with the other three implicitly suggesting a community of believers.

Aside from the Louvins' "Atomic Power" discussed above, with its mixed metaphors emphasizing God's salvation and humankind's hubris, at least two of the other religious covers conceive of God and his followers as sources of comfort and strength for those individuals brave enough to take action—personal and/or political—outside of society's status quo. Part of this, for Tupelo's atheist songwriter/arrangers, was about context. Commenting ten years after the fact on Tupelo's choice of covers relative to his original songs on *March*, Jeff Tweedy told David Fricke:

I never felt as adept at singing big-picture songs as Jay...I gravitated to interior songs like "Fatal Wound." I didn't want them to be dark. But I've always been fascinated by what

¹¹¹ Laura Grattan, *Populism's Power*, 133.

¹¹² *ibid*, 131-3.

makes people happy, what gets them through. And religious songs, like “Satan,” seemed to me to really be about fear—that the only way to beat it was to sing about it. I didn’t think of these songs as literal, in the sense of Satan as Dante imagined him. I was thinking of Satan as the guys who threw pizza at me at high school.¹¹³

Tweedy here refers to “Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down,” a traditional American spiritual that Uncle Tupelo learned by a 1974 recording by Frank Proffitt. The lyrics are quite simple, consisting largely of a repetition of the title, an assertion that Jesus spoke these words, and a pledge that the singer will pray and shout until Satan is vanquished. On *March* the song is performed as a solo Tweedy vocal, with assists on harmony by Farrar at the end of each verse, as if embodying in miniature the congregation which will pray and shout to battle Satan. As conceived by Tweedy’s comments above, Satan here is purely metaphorical—a representation of bullies, their power drawn from brute violence, seeking to enforce the status quo upon a geeky outsider punk kid. By implicit contrast, in the song Jesus is the friend and protector of misfits, society’s outcasts.

Even at the time of the album’s 1992 release, Tweedy and Farrar took pains to point out that they were not believers. In a broad sense this echoes T.J. Jackson Lears’ discussion of metaphorical adaptations of Biblical stories to the complexity of contemporary life at the turn of the last century. But even as the band disavowed religious belief in interview discourse, the Christian content of *March* drew enough interest and confusion from fans and friends of the band that a reporter from the local *St. Louis Riverfront Times* felt compelled to ask them about it:

Riverfront Times: What’s this Jesus thing? I haven’t been satisfied by your explanations.

Tweedy: They’re just songs we like.

Farrar: We didn’t want to not do them because people would ask about what Jesus was doing in them.

Tweedy: The songs mean something. Whether or not they have Jesus in them. They’re “cool.”¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Uncle Tupelo, *March* 16-20, 1992.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Crone, “The Men from Uncle: Belleville’s Uncle Tupelo Goes Buck Naked,” *St. Louis Riverfront Times*, August 26-September 1, 1992, accessed May 20, 2016, http://www.factorybelt.net/articles/rft_8-92.htm.

In this interview, conducted in disjointed “fanzine” style (and based on Tweedy’s punctuation, I suspect, via email), neither Tweedy nor the interviewer follows up on what Tweedy intends by saying that the Christian songs are “cool.” But as I understand it, Tweedy’s invocation of “cool” refers to a kind of subcultural capital garnered by the curation and re-presentation of old songs whose intensity of belief is so strong, their professions of faith—with the passage of time—can be understood from a rock context as hip, hip in the mode of Filene’s outsider populism.

In the case of a traditional hymn such as “Warfare,” my suspicion is that the song exists on *March* as a kind of scene-setting, a perceived window on time, an artistic conception of historical context for contemporary rock listeners. These, Tupelo seems to suggest, are the warts-and-all roots of the populist protest music we are playing, a late 19th-century world of Christian revival camp meetings, completely of a piece with the Populist party era of church-based activism I sketched above. In the song, the narrator posits himself as one of Jesus’ disciples and evangelists in the modern world, noting that “you can rebuke me all you want to” but that “I’m traveling home to God,” comparing his spiritual struggle against nonbelievers with warfare, a battle that will end when he receives his reward in heaven. In an intriguingly unexpected turn towards its end, the narrator lists a variety of evangelical and charismatic Christian denominations, and then implicitly asserts the validity and sacredness of them all:

God bless them holiness people
 The Presbyterians too
 Those good old shouting Methodists
 Those praying Baptists too

And when you get to heaven
 I wanna see you there
 And when I say, "Amen"
 I want you to say so too¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Uncle Tupelo, *March* 16-20, 1992.

Within the context of Tupelo's scene-setting, for contemporary listeners the impact of these verses is twofold. For one, a sense is offered of the palpable empowerment of being one of God's select few, despite existing as a persecuted minority on this earthly plane. This embellishes and extends the themes of being a chosen outsider, one whose suffering has moral righteousness, initially discussed in "Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down." Secondly, "Warfare"'s guided tour through late-19th century evangelical and charismatic Christianity implicitly reminds contemporary listeners of the definitional antimodernism of this type of American religious practice. As Allen Hertzke notes, for charismatic Christians both then and now, rituals such as glossolalia ("speaking in tongues") not only enable congregants to mark themselves off as different from mainstream society, but in their emphasis on an intense emotional connection with God also serve as a cultural and implicitly political protest against the rationality of modernity.¹¹⁶ In performing this "irrationally" devout content with such burning sincerity, Tupelo challenges their rock listeners to take seriously the power of religious faith as a wellspring of community, to recognize that even the most intellectually rigorous protest of capitalism can have partial roots in gut reactions against modernity which go beyond rational thought. Tupelo's presentation of (implicitly Southern) religious practice as a moral grounding for politics chimes with Hertzke's argument that while populism is commonly understood as driven by discontent, what is under-appreciated is that "populist analysis is rooted in a communalist understanding of society, over and against an individualist one."¹¹⁷ Despite populist/realist punk's professions of community discussed above, within broader rock culture

¹¹⁶ Allen Hertzke, *Echoes of Discontent*, 16.

¹¹⁷ Allen Hertzke, *Echoes of Discontent*, 4.

and American culture as a whole, this sentiment is notable in the way it runs counter to standard-issue individualism.

Outcasts from the Moral Community

The final wrinkle to Tupelo's presentation of a community of faith on *March* is that in at least three of the cover songs, the listener experiences this community from the perspective of an individual whose actions have placed him outside their borders; he has been judged, and the situation is bleak and painful. The listener notes hints of a worldview laying the groundwork for such judgment, in the aforementioned "Warfare."

They say My Lord is the devil
They call His saints the same
I don't expect much more down here
Than grief and scorn and shame¹¹⁸

As portrayed here, the narrator perceives himself and his community of evangelical or charismatic Christians as hated outcasts from society, demonized by powerful enemies in spite of the knowledge that they are God's chosen people. Faced with a lifetime of "grief and scorn and shame" visited upon them by the powers-that-be, by implication this community of believers turns inward, living as a kind of subculture with its own rules.

In this context, where religious belief constitutes community solidarity but also sets the community apart from mainstream society, it stands to reason this community polices itself with a zeal garnered not just from the law but from biblical understandings of sin and salvation. Nowhere is this more apparent in Tupelo's choice of cover songs than in "Lilli Schull," a kind of murder ballad which New World Records' compilation *Oh My Little Darling* sources to an actual crime in Tennessee:

Lily Schull was actually Lillie Shaw, a black woman from near Mountain City, Tennessee, who was murdered in October, 1903, by one Finley Preston, also black, of

¹¹⁸ Uncle Tupelo, *March* 16-20, 1992.

Saw Mill Creek, Tennessee, as a consequence of a sexual triangle. Preston was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to be hanged, which was carried out on November 7, 1905, following two appeals and a second trial.¹¹⁹

This song, embellishing upon the ostensibly true story of the crime, is told from the vantage point of a deathbed confession and repentance by the murderer. In keeping with the Victorian era in which it was written (New World's liner notes date it to a few years after the murder trial), the song presents a narrative of innocence in peril, with Lilli's "lovely face" haunting the narrator's memory after the fact, along with memories of her cries as "she begged me not to kill her...in the fire that burned so bright." Guilt overpowers the narrator, and in a departure from many murder ballads he repents both forcefully and specifically: "Now I bow down to Jesus/In penitential grief/And I beg him now to save me/Like he did the dying thief." In the next verse Jesus' voice is heard, explaining that his act of sacrifice on the cross was powerful enough to save even the narrator. Yet despite this salvation the song ends nonetheless on a downbeat note, with the narrator imploring "God bless my aged parents/Who mourn for me alone/Also my wife and baby/Who will be left alone." Even though a deathbed confession and conversion to Christianity may yet save the narrator from eternal damnation, the song insists on reminding us of those who still suffer in the wake of his actions. It is also worth noting that this song describes the execution of a black man for a crime with purported sexual dimensions at the height of Jim Crow state-sanctioned racist repression, adding a loaded layer of "tradition" to this narrative of sin and salvation in the rural South.

Though Lilli Schull's killer repents, to mixed results, in the world evoked by *March's* cover song repertoire there are two others whose lack of repentance for bad behavior places them even further outside the boundaries of the imagined moral community. In "I Wish My Baby

¹¹⁹ Various Artists. *O My Little Darling: Folk Song Types*, New World Records 80245, 1977, LP record.

Was Born,” Tupelo reworks slightly Dillard Chandler’s version of the same song, learned from the aforementioned *High Atmosphere* anthology. Chandler’s version is a reworking in turn of the traditional British ballad “A Brisk Young Sailor,” a narrative in which a young woman is impregnated by a charming womanizer, and she quickly comes to regret her decision, so much so that she wishes for her own death while her baby is born and “set smiling on his father’s knee.”¹²⁰ In Tupelo’s minimalist rewriting of the lyric, the narrator’s perspective shifts to the father, who offers his fantasies—possibly realized, it is hinted—without explanation: “I wish, I wish my baby was born/Sittin’ on his papa’s knee/And you poor girl were dead and gone/And green grass growin’ over thee.” Noting that he is “no saint, nor never shall be,” he hopes his wife and he may ever be reunited, but that this is as probable as when “the sweet apple grows from the sour apple tree.”¹²¹ The implication is that he has committed murder, and that as “no saint,” he has crossed a moral threshold from which there is no coming back. The narrator, thanks to the elliptical lyric, seems a bit ambivalent on this turn of events, but the mournful, extended mandolin solo from 0:53-1:35 leaves little doubt in the recording that Tupelo presents the story as a tragedy.

This theme of exclusion from a rural community of faith and human kindness is developed even further in Tupelo’s cover of the more widely-known traditional song “Moonshiner,” which in a dramatic arrangement of two acoustic guitars, acoustic bass, brush-played drums, accordion, and harmonica, works to extract maximum pathos from the lyric. The

¹²⁰ Thank you to the anonymous editors of “Factory Belt: The Unofficial Uncle Tupelo Archives,” who on their page “Officially Released Cover Songs” brought to my attention that Tupelo’s reworked cover inverts the lyrical formula typically associated with a ballad in the mode of “I Wish My Baby Was Born.” “Officially Released Cover Songs,” *Factory Belt: The Unofficial Uncle Tupelo Archives*, 2004, accessed May 20, 2016, http://www.factorybelt.net/covers_released.htm. See also the official digital repository of the Axon Ballads for a printed broadside of “A Brisk Young Sailor:” “Axon Ballads No.55 - Donnelly and Oliver; Brisk young sailor,” *Chetham’s Library*, accessed May 20, 2016, http://www.chethams.org.uk/axon_ballads/055.htm.

¹²¹ Uncle Tupelo, *March 16-20*, 1992.

narrator of “Moonshiner” tells us that his entire life consists of trips to a secluded hollow to rig a distillery, followed by daily visits to the local tavern to spend any profits from this enterprise. Identifying the tavern as a male-only zone where “women...can’t follow,” the song posits women as loving community, with the singer exclaiming “God bless them pretty women,” but acknowledging they will forever be out of his reach. The song reaches its dramatic apex as the narrator bleakly states his *modus operandi*: “Let me eat when I’m hungry/Let me drink when I’m dry/Two dollars when I’m hard up/Religion when I die.” Continuing on to note that for him, life is just one big bottle, the narrator finishes the song resolved that nothing about his situation of banishment from the pleasures and protections of community will ever change.¹²²

As I see it, Tupelo’s inclusion of these songs is intended to show the darker side of the tight-knit moral community held in positive esteem in songs such as “Satan Your Kingdom Must Come Down” and “Warfare.” By juxtaposing these with other covers, particularly in one more-or-less uninterrupted sequence, Tupelo suggests that the very same small town of Southern religious people who could provide such sustenance and motivation for collective political action can quickly, unforgivingly turn against the individual when he steps out of bounds. This is how a community can become a mob, how populism’s “cruel aspirations” (Grattan’s concept discussed above) can foster an in-group mentality that prevents meaningful social/political change. Tupelo’s inclusion of this subtly downbeat theme on *March* does not negate their celebration of collective action with songs like “Coal Miners;” rather, it purposefully gestures to the difficulty of enacting change when groups and individuals inevitably act in irrational, ungenerous, even violent ways.

The Aesthetic of Rock Liveness

¹²² Uncle Tupelo, *March* 16-20, 1992.

One might reasonably ask what distinguishes Tupelo's covers of Christian hymns and murder ballads from any number of bluegrass, string-band, and overall more tradition-minded country music groups covering similar material. Why do I suggest that Tupelo's choice of repertoire constitutes revivalist antimodernism, whereas a bluegrass group covering similar material may be considered more as paying homage within an imagined historical country music tradition? The answer is the rock context in which Tupelo presents the material. I have already sketched above how a rock context helped shape the group's deployment of populist themes when operating in a full-band up-tempo electric setting (i.e. the first two albums). In the case of *March 16-20, 1992*, even though the music is entirely acoustic, the rock aesthetic is enacted through an ideological fixation on "liveness," which I suggest here is more specific to early '90s rock than 1990s country music.

In interviews at the time of the album's release, and in retrospective articles and reissue liner note essays, Tupelo repeatedly described the *March* project as arising from small-scale, intimate, almost "backstage" live performance, akin to the song circle sketched above in "Screen Door"—musicians playing songs which excite them, for an audience of other musicians. As Tweedy put it to David Fricke in 2002, "Jay and I always talked about doing a record of songs the way we played them in the apartment."¹²³ When the opportunity to make such a record arose suddenly and unexpectedly—Peter Buck came off of a world tour with R.E.M. and offered up his services as producer free of charge—the band members framed their decision to record "live" as a response to the economic realities of being such a small band paired with such a world-famous talent. In a 1992 interview with the *St. Louis Riverfront Times*, they stated:

Farrar: The whole thing was kind of unplanned. We decided to do it about a month before we actually did it, and practiced two or three times and came up with the songs about five days before we actually recorded it.

¹²³ Uncle Tupelo, *March 16-20, 1992*.

Tweedy: Basically, it's all live, the vocals live. There's only a handful of overdubs. We tried to keep it as simple as possible to get as much done.¹²⁴

Though I have already mentioned the band's thoughts on religious songs as they relate to fear, it is interesting that when reflecting on the album in 2002, Farrar emphasized fear for a different reason: "Listening to it now...what I hear most in my voice is fear, although someone else might construe it as emotion. Most of the songs were just recently written or learned. It was very raw."¹²⁵ The implicit suggestion here is that the lack of preparation—and the concurrent fear that the performances might not connect as intended—brought a charge to the record which overdubbing would have diminished. The band has consistently denigrated overdubs since 1992, though not for always precisely the same reasons. In a 1993 interview with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jeff Tweedy stated that their decision to record their final two albums live was in part a reaction to the overdubs they felt their producers had forced upon them during the making of their first two records: "[Overdubbing] is totally the opposite of what we do...We're a live band, a working band."¹²⁶ Here he posits the band's studio practice as a direct extension of their live practice.

That Tupelo invokes no less than three different types of liveness is not surprising when considering Philip Auslander's work on liveness as central to rock's ideological conception of authenticity. Auslander, responding to the work of Lawrence Grossberg, argues that "rock's authenticity effects are...dependent on the nomination of something to serve as the inauthentic Other," and that often this Other is defined as forms of pop music primarily reliant on synthesizers and sequencers.¹²⁷ Despite rock culture's occasional boasts that rock is not fixated

¹²⁴ Thomas Crone, "The Men From Uncle—Belleville's Uncle Tupelo Goes Buck Naked."

¹²⁵ Uncle Tupelo, *March 16-20, 1992*.

¹²⁶ Daniel Durchholz, "Uncle Tupelo Goes Back to the Country," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 3, 1993, 3D.

¹²⁷ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 83.

on the trappings of visual culture à la pop music, Auslander argues that fans demand to see rock bands play live in part to definitively prove that band members can operate rock's technologies heard on record—namely the electric guitar. For Auslander, rock authenticity thus “resides in a dialectical relationship between live and recorded performances,” an evolving series of positions, strategies and effects, rather than any sort of fixed essence.¹²⁸ And in the case of *MTV Unplugged*, which he points out draws on aspects of 1960s acoustic classic rock while also attempting to “historicize” contemporary rock music, Auslander argues that the show's attempt to restore “the imploded polarity of authenticity and inauthenticity” central to popular music of the early 1990s was in fact merely “a simulacrum of restoration.”¹²⁹

While Auslander's description certainly echoes the scholarly discussion of alt.country music as postmodern, and makes sense on an institutional level vis-à-vis MTV, his account cannot fully explain Tupelo's approach to liveness circa 1992, which I would describe as live-in-the-studio. It is an aesthetic which tries to capture, as producer Peter Buck put it “when you're in a [small] room with a special group of musicians...people sitting there, singing and playing just for you.”¹³⁰ In so doing, it prioritizes—perhaps unintentionally—what Paul Sanden describes as a liveness of fidelity over a liveness of spontaneity. Sanden, working to update Auslander, argues that there are in fact seven different modes of live music, among these a liveness of fidelity and a liveness of spontaneity. A liveness of fidelity is based around a distrust of “studio trickery,” paradoxically coupled with an ideological interest in using recording technology sufficiently high in quality to represent the performance that went down that day “transparently.” In contrast, a liveness of spontaneity is based around the aforementioned suspense as to whether

¹²⁸ *ibid*, 91, 108.

¹²⁹ *ibid*, 112.

¹³⁰ Uncle Tupelo, *March 16-20, 1992*.

the musicians can convincingly utilize instrumental technology; furthermore, a liveness of spontaneity can give listeners a window into “process,” such as an artist’s missed notes, studio chatter, and so on.¹³¹ Though Sanden does not make this specific observation, I would add here that a liveness of spontaneity seems to most specifically exemplify rock ideology, with its romantic valorization of the individual artist’s quirks and eccentricities, always in danger of coming unraveled in the context of live performance.

It is also the live aesthetic of folkloric field recordings, which in their mid-20th-century heyday strove to capture “everyday” moments of music making in settings other than professional studios. Jeff Tweedy certainly embraced such a perspective when he told David Fricke in 2002 that *March 16-20, 1992* was “an insight into the pure documentation of moments. It wasn’t about where Alan Lomax put his microphone. It was about feeling worthy of being in front of that microphone.”¹³² Parsing these remarks, on one level Tweedy seems to gesture to questions of insider/outsider status which I argued earlier the band made work in their favor. But on another level, he suggests that *March 16-20, 1992* was a modern field recording project in the Lomax folkloric tradition, down to the album’s matter-of-fact name itself.

The irony of Tweedy’s statement is that, to my ears and the ears of others who have written on *March 16-20, 1992*, it is actually a high-fidelity album. Missing are any of the sonic markers of a liveness of spontaneity one associates with field recordings, such as the background coughing in Lomax’s recording of Sarah Ogan Gunning’s “Come All Ye Coal Miners.” Instead, the hard work of the producer, engineer, and band laboring within just a five day span of recording is amply evident, in the precision of the arrangements and the crystalline sound quality

¹³¹ Paul Sanden, *Liveness in Modern Music: Musicians, Technology, and the Perception of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 35-8.

¹³² Uncle Tupelo, *March 16-20, 1992*.

of the acoustic instrumentation. As William Bowers put it in a *Pitchfork* retrospective “Buck rendered the project pristine; you'd think it were laid down in some soundproof gazebo outside an all-retiree church. The acoustic guitar has rarely sounded better than it does here.”¹³³ At every instance Buck’s production choices seem determined to promote a liveness of fidelity, employing high-end equipment to “transparently” capture the sound of a small room, using technology to enable the notion that “you are there.”

By 1992 indie rock contemporaries of Uncle Tupelo such as Sebadoh and Liz Phair were recording singer-songwriter meditations in such genuinely sludgy low fidelity, they directly inspired an entire underground sub-genre still known today as “lo-fi.” In contrast, Buck’s production sounds ready for early ‘90s commercial “alternative rock” radio, particularly in his use of studio compression. For instance, on the aforementioned “Moonshiner” recording, the two acoustic guitars are mixed to sound almost as loud as Farrar’s voice, with an emphasis on the higher frequencies, bringing out the “pristine” quality named above by William Bowers. Each instrument, as well as Farrar’s voice, is clearly individuated in the mix, with no bleed-through between tracks as one would hear in a genuinely “live” recording. In particular, Brian Hennemen’s acoustic guitar fills are isolated in the far right of the stereo field, in a fashion that demonstrates microphone placement and considerable forethought into sonic architecture. It is not so far removed from the sound of R.E.M.’s own loud yet acoustic, crystalline radio hits of the early ‘90s such as “Losing My Religion.” It is the sound of 1990s “studio-live” rock, and in this and only this context does Tupelo’s choice of “old” covers resonate as revivalist anti-modern. The sound is the one aspect identifying the album as resolutely of its time, in

¹³³ William Bowers, “Uncle Tupelo: *No Depression, Still Feel Gone*, March 16-20, 1992.”

productive tension with the band's desire to look back up to one hundred years in the past for inspiration.

Postscript: Kinder and Gentler at their Feet

Throughout the latter half of this chapter, I have demonstrated how Tupelo lets their choice of cover songs on *March* do most of the talking in regard to their left-wing populist political intentions—in many ways the cleverest aspect of the entire album. There is but one original song on *March* which intentionally (if obliquely) discusses then-current events: Farrar's "Criminals." Invoking both George H.W. Bush's recent invasion of Iraq and the same president's inaugural address call to "make kinder the face of the nation and gentler the face of the world," Farrar sings over a 12-string guitar that provides a droning quality:¹³⁴

We've got two kinds here
Those that bleed the blood
And those that work to will it
Can't believe the big screen
There's no justice in the hall
We're all criminals waiting to be called

We've got shackles to keep the laws
Made by men who bought and sold themselves
Without a prayer to keep their powers at bay
They want us kinder and gentler at their feet¹³⁵

What is striking in this lyric first of all is the way in which it conceives of the then-current situation facing everyday Americans as a battle of epic proportions between clearly demarcated armies of good and evil. In this way it echoes "Warfare"'s discussion of the saved and the sinners, and aforementioned related populist rhetoric of the need for national, spiritual purification. On the other hand, though, the song is perhaps the darkest on *March* in its

¹³⁴ Regarding Bush's inaugural rhetoric, see: Nina Esperanza Serrienne, *America in the Nineties (America in the Twentieth Century)* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 7.

¹³⁵ Uncle Tupelo, *March 16-20, 1992*.

pessimistic assessment of Americans' ability to change their current political state, even with a presidential election looming that November. Whereas cover songs such as "Lilli Schull" illustrate populism's "cruel aspirations" via a community of outcasts' ability to turn on their own, the cruel side of populism illustrated with "Criminals" is more about demagoguery, about Americans' tendency to fall in line behind powerful and/or charismatic leaders, trading their people power in exchange for a feeling of security. And echoing Richard Hofstadter's concerns about the "paranoid style" of American populism, Farrar's dystopian depiction of how the powers-that-be manufacture consent for war and industry edges toward conspiracy theory, complete with an allegation the "big screen" (Hollywood) is feeding us capitalist propaganda. When considering the *March* album as a whole, the band's pessimistic message here does not overshadow the more hopeful depictions of people-power featured in some of the more uplifting cover songs already discussed. But what the song does do, as with "Lilli Schull," is sketch the limits of the scope and depth of aspirational democratic populism—not impossible to enact, but very, very difficult.

When considering "Criminals" in the context of Tupelo's broader body of work, what is perhaps even more surprising than the song itself is a contemporary reaction to it, from an August 1992 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* profile by David Durchholz: "The most insightful song on the album is the Farrar/Tweedy original 'Criminals.' It's a terse indictment of an over-legislated society, where personal freedom is in constant peril. With a defeated, yet defiant edge to his voice, Farrar sings what should be the theme song for this, or any election year."¹³⁶ I see no lyrical or musical evidence that the song is about the curtailed personal freedoms of the individual in an "over-legislated society." But the fact that the song was nonetheless perceived

¹³⁶ David Durchholz, "Unplugging Uncle Tupelo."

this way by a critic demonstrates how community concerns are often mistaken for individual desires in an American cultural/political context. That a song which to me is a crystal-clear embodiment of a communitarian point of view could be perceived as individualist demonstrates the strength of the cultural current Tupelo was swimming against in 1992, in creating *March*. That they did this through the unique angle of exploring the political costs and benefits of invocation of religious community is a remarkable accomplishment.

Chapter 4:

“I Think I Lost It”: Lucinda Williams’ Southern Backroads of (Recent) Memory

Lucinda Williams’ lofty position within the contemporary “alternative country” marketplace is clear. Before its recent dissolution and her move to self-released recordings, Williams was one of the flagship artists on Lost Highway, an imprint of major label Universal known as a home for alt.country notables such as Ryan Adams and the Jayhawks. Her 1998 Grammy award for “Best Contemporary Folk Album” (*Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*) places her in the company of winners in the category such as Emmylou Harris and Steve Earle, alt.country mainstays both.¹ Additionally, Williams’ Gold album certification for *Car Wheels* is a feat matched by Harris and Earle only early in their careers, and among ‘90s and ‘00s alt.country acts only by Wilco.² When touring, she regularly plays mid-size theaters with larger capacities than the clubs typically played by her country-rock contemporaries. Thus, in terms of sales and public visibility, Williams is well-established as one of alt.country’s “stars.” Paradoxically, however, she has been discussed in the media less often as explicitly “alt.country” than were a

¹ “Past Winners Search: Lucinda Williams,” Grammy.com: The Recording Academy, accessed May 13, 2016, http://www.grammy.com/nominees/search?artist=%22Lucinda+Williams%22&field_nominee_work_value=&year=All&genre=All. See also: “Past Winners Search: Emmylou Harris,” Grammy.com: The Recording Academy, accessed May 13, 2016, http://www.grammy.com/nominees/search?artist=%22Emmylou+Harris%22&field_nominee_work_value=&year=All&genre=All. “Past Winners Search: Steve Earle,” Grammy.com: The Recording Academy, accessed May 13, 2016, http://www.grammy.com/nominees/search?artist=%22Steve+Earle%22&field_nominee_work_value=&year=All&genre=All.

² “Gold & Platinum: Lucinda Williams,” Recording Industry Association of America, accessed May 13, 2016, http://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=Lucinda+Williams#search_section. Compare with: “Gold & Platinum: Emmylou Harris,” Recording Industry Association of America, accessed May 13, 2016, http://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=Emmylou+Harris#search_section. “Gold & Platinum: Steve Earle,” Recording Industry Association of America, accessed May 13, 2016, http://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=Steve+Earle#search_section. “Gold & Platinum: Wilco,” Recording Industry Association of America, accessed May 13, 2016, http://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=Wilco#search_section.

band such as Uncle Tupelo in the prime of their career. Instead, Williams is more often described as transcending genre, “too country” for rock ‘n’ roll, and “too rock ‘n’ roll” for country. This discrepancy speaks to the gendered nature of “auteur” status as constructed by rock criticism, and is—in part—key to understanding Williams’ reworking of Southern mythology within the alt.country genre.

In this chapter, I argue that Williams is in fact rock—as constructed by her audience, journalists, and herself—and that a rock framework affords her a unique “insider-outsider” subject position, presenting tensions which are more interesting raised than resolved. Analyzing four songs from Williams’ signature 1998 album *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, I demonstrate how the album inextricably binds together an anti-modern longing for an imagined Delta South of the past with an at times stubborn resolve to move forward into new identities (personal and political). This anti-modern rock art is animated by two key tensions: a dialectic between mastery of studio craft and gendered expectations surrounding the emotions-driven or irrational female artist, and also the classic unresolved back-and-forth between what Sigmund Freud calls mourning and melancholia. Heavily informing both these tensions is Williams’ identity as a native-Southern woman, resistant to traditional gender roles, yet at the same time eager to position herself as a white musician within a Southern musical tradition largely built by black musicians and musical styles. Williams believes in rock’s ability to transparently or “authentically” represent an evolving contemporary Southern identity; yet as a self-conceived auteur invested in the literary techniques of poetry, she also grants herself the freedom to blur the lines between history and memory, autobiography and fiction. In refusing to resolve any of these tensions in her work, she stakes a claim that country-rock is Delta music in a way that goes beyond any one scene or group of performers.

From College Rock to “New Country”

To understand how Williams reached her position as a rock auteur seemingly “beyond” rock or country, it is necessary to first understand how she first almost became a country artist in the Nashville establishment, with all that entails. Williams garnered national media attention for the first time upon Rough Trade’s release of her self-titled third album, in 1988. Of this British independent label, Williams recalled in 1999, “They offered me a deal and there was nothing to negotiate because I didn’t have any other offers. Everybody turned me down – Rounder, Hightone and Rhino, not to mention the major labels – so it’s a European, mostly punk rock label who I really I owe it all to.”³ Williams’ telling of this story fits comfortably within an oft-repeated media anecdote about her career: the fact that a different record label released each of her albums between 1980 and 2001.

This narrative’s implication is that her music is unclassifiable, and thus, unmarketable. Yet Williams herself had a slightly more prescient take on the subject when interviewed by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1989: “The kind of music I was doing just wasn’t really marketable, I guess. It’s only recently that people have started opening up to this kind of music. They finally created a market for it. That market has definitely come to me rather than me going to it.”⁴ Although Rough Trade typically released music harder-edged and artier than Williams’, her observation supports Diane Pecknold’s argument that in the 1980s and early

³ Sylvie Simmons, “Lucinda Williams: Even Cowgirls Get the Blues,” *MOJO*, August 2001, accessed May 13, 2016, <http://www.rocksbackpages.com.proxy.its.virginia.edu/Library/Article/lucinda-williams-even-cowgirls-get-the-blues>.

⁴ Jon Casimir, “Songstress from the South; Musical Notes,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 24, 1989, Metro 20.

1990s, independent rock labels began releasing country-rock albums in a groundswell that gave shape to what we now consider the commercially mature genre “alt.country.”⁵

While the indies really did move toward country-rock, the press coverage of Williams during her late-80s ascendancy does not particularly reflect this movement. Instead, media reports of Williams and attempts to market her music seem to hinge around discussions of then-contemporary (mainstream) country music and her tentative presence within that industry. The key historical context for this discussion is country music’s meteoric rise in popularity in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, via popular performers such as Garth Brooks and Shania Twain. As Bill Malone reminds us, by the mid-90s country had become the biggest radio format in America. Malone defines this wave as “New Country,” young performers who grew up listening to pop and rock, and who sometimes rose from suburban instead of rural origins.⁶ This is in distinction from “New Traditionalists,” the phrase often applied slightly earlier in the ‘80s to performers such as Randy Travis, Dwight Yoakum, and Lyle Lovett, country musicians who audibly evoked mid-century honky-tonk like Lefty Frizzell, while also updating Frizzell’s sound with regional pop touches.

Beginning in 1988 with her self-titled record, and picking up steam in the early 1990s after Mary Chapin-Carpenter scored a hit single covering Williams’ “Passionate Kisses,” journalists frequently considered the question as to what variety (traditional or not) and degree of “New Country” one could classify her music. Some journalists, such as Eve Zibart of *The Washington Post*, portrayed New Country and Williams’ role within it in an expansive,

⁵ Diane Pecknold, “Selling Out or Buying In?: Alt.Country’s Cultural Politics of Commercialism,” in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 30-32.

⁶ Bill Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 419-421.

optimistic light. In some of Williams' very earliest press coverage (a piece entitled "New Country: Across The Great Divide"), Zibart paired her with folkie Nanci Griffith, arguing for both the porousness of genre and the idea of the country genre as an imagined national community: "The only common denominator of more and more 'new country' records is just how broad the country can be." While using the term "alternative fringe" to describe Williams' style of country, Zibart also compared some of her work to "the coolness of Mother Maybelle's milk," implicitly arguing that New Country demonstrated tangible links to the historical tradition of country music.⁷

Other journalists also took note of Williams' traditionalism, but used this idea instead to argue that the majority of New Country aims for the lowest common denominator. For instance, Bruce Elder, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1989, praised Williams as part of what he called a "sophistication" trend in country, while also arguing that she was unappreciated in contemporary Nashville. Elder placed Williams on the winning end of a commercial binary: "The dilemma in contemporary country music is sharply focused in the contrast between Lucinda Williams and The Judds. Where Williams can write about the pain and anguish of growing up in a small town, all The Judds can do is turn the experience into a piece of Mills & Boon romantic twaddle. Their song 'Young Love' is appallingly sentimental."⁸ Other journalists joined Elder in arguing that country women who spoke bluntly about the trials of life rose above the "New Country" trend to another strata altogether. Previewing Williams' 1991 tour of Tasmania with Mary-Chapin Carpenter and Roseanne Cash, David Sly wrote, "They're not crushed flowers yearning for the good ol' simple ways. They are women who have lived rich

⁷ Eve Zibart, "New Country: Across the Great Divide," *The Washington Post*, December 23, 1988, Weekend Section N22.

⁸ Bruce Elder, "Bustin' Down Barriers," *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 31, 1990, 16.

lives and sing about them with a jarring frankness. Forget the ‘new traditionalists’ filling the United States country charts with twangy roots music, these women are the new realists.”⁹

The fact that Williams’ music could be interpreted as both firmly “New Country” and also something apart from it demonstrates that journalists of the era were attempting to define and police genre boundaries during a “boom time” for country music. Since popular music genres are clearly bound up in commercial and rhetorical structures of their time and place, sociologists Richard Peterson and Jennifer Lena argue that:

Boundary-defining work occurs within a shifting social, political, economic and cultural landscape, and the structural features of this landscape condition the actions of genre stakeholders. A genre’s proximal environment includes other genres that compete for many of the same resources, including fans, capital, media attention, and legitimacy. Competing genres often include both the dominant genre in a field and fledgling genres contesting for the same opportunity space.¹⁰

In the case of the early 1990s country music sales and radio market boom recounted here, it could be argued that the “New” and “New Traditionalist” camps were country music genres competing over finite cultural and financial capital. Such a struggle is reminiscent of the 1950s “competition” between honky-tonk and countrypolitan styles described in Joli Jensen’s *The Nashville Sound*. Yet as Jensen points out, the creators of the Nashville Sound strategically portrayed themselves as in competition more with the then-nascent genre of rock ‘n’ roll, than with preexisting forms of country music.¹¹

⁹ David Sly, “Old Country Feels a Challenge,” *The Advertiser*, November 9, 1991.

¹⁰ Jennifer Lena and Richard Peterson, “Classification as Culture: Types and Trajectories of Music Genres, *American Sociological Review* 73 (2008): 699.

¹¹ Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 38-61.

The Rock Perspective

Of note here is that virtually all of this critical discourse was generated by rock critics and general-readership cultural reportage; country music industry press regarding Williams' early work is basically nonexistent. Steve Waksman's work on the "counter-genres" (a term he borrows from Heather Dubrow) of punk and metal in the 1970s and '80s demonstrates how seemingly opposed genres, through the boundary work of journalists and fans, can help define one another.¹² Though the critical discourse of praise surrounding Lucinda Williams' 1988 self-titled album was used to define "New Country" in opposition to "New Traditionalism" and "New Country" to "classic" country of the 1960s, when we reconsider Williams' actual generic home as rock, it changes the terms of counter-genre comparison, pitting country versus rock or even the sounds and ideologies of indie rock versus classic rock—a generational battle.

The most striking example of this alternate perspective is found in John Rockwell's think-piece in *The New York Times* on Williams' career up to 1989. Rockwell begins his critique with qualified praise for Williams' seemingly straightforward performance of authenticity:

I like Lucinda Williams's eponymous album on the Rough Trade label as much as the next person: This is serious, satisfying singing and playing and composing in a gritty folk-blues-rock idiom. But even her most fervent admirers concede that she sounds familiar; indeed, her very familiarity in this slick, syntho-pop era seems deeply comforting. A whiff of the late 1960's and 70's persists, no matter how highly one judges her work. The issue here, then, is this: Can a rock performer be valued for the ability to make music within a dated style? Or is such a choice - to avoid the bustling, glittering fashions of this moment - increasingly a sign of crippling, nostalgic self-consciousness?¹³

¹² Steve Waksman, *This Ain't the Summer of Love: Conflict and Crossover in Heavy Metal and Punk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 9.

¹³ John Rockwell, "Pop View: Do Some Rockers Hide Out in Dated Styles?", *The New York Times*, March 5, 1989, Section 2 Page 25.

Ultimately, Rockwell concludes later in his analysis that Williams' music only flirts with nostalgia, not necessarily becoming overwhelmed by it. He concedes that if Williams opens up her music to a few carefully-chosen commercial moves, "if she graduates from being a critics' darling, Ms. Williams may yet emerge herself," into mainstream success.¹⁴

Rockwell's tone is occasionally rockist¹⁵, in interesting and slightly problematic ways which anticipate the creation of an alt.country genre aesthetic later in the 1990s. I will return to his argument in further detail later in this chapter, but my point here is that by taking a contrary stand in labeling Williams as "rock, Rockwell liberates her from the "innovation within New Country" narrative relied upon by most journalists of the late 1980s/early 1990s in describing her work. Examining the strong influence of 1960s and '70s rock upon Williams' music allows Rockwell to articulate the ways in which her musical and lyrical aesthetic can in fact be seen as conservative. Furthermore, Rockwell's rock perspective opens up an interpretation wherein this (rock) conservatism may be an artistically valuable thing.

Williams herself, interviewed in the early 1990s, seemed to intuitively grasp some benefits of aligning herself within a canonical rock tradition. "I'd like to call it folk-rock if anything at all," she told an Australian journalist, utilizing a term typically associated with late '60s rock.¹⁶ In interviews of the period, Williams repeatedly linked herself to popular rock

¹⁴ Rockwell, "Do Some Rockers Hide Out in Dated Styles?"

¹⁵ For instance, Rockwell argues that "Modernist classical composers, pushing Romantic ideals to a sometimes absurdist extreme, made stylistic originality the touchstone of their art. So important did novelty become that unpopularity was prized as the only sure sign of integrity. If audiences liked a piece of music right away (or ever), then it was presumed that it must be old hat, and hence uninteresting." Then, updating the evolution of this sentiment to 1989, he implicitly complains that "all over the charts there are signs of self-conscious returns to the past, or of deliberately archaic sensibilities that sound self-conscious even if they aren't." This emphasis on sonic innovation as an implicitly "good" characteristic is rockist in orientation.

¹⁶ "Lucinda Defies Titles," *The Advertiser*, June 24, 1993.

artists, drawing distinctions with country music perhaps a bit predictable given the media narratives I have outlined above:

This is a big mistake that everyone's making out there and it's driving me crazy. Everyone calls me country and I'm not. When most people think of country they think of Kathy Mattea or Mary-Chapin Carpenter. That is not at all what I do. Their stuff is much more mainstream than what I do. I have more in common with Chrissie Hynde and Tom Petty. Other people have recorded my songs who are country artists so they think I am, too.¹⁷

When Williams was reminded by her interviewer that she had recently toured the world with Carpenter and Roseanne Cash, two musicians typically labeled as country music, she replied with seeming exasperation, "I thought I could do what I wanted to do without being pigeonholed, but now I see that's impossible. So now I have to be careful about the shows I do, who I'm associated with, because I don't want people to confuse me that way."¹⁸ Williams' statement demonstrates a keen understanding of the point articulated by Elijah Wald that audience expectations are often central in shaping genre boundaries and the musicians classed within them.¹⁹ Yet Williams' statement is also a blunt argument that musicians themselves need to play a key role in establishing their genre affiliation—primarily through the performance of interview discourse.

Williams' self-descriptions of her sound are often simultaneously precise and opaque, expressed in terms of how she wants the public to perceive her. For instance, in June 1993, she told Brett Thomas of Sydney's *Sun Herald* that "I'd just rather be known as a singer-songwriter...I'd rather be identified with the more rootsy rock crowd."²⁰ While keeping her

¹⁷ Stephanie Bunbury, "'Rural' Lucinda's No Nashville Diva," *The Age*, June 18, 1993, 3.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹ Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 6-7.

²⁰ Brett Thomas, "Singer's Verbal Guns Can Blaze," *Sun Herald*, June 13, 1993, 127.

work firmly rooted in rock, Williams' use of "singer-songwriter" is interesting for two reasons. One, it suggests an "auteur" sensibility, a Dylan-inspired take on '60s rock which later greatly informed the 1990s alt.country aesthetic—with Williams as one of the primary drivers of that scene. Two, in the context of the late 1980s and early '90s, "singer-songwriter" was a vague yet *au courant* umbrella term encompassing everyone from folk-rock chart star Tracy Chapman to country chart star Mary-Chapin Carpenter. Williams' willingness to associate herself with that term in the early '90s suggests to me that at this tenuous point in her career—having gained critical acclaim but still touring in a van—she herself was unsure as to the genre of her music and the direction it would continue to evolve.

Evidence suggests that Williams came the closest to "breaking through" as a potential Nashville country artist during the early 1990s. "The Night's Too Long" and "Passionate Kisses" (from her 1988 self-titled album) were recorded during this period by Patty Loveless and Mary-Chapin Carpenter, respectively. Williams moved to Nashville and hired Nashville-based public relations firm Shock Ink to represent her; fellow clients included Carpenter, Travis Tritt, and Trisha Yearwood.²¹ When postpunk-oriented Rough Trade declined to renew her contract, after a brief stint at RCA Williams signed with Chameleon, a small label distributed by Warner Brothers.²² As reported by Edward Morris in a June 1993 issue of *Billboard*, during this time

²¹ This interview notes that Williams was living and working in Nashville as of 1993: Bryanna Latoof, "The Sweet Kiss of Success," *St. Petersburg Times*, April 23, 1993, Weekend 19. Additionally, *Billboard* reported that Shock Ink had opened a Nashville office and that Williams was a client: Edward Morris, "Nashville Scene," *Billboard*, March 27, 1993, 30.

²² Jim Bessman of *Billboard* tracked Williams' journey through record labels upon her signing to Chameleon: Jim Bessman, "Singer/Writer Makes Her Chameleon Label Debut," *Billboard*, September 5, 1992, 14. Though Bessman and Williams characterize her exit from RCA and move to Chameleon as a journey toward creative control, with a smaller label enabling her to capture on tape "all the emotion of the songs and the spontaneity" that she associated with her eponymous Rough Trade LP, to these ears the production aesthetic of this Chameleon album, *Sweet Old World*, such as increased stereo field presence of the vocals and greater audible separation between instrument tracks, moves Williams' recorded sound incrementally closer to a mainstream 1990s country music production, at least when compared with the more austere *Lucinda Williams*.

Warner executed a marketing campaign (“Pick the Hits”) promoting country artists on Chameleon and other WEA labels. Williams’ *Sweet Old World* was hawked as “country” alongside superstars like Kenny Rogers, not to mention New Traditionalists like Dwight Yoakam.²³ In the spring and fall of 1993, Williams undertook a U.S. tour co-headlining with Texas country artist Joe Ely, dubbed the “Jim Beam Country Caravan Tour”. As reported in *Adweek*, “The company believes the demographics of country music dovetail with its target market of 25-to 40-year olds.”²⁴ It is interesting to note that this became the core demographic for the alternative country audience just a few years later.

“Crescent City” and Defining Rock

One additional song from 1988’s *Lucinda Williams* was also recorded by a country music star; Emmylou Harris included her version of “Crescent City” on her *Cowgirl’s Prayer* album in September 1993, and even released a video expanding upon the song’s themes of celebration in a Cajun community.²⁵ Harris recorded the song at an interesting juncture in her career; *Cowgirl’s Prayer* was her final album in an acoustic “country” style; beginning with 1995’s *Wrecking Ball* (which also featured a Williams song), she self-consciously remade her work in an art-rock aesthetic. However, Harris’ “Crescent City” features several musical elements making it appropriate for 1990s mainstream country radio airplay. The electric guitar riff which opens the recording (0:00-0:15), completely absent in Williams’ original, echoes Bakersfield country, but with a compressed production sheen appropriate to ‘90s radio. The guitar is consistently mixed

²³ Edward Morris, “WEA Labels Enter Joint Promo; Country Albums To Get Boost At Retail,” *Billboard*, June 12, 1993, 30.

²⁴ “Singing the Praises of Jim Beam,” *Adweek*, February 1, 1993.

²⁵ Emmylou Harris, *Cowgirl’s Prayer*, Elektra/Asylum 61541-2, 1993, compact disc. The promotional video for the song is viewable online: “Emmylou Harris: Crescent City,” YouTube video, 3:29, 1994 promotional clip, posted by “1000Magicians,” November 9, 2012, <https://youtu.be/jETFAhth98U>.

higher than the song's fiddle, preventing the latter from rising above the level of background texture. Lead electric guitar and Harris' vocals drive the song; the simple shuffle drumbeat adds light accents at 2 and 4, also not rising above the level of texture. Harris sings the lyrics in her typical polished vocal style; at 0:37-0:43, in particular, she elongates the vowels in "the longest bridge I've ever crossed over Pontchartrain" so the words fall across the beat in soaring fashion. The song also features backing gospel harmonies in the choruses, and Harris double-tracked harmonizing with herself in the second verse. The overall effect is a warm, thick musical texture, one that would sound absolutely at home placed between Mary-Chapin Carpenter and Trisha Yearwood on a 1990s country radio playlist.

Lucinda Williams' original 1988 recording of "Crescent City" is notably stark, almost chilly in comparison.²⁶ Unlike Harris' version, there is a great deal of space in the recording, allowing drums, bass, acoustic and electric guitar, fiddle, and Williams' voice to be heard as distinct instruments. The production aesthetic splits the difference between Robert Earl Keen's *West Textures* (1989) and the Pixies' *Surfer Rosa* (1988), and it seems Williams and her co-producers Gurf Morlix and Dusty Wakemen may have especially taken note of Pixies engineer Steve Albini's drum miking techniques. Her snare in particular has a crispness associated with "college rock" of the late 1980s. While possessing a degree of rhythmic flexibility associated with the shuffle of Harris' version, Williams' drummer pushes the song much closer to a straight 4/4 rock beat. Though the Williams and Harris versions are roughly the same tempo, the harder-hitting snare in Williams' version creates a more intense rhythmic feeling.

²⁶ Lucinda Williams, *Lucinda Williams*, Rough Trade 047, 1988, compact disc.

A combination of Williams' vocal with drums and fiddle are what drives the recording. In particular, in comparison with Harris' version, Williams' measured vocals at key moments in the song work to create a feeling of deep sadness and poignancy. In one of many examples, when Williams sings "and the longest bridge I've ever crossed over Pontchartrain" (0:24-0:30), the breathiness of her enunciation of "and the longest," coupled with an upturn in pitch at the end of "Pontchartrain", creates the illusion that the singer is audibly pained as she remembers said bridge mid-phrase. "The longest bridge I've ever crossed over Pontchartrain" is perhaps one of the most precise yet inscrutable lines in Williams' entire body of work. It is not entirely clear whether the bridge is being traversed heading toward or away from "home," and it is also not spelled out why returning home across the bridge might bring the singer sadness. However, one thing is clearer: the gravitas with which Williams sings this line suggests a very long bridge indeed; the Creole homestead she travels to is "a mythic land apart."²⁷

Following the song's opening section, wherein the listener is drawn in across Lake Pontchartrain with the narrator, the song becomes a veritable ode to what remains distinctive about Cajun culture, as it is perceived by residents and admirers. During the song Williams sings two phrases in Cajun French, "Laissez Les Bons Temps Rouler" and "Tu Le Ton Son Ton," the latter of which is the title of a Clifton Chenier zydeco song, a song the narrator implies she and her friends dance to all night long. She spatially sets the scene with place names (Mandeville), and riding in open cars driven by a brother who knows "where the best bars are." Everything about this scene suggests friendliness, warmth, family—and also exclusivity, proprietary local knowledge. Williams' narrator speaks with the confidence of an insider speaking to other

²⁷ I reference here the scholarly anthology *A Mythic Land Apart: Reassessing Southerners and their History*, eds. John David Smith and Thomas H. Appleton Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997).

insiders, as she names her mother and siblings in the song as Bayou residents. The atmosphere of a friendly inside conversation is so artfully constructed, one begins to wonder if it wasn't created at least in part for the delighted eye and ear of an outsider.

Paired with these lyrics celebrating good times with family and friends is the song's most "Cajun" quality, and also its saddest: the fiddle playing. The fiddle is heard throughout, at a much higher level in the mix than in Emmylou Harris' version. Its timbre has a characteristic roughness associated with Cajun music, and particularly during the song's choruses the fiddle adopts the trick of audibly seeming to harmonize with itself. And it is during these choruses ("Me and my sister, me and my brother," 0:48-0:56, for instance) that the fiddle's endlessly unresolved movement between F#m and B, always in the characteristic Cajun two-slurred two-separate rhythm, contributes a brooding, haunted quality. In contrast to the gospel-style backing choir evoking community in the choruses of Harris' version, in Williams' version her voice with one thin male harmony, interacting with the prominent F#m to B harmonic movement of the fiddle, creates the feeling that these family memories can never actually be returned to—that the narrator as an individual is left lonely. Furthermore, in an anti-modern interpretation, the Cajun-style fiddle part, striving toward harmonic resolution but not reaching it, could be said to represent a Creole southern way of life that the narrator depends upon and longs for even as she knows it is inexorably slipping away.

I discuss both versions of "Crescent City" here for two reasons. One, the fact that Williams' song could be covered and popularized by a country star like Emmylou Harris demonstrates that in the early phase of her career, her generic identity in the public eye was not entirely fixed. The distinct possibility existed in the early '90s that she might "cross over" to

mainstream country radio and a new audience. However, the fact that Williams denied her status as “country” in interviews of the period, and consciously aligned herself with rockers like Tom Petty and Chrissie Hynde, brings me to my second point: in a song like “Crescent City” Williams presents rock audiences with a singer-songwriter “auteur” take on country music. While country music lyrics of the past 40 years typically emphasize commonalities shared between rural (and suburban) audiences of the broader Sunbelt South and West, in a song like “Crescent City” Williams consciously highlights what is marginal, hidden, and Creolized about the southern Louisiana community she originally hails from. It is one of Williams’ earliest efforts at presenting a stylized take on the Cajun South to listeners, and notable for its stark, ruminative sadness; it is the beginning of a thematic thread fully realized on *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*. In presenting a self-consciously idiosyncratic and “personal” take on country music to rock listeners, Williams claims an auteur singer-songwriter persona which, as I will suggest throughout the rest of this chapter, is one of her primary contributions to a 1990s alt.country aesthetic.

The Auteur

In the fields of popular music and film, both inherently collaborative and commercial, an auteur is a filmmaker or musician who not only believes that the rules of genre should not apply to her, but also believes that the formal conventions of genre are the raw building blocks out of which she creates a “personal,” idiosyncratic statement. Williams fits this definition, particularly in the way she began to publicly shape her creative philosophy in interviews as her career picked up. She often articulated her desire to be considered an auteur beyond genre when describing to journalists her musical upbringing. As Jon Pareles described it in a *New York Times* 1989

profile, “She began writing poems and short stories in grade school, and when she picked up a guitar in 1965, she was drawn to the mid-1960s folk revival, from *Sing Out* magazine to Peter, Paul and Mary songs. Her own style started to come out, she said, ‘when I realized I couldn’t sing like Joan Baez.’”²⁸ In many interviews Williams describes her nascent performing and songwriting career as steeped in 1960s influences, but transfigured through her own lens, due to practical (i.e. vocal range) and aesthetic (i.e. personal taste) reasons. As she said to *Rolling Stone* in 1998, “Hank Williams put it best when he said country music is the white man’s blues, because it all comes from the same place. But at the same time I was listening to Hank Williams, I was also listening to The Doors and Sandy Denny, and when I did my own shows I’d do Jefferson Airplane songs and Hendrix’s ‘Angel’. I didn’t care if it was rock, folk, or blues, I just interpreted it my way.”²⁹ Since it can be reasonably argued that *every* performer brings some degree of individuality to her interpretation of a song text, by dint of the fact that no two voices are alike, Williams’ emphasis on personal interpretation here demonstrates a belief in the ideology of auteurism.

In attempting to understand and explain the cultural significance of Williams’ successful blending of various American “roots” styles within a rock context on her career high water mark, 1998’s *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, rock-oriented publications such as *Rolling Stone* often also approached her work through an auteurist perspective. Robert Christgau’s rave review of the album in *RS*, for instance, states “Not only is *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* more perfect than the two albums that preceded it, which English grammar declares an impossibility. It

²⁸ Jon Pareles, “With a Sob and Twang, Songwriters From Texas,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 1989, C5. Williams lived for a time in Texas.

²⁹ Chris Mundy, “Lucinda Williams’ Home-Grown Masterpiece,” *Rolling Stone*, August 6, 1998, 39-44.

achieves its perfection by being more imperfect.”³⁰ While Christgau would later add more nuance and even direct criticism to his published take on *Car Wheels*, this perspective on the album—that it is a self-evidently cohesive art object, whose cohesiveness is enhanced by Williams’ personal flaws—became the rock-critical consensus opinion. Rave reviews espousing an auteurist perspective helped boost Williams to a level of success she had never experienced previously: besides the aforementioned Gold album certification (500,000+ units sold) and Grammy win, *Car Wheels* also topped the 1998 Pazz & Jop critics’ poll of 1998.³¹

Critical veneration of Williams as an auteur noticeably changed her career, propelling her from cult status on the edge of the music business to a position as the flagship artist of a major label, Lost Highway (now defunct). While auteurism is useful in explaining that meteoric rise, it is less useful in explaining Williams’ unique contributions to a 1990s alt.country aesthetic, particularly vis-à-vis the evolving role of Southern regional identity. As film scholars David Wharton and Jeremy Grant argue:

The auteurist perspective says that what is good and/or interesting about a [text] is the way it reflects an individual creative personality. The genre-critical approach may be based on one of two lines of approach. It may see [art] as a social practice and be interested in how a genre fits into the ideologies and expectations of the society that produced it. Or, as in the writing of Pauline Kael, it may look for aesthetic quality in individual [texts] in terms of what they do with the conventions of the genre.³²

While it is undeniable that Williams’ multi-faceted *Car Wheels* songs “reflect an individual creative personality”, in the remainder of this chapter, I will explore the dialectic *between* Williams’ personal, idiosyncratic artistic choices and the broader ways in which *Car Wheels*

³⁰ Robert Christgau, “Lucinda Williams: Car Wheels On A Gravel Road,” Robert Christgau: Dean of American Rock Critics, July 23, 1998, accessed May 15, 2016, <http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cdrev/lucinda-rs.php>.

³¹ “The 1998 Pazz & Jop Critics Poll,” Robert Christgau: Dean of American Rock Critics, March 2, 1999, accessed May 15, 2016, <http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/pnj/pjres98.php>.

³²David Wharton and Jeremy Grant, *Teaching Auteur Study* (London : BFI, 2005), 34.

participated in and was informed by an emerging anti-modern alt.country genre aesthetic of the 1990s. When examining four of Williams' songs from the album, it becomes apparent that by the late '90s her auteur singer-songwriter music had crossed firmly into rock—more ideologically than sonically—and that Williams' take on Southern memory and longing spoke more to an anti-modern impulse in '90s rock than anything directly relating to 1990s country music.

The Perfectionist

One notable arena where *Car Wheels* and its reception crossed into the rock world was in the “auteur” narrative surrounding the album's long gestation. In fact, the years spent recording and finding a label for the album—six by one count, three to four by another—was considered “legendary” in the music business, and became arguably the primary narrative about *Car Wheels* in general-readership media. Williams first recorded the songs in 1995 with her longtime bandleader Gurf Morlix, and the process proved so frustrating to both that Morlix eventually cut professional ties with Williams. Next, after duetting with Steve Earle on his self-produced 1996 album *I Feel Alright*, Williams was drawn to Earle's vocal production techniques, and asked him to re-record the *Car Wheels* songs with her. Although reportedly aspects of Earle's productions made it to the final 1998 cut, on the whole Williams was unsatisfied with the results, and recorded most of the tracks yet again with Roy Bittan, pianist of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band.³³ As immortalized in a 1997 profile by *New York Times Magazine* writer Darcy Frey, these Los Angeles Bittan sessions were renown for intensive weeks spent reworking the basic

³³ Mundy, “Lucinda Williams' Home-Grown Masterpiece,” 39-44.

tracks, adding and removing instrumental work by various session players, with Williams doing more of the production work than Bittan, according to Frey.

As exemplified in Frey's profile, Williams' so-called "perfectionist" demands as co-producer often focused on aspects of her vocal performance. Frey depicts an exchange between Williams and Bittan in the recording booth, as Williams attempts various vocal takes on the song "Right in Time":

Suddenly Williams opens her eyes and stops singing, midverse. Sitting in the engineer's glass booth, her producer, Roy Bittan, hits pause, the band cuts off and the studio falls silent. "Yes?" he says through the intercom.

"The problem is," Williams replies, frowning and shading her eyes from the glare of the studio lights, "I don't know if I like how this last line sounds.

"Which one?"

" 'Lie on my back and moan at the ceiling.' I just don't want to sound nasally and bright."

"You don't," Bittan assures her. "You sound just fine."

"How do I know?" Williams asks anxiously. "I think that one 'lie on my back' was a little pitchy. I want to hear it again."

Bittan shrugs. "O.K., then I'll play it for you again." He rolls the tape, and once again Williams's haunting Southern voice fills the studio, this time with the singer and her producer listening to each melancholy vowel as the woman slips off her watch and her earrings, lies on her back and moans at the ceiling.

Like Dylan or Neil Young, Lucinda Williams is a remarkable storyteller with a rough-edged voice that sounds as if she's speaking straight from her heart. It's understandable, then, that on this particular number she'd prefer not to sound as if she's speaking straight from her sinuses. Nevertheless, Williams and her lonely-hearted protagonist have been moaning, as it were, all afternoon.³⁴

³⁴ Darcy Frey, "Lucinda Williams is in Pain," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 14, 1997, 53.

Williams would later argue in Toronto's *Globe and Mail* that Frey overemphasized her perceived neuroses in a studio exchange such as this because he was not a musician and was unfamiliar with music business practices.³⁵ In any case, it seems evident that Williams and her team put a tremendous amount of time and effort into craft; the evidence is in the recording itself.

For instance, in the finished version of "Right in Time", the lyric "Lie on my back and moan at the ceiling" is delivered in a manner neither "nasally" nor bright; Williams and Bittan succeeded in capturing a vocal more emotionally nuanced. At 2:41, Williams sings the words "Lie on my" completely on pitch; but in a sudden turn at 2:43, she exhales the word "back" slightly off-pitch and with a notable shift to a breathy timbre. This vocal trick cleverly anticipates the actual moaning that the song's narrator will be doing in the line that immediately follows. Said moaning is then rendered onomatopoeically via Williams' sung "Oh, my baby" (2:49-2:53), essentially on-pitch and at a softer volume compared with the lines preceding. The drama of this vocal moment is emphasized by the backing instrumentation, which drops down to just a high hat and snare played with brushes, a spare bass line, and occasional fills on acoustic and electric guitar.³⁶ The arrangement thus places full emphasis on Williams' voice, and the lyric.

In fact, both Williams' arrangements and production techniques throughout *Car Wheels* place an emphasis on her vocal performance, in a style notably different from 1988's *Lucinda Williams*, discussed above. Whereas the vocals and instruments on the 1988 album are bathed in light echo and reverb, making it sound as though her band is performing live in a small room, the vocals and instruments are intensely "dry" throughout *Car Wheels*, absent of reverb to a degree

³⁵ Alan Niester, "The Long, Slow Build of Lucinda Williams," *The Globe & Mail*, October 31, 1998, C17.

³⁶ Lucinda Williams, *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, Mercury P2 58338, 1998, compact disc.

that—to these ears—the tracks self-evidently present as studio creations. Furthermore, Williams’ vocals are heavily compressed so that they sound “loud” in a crystalline fashion that would have been at home on 1990s commercial country or modern rock radio. The stereo mix throughout the album consistently isolates the vocals from the band, and prioritizes vocals as the loudest aspect of the mix.³⁷ For instance, in the song “Car Wheels on a Gravel Road,” when Williams sings “Smell of coffee, eggs and bacon” (0:24-0:27), the listener can hear “coffee” half-spoken, half-sung with a precision that would be impossible to discern in a more “live” recording. This audible precision is useful, because it emphasizes the conversational, quotidian, “mundane” dimension of the lyrics, adding another layer to the portrait being painted of familial strife. And when Buddy Miller adds his high harmony vocal to Williams’ at 0:53 (“Car wheels on a gravel road/Car wheels on a gravel road”), again the vocals are so isolated in the mix that the listener can hear every detail of Miller’s backing vocal performance, including his precise pronunciation of “on a.”

Thoughtful vocal details such as these throughout the album were celebrated in numerous reviews of *Car Wheels*; critics either seemed to argue that Williams’ vocals were so “natural” and lived-in that they demonstrated a singular vision, or that they were so mannered, so artfully crafted, that they demonstrated a singular vision. Both interpretations furthered an auteurist perspective on Williams’ work. The former is exemplified by N. Mengel’s review in Queensland’s *Courier Mail*: “By the time her sad, lonesome voice rises up somewhere in the back of the throat, rolls off the side of her tongue and slurs out of the corner of her mouth, you

³⁷ I should note that this in itself is an “auteurist” choice in a rock context; rock singer-songwriter recordings often foreground an artist’s voice in the stereo mix, so that maximum attention may be focused on the lyrics and their performance. This works off the assumption that the singer’s “message” is worth hearing—an “auteur” perspective because this in turn assumes that rock lyrics can “rise above” pop songcraft to the level of poetry.

get the feeling it has done a lot of living. Probably in a dusty pick-up truck on some lonely road to Nowhere, Louisiana...Her voice is one that knows something about joy and a lot more about regret and sorrow. When it aches, you can't believe she is acting."³⁸ Mengel thus authenticates Williams' vocals to the listener by implying that her performance is a direct record of her unique lived experiences. In contrast, Robert Christgau's 4.5-star *Rolling Stone* review of the album noted of her vocals, "She skillfully deploys the usual roughness tricks, from sandpaper shadings to full-scale cracks, but her main techniques are the drawl, emphasized to camouflage or escape her own sophistication, and the sigh, a breathy song-speech that lets her moan or croon or muse or coo or yearn or just feel pretty as the lyric permits and the mood of the moment demands."³⁹ Use of language like "tricks" and "techniques" demonstrates Christgau's belief that her vocal performances are artifice, carefully planned and re-worked over time. In this rendering Williams is also an auteur, because she labors intensely to create for the listener a sonic structure roughly equivalent to the one inside her brain alone.

Williams would likely agree most with Christgau's characterization, seeing as she subsequently defended her protracted work methods as an extension of her personal passions in life. As Dan DeLuca wrote in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*: "Williams bristles at the perfectionist tag. But she admits to an obsessive streak that fires her passion for everything from...Southern folk art...to her drive to record an album that avoid slickness yet contains no audible imperfections...Says Williams, 'I just want it to be really great—as good as it can possibly be.'"⁴⁰ Williams also directly responded to Frey's profile at least once on stage in 1997, as reported in *The New York Times*: "From the stage, Ms. Williams insisted, 'I'm no more neurotic

³⁸ N. Mengel, "Polished Rough Diamond," *Courier Mail*, August 1, 1998, Weekend 13.

³⁹ Christgau, "Lucinda Williams: Car Wheels on a Gravel Road."

⁴⁰ Dan DeLuca, "For Lucinda Williams, A Great Album, Great Relief," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 5, 1998, F01.

than any other songwriter or artist.’ Later, she wondered aloud whether people told van Gogh he was taking too long to finish a painting.”⁴¹ In aligning herself with an influential visual artist such as van Gogh, an artist who struggled with personal demons but also produced 19th-century masterpieces, Williams here implies that the finished product—the text—is what matters. In the logic of auteurism, a singular text justifies a prolonged and “difficult” process whereby it is created.

The Southerner

It is interesting, however, that in Mengel, Christgau, and Williams’ remarks on voice and process, one notes a certain unresolved tension between Williams’ artistic persona on *Car Wheels* and the “real her.” Williams is lauded for writing songs based on so-called autobiographical Southern experiences, and in the assessment of a critic like Mendel, the fact that she hails from Louisiana gives her travelogue-like narratives greater authenticity. Williams does not discourage, and even sometimes encourages this notion, telling *Rolling Stone* in 1998: “I’ve always been defensive about being a Southerner...There have been a lot of misperceptions that I’ve encountered. Any time anyone deals with those kinds of barriers or prejudices or stereotypes, it makes you want to delve into that area more, feel good about it.”⁴² The implication here is that she could help speak for the South, to use her personal experiences to show outsiders (Northerners) the cultural riches and communal fun of a place like “Crescent City.” But upon closer examination, Williams’ work is too subtle, too full of disconnects between persona and “real person,” to perform a straightforward regional boosterism. Examining two songs which engage this insider/outsider question, “Car Wheels on a Gravel

⁴¹ Jon Pareles, “Looking Death in the Eye, and Singing About It,” *The New York Times*, September 17, 1997, E5.

⁴² Mundy, “Lucinda Williams’ Home-Grown Masterpiece,” 39-44.

Road” (in a poor white setting) and “2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten” (in a poor black setting) demonstrate that the impressionism of memory—and memory’s intersection with the historical legacies of Southern popular music and visual culture—are what make these songs anti-modern rock art.

“Car Wheels on a Gravel Road” is situated pointedly second on the album of the same name, the first of five “driving” songs on the record, and one that early on states, “Come on now child, we’re gonna go for a ride,” seeming to signify beyond the immediate text/story as an invitation to the listener. It is also the only song on the album to describe a scene from childhood, arguably told from a child’s point of view. The narrator specifically sets the scene at a house in Macon, Georgia, further coloring the moment as “Southern” by describing Loretta Lynn on the radio as bacon and eggs fry in the kitchen. It appears the adults of the household are preparing to vacate the premises and move to a new city, pulling out a “set of keys and a dusty suitcase” as the child overhears them packing: “Can’t find a damn thing in this place/Nothing’s where I left it before.” With a parental admonishment that “When I get back, this room better be picked up,” the child “pull[s] the curtain back and look[s] outside,” caught up in the rush and confusion of the moment—and as a child not understanding its full significance: “Somebody somewhere don’t know...Low hum of voices in the front seat/Stories nobody knows.” The family hits the road for “folks in Jackson we’re going to meet,” as the backseat narrator notes “Telephone poles, trees and wires fly on by/Car wheels on a gravel road.” In the final verse, there is a cinematic turn, as the point of view shifts into the car, observing the narrator outside herself, “Child in the backseat, ‘bout four, five years/Lookin’ out the window/Little bit of dirt mixed with tears/Car wheels on a gravel road.” Much of the song’s power is found in the tension between the matter-of-fact tone of the previous vignettes and the mysteriousness of the child’s

tears; what exactly has made her cry? Familial discord is hinted at (“There goes the screen door slamming shut”), but never made fully clear.

When “Car Wheels on a Gravel Road” was occasionally discussed in late-‘90s profiles of Williams, the critical consensus was that the song was autobiographical. Not only was the discord suggested in the song attributed to Williams’ family, there was also occasionally the intimation that the family’s relative poverty added to the strife. As articulated by Bill Buford when describing Williams’ early years:

As a child, Lucinda had seen so much of Uncle Cecil that she asked her mother if they'd lived in Sulphur, too, along with Lake Charles and Macon and a half-dozen other small college towns in the South. "No, no," her mother said, tellingly. "You're thinking of Iowa"-another town in Louisiana-"your grandmother's, where we went so often because we had no money for food and used to go there to eat." Lucinda's childhood was one of testing difficulty, and it is, she admits, an element in why she writes her particular songs of loss and neediness, some of which is touched on in "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road," her account of being a five-year-old in the South, with lyrics that evoke a time of tense domestic hush-hushness: of neighbors watching...of parents' squabbling...of a family's having a secret that others don't know... When Lucinda's father first heard the song, he sought out his daughter and apologized.⁴³

Williams reconfirmed the story’s coda in an interview with Chris Mundy, telling him, “I didn’t know what he meant, and he said, ‘That song’s about you. Didn’t you realize that?’ “I was just trying to paint a picture, but he recognized me in the song. I was the child in the back seat...” And was he right? “Yeah,” says Williams softly. “Yeah, he’s right.”⁴⁴

Foregoing critical distance for a moment, if we accept Williams’ comments and approach the song as an account of her own life story, it’s notable that she aligns herself within two Southern storytelling traditions. First, through the lines “Loretta’s singing on the radio” and

⁴³ Bill Buford, “Delta Nights: A Singer’s Love Affair with Loss,” *The New Yorker*, June 5, 2000, 60.

⁴⁴ Mundy, “Lucinda Williams’ Home-Grown Masterpiece,” 39-44.

“Hank’s voice on the radio”, she implicitly establishes herself as part of country music’s historical tradition, since being born a Southerner and raised on the country music of fellow Southerners is perhaps the primary criteria for membership within that tradition.⁴⁵ As Williams told Barney Hoskyns in *MOJO*, “I was influenced by singers like Hank Williams and Loretta Lynn from a real young age, and then later by a lot of Delta country blues singers like Robert Johnson and Skip James.”⁴⁶ As I highlight throughout this dissertation, alt.country musicians self-identifying within a Southern country music tradition, while primarily creating music based within the ideologies of the rock genre-world, is a cornerstone of the alt.country genre.

Furthermore, if we accept Williams’ narrative in “Car Wheels” as her life story, it can also be seen as part of the literary tradition of Southern autobiographers. Historian John Inscoe, in *Writing the South Through the Self*, argues that though the South may increasingly be less regionally-distinct from the rest of the nation, the sheer disproportionate number of Southerners who have written their autobiography by default constitutes a tradition—a “Southern rage to explain” he reminds us, quoting Fred Hobson.⁴⁷ In his book Inscoe analyzes various subgenres of Southern autobiography, arguing that among others there is a distinct tradition of what he calls “autobiographical encounters with Southern white poverty,” from William Styron to Lillian

⁴⁵ Bill Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 1. Bill Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), vii-x.

⁴⁶ Barney Hoskyns, “Lucinda Williams,” *MOJO*, January 1999, accessed May 13, 2016, <http://www.rockbackpages.com.proxy.its.virginia.edu/Library/Article/lucinda-williams>. Of course, it is worth noting here that all the performers Williams names here reached their peak of fame well before the 1970s, and as she told Brett Thomas of Sydney’s *Sun Herald*, “For Williams, the original, passionate sound of early country music is the only form of country. It’s real country” (127). This rhetorical move, to bracket off “classic country” as the only “true” country music, clearly delineating it from contemporary radio country, is an interview one-liner so common to alt.country musicians, it has nearly become a cliché. It is also worth noting that Williams’ citation of Robert Johnson, the famous African-American bluesman, as an influence, aligns with the Sixties rock tradition of white rock musicians self-consciously drawing on older (black) blues.

⁴⁷ John Inscoe, *Writing the South through the Self: Explorations in Southern Autobiography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), xii.

Smith.⁴⁸ In these narratives, Inscoc argues, typically a native-born white Southerner of means experiences a social-justice moment of awakening, when in her childhood or teen years she meets working-class or indigent poor Southern whites for the first time.⁴⁹

Inscoc believes this phenomenon is largely positive, but he also notes that writers in this tradition historically have had the problematic tendency to portray poor whites as types, not individuals. As such, he welcomes the evolving tradition of white working-class Southern autobiography, where in our contemporary moment poor white Southerners often tell their *own* stories, resulting in narratives “far more personalized and emotionally engaged than that of earlier generations of southerners who had merely observed their plight from afar.”⁵⁰ To this evolving tradition one could certainly add the autobiographies of country music stars from Southern working-class backgrounds. As Pamela Fox argues in *Natural Acts*, autobiographies by white female country singers like Loretta Lynn are an effective means of authentication within the genre’s lineage, and such working-class memoirs “offered the potential to challenge persistent representations of the Southern past as a domestic, bucolic temporality and the present as a largely feminine preoccupation with modern sensual and material pleasures.” By speaking as Southern “insiders” to a broad audience, Fox argues, white female country autobiographers sought to present a multiplicity of Southern identities (especially marginalized ones), both in terms of lived reality and in terms of country music representations of Southern identity.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Inscoc, *Writing the South Through the Self*, 73.

⁴⁹ Inscoc also argues that such “conversion” moments via identification with poor whites also typically lead the autobiographer to work for social and economic justice for impoverished Southern African-Americans later in their adult lives; *ibid*, 76.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 92-97. Inscoc notes the personal narratives of Dorothy Allison here, a self-identifying “poor white” Southerner.

⁵¹ Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 200), 115.

If one accepts the “Car Wheels” narrative as fact, Williams’ song can certainly be seen as participating in and expanding upon that tradition. But two factual problems, so to speak, disrupt the tidiness of that equation. One, while it seems verifiably true that Williams grew up in an economically-modest household, due to her professor father’s inability to secure tenure at several of the institutions where he taught writing, it also seems verifiable that while Lucinda’s early years may have been lacking in financial capital, they were rich in cultural capital.⁵² It has been widely noted that as a child and teenager Williams was surrounded at home by various famous writers hosted by her poet father, ranging from Allen Ginsberg to Flannery O’Connor.⁵³ Williams has stated several times in interviews that these early literary encounters were hugely influential in her decision to become a singer-songwriter. As such, Williams’ opportunities and experiences were not typical for a Southern white lower-income young woman of her day, and accordingly her position as “insider” in the autobiography tradition sketched above is more tenuous.

Furthermore, Williams’ account of her backstage conversation with her father (after he heard “Car Wheels on a Gravel Road”) is not the same with each retelling. In the version she relates to Bill Buford, Williams says her father approached her after her set to apologize for her upbringing, at which point she exclaimed, “Why, Daddy—that song’s not about you!”⁵⁴ Whereas the version she told *Rolling Stone* continued with her father explaining the song to her (as if the song sprang from Williams’ id, beyond her own rational comprehension), in this

⁵² Regarding Williams’ father’s employment, see Buford, “Delta Nights,” 60. By cultural capital, I refer to non-monetary sources of prestige, typically formal or non-formal education in the visual arts, music, economics, politics, history, literature. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, “Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction,” in *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education*, ed. Richard K. Brown (London: Tavistock, 1973), 71-112.

⁵³ Mundy, “Lucinda Williams’ Home-Grown Masterpiece,” 39-44.

⁵⁴ Buford, “Delta Nights,” 63.

version she presents her answer as definitive: the song truly is not about her father. If the song is not about her father, then the song may also not (entirely) be about her own childhood. And if that is the case, it is possible, even likely, that the song's narrative contains aspects of fiction.

If "Car Wheels" is interpreted as part fiction, this may remove it from the Southern autobiographical tradition, but opens up new interpretive possibilities vis-à-vis memory and a sense of *place*. For instance, consider the fact that both Loretta Lynn and Hank Williams are reported by the narrator as playing on the radio during the course of this fractured domestic scene. While Hank Williams achieved his peak chart success in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Lynn scored her biggest hits in the late 1960s and early 1970s. On no radio station in 1958 (the year Lucinda Williams would have been five years old) could these two artists have possibly been played together. As such, it seems Williams injects a degree of magical realism into her story, portraying for her audience a Southern memoryscape wherein Hank and Loretta can share the same emotional universe. Perhaps these two artists signify a long-lost Southern feeling of "home" for Williams in a way that steps beyond a linear sense of time or narrative. In conveying this to the listener, the song focuses more on the quotidian; it communicates less of a grand statement about Southern identity or homeland, and more about what its absence may feel like to Williams as an adult, personally. And in that slightly distanced, "meta" turn, the song becomes conceptually more rock than country.

Musically, there are also choices in the instrumentation which push the song more into rock territory—arguably the most "rock" song on the entire album. Perhaps the most noticeable is Gurf Morlix's electric guitar work throughout the song, both in the form of short lead breaks and also rhythmic texture backing Williams during the song's verses. In particular, at the end of

a short lead break at 3:14, Morlix bends and distorts a high note to such an extent that it almost crosses the boundary into “noise”, spiking the intensity of the song. Similarly, the movement between minor-key verses and major-key choruses is striking, with a small but noticeable increase in volume at each chorus. This ramping up of intensity is further underscored by Williams’ and Buddy Miller’s aforementioned close harmonizing on “Car wheels on a gravel road/Car wheels on a gravel road” (the chorus, in other words). This particular musical formula, softer minor-key verses crashing into louder major-key choruses, owes more to 1990s alternative rock à la the Pixies and Nirvana than it does to country music of any era. And the fact that the song’s greatest intensity occurs during “Car wheels on a gravel road/Car wheels on a gravel road” suggests a reading of that aural image which moves beyond simple nostalgia into emotions like boredom, frustration, even anger and resentment. Put simply, the full-rock-band instrumentation of “Car Wheels on a Gravel Road”, coupled with its elliptical lyrics, makes it difficult to interpret the song as straightforward singer-songwriter statement in classic “confessional” mode; its lyrics do not even feature first-person pronouns.

In Simon Frith’s *Performing Rites*, he notes that listeners think of the “real person” behind a recording as “what we like to imagine they [singer-songwriters] are really like...what is revealed, in the end, by their voice.”⁵⁵ But as I have demonstrated, in the case of critics interpreting Williams’ studio recordings, the complex mannerisms of her vocal performances make it too difficult to neatly map “real person” onto persona/narrator in a way that is unproblematically “authentic”. This is in spite of the fact that Williams herself often espouses a songwriting ethos of straightforward “authenticity”! For instance, she has frequently referred to songwriting as therapeutic, helping her emotionally process traumatic breakups, and as she told

⁵⁵ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 199.

Chris Mundy, ““You can't be afraid to deal with your demons. You've gotta go there to be able to write.”⁵⁶ But songs like “Car Wheels on a Gravel Road”, with its magical realism set to a rock arrangement, comes closer to how Keith Negus describes “Authorship in the Popular Song” (2011). In the world of rock and pop, he suggests,

These songwriters might be viewed as engaged in a Romantic project that seeks to resolve the tensions between the real author, implied author, narrator, and star image, and recover the fragmented self through an aesthetic that consciously strives to dissolve such distinctions, engaged in a sociological or political as well as a subjective and stylistic struggle.⁵⁷

In “Car Wheels on a Gravel Road”, due to intentional lyrical vagueness these tensions are never fully resolved, but the narrator’s desire to “recover the fragmented self” through childhood memories reveals a modest but larger idea: that images of the South, filtered through family, have the power to comfort, but also disturb—perhaps especially for those Southerners straddling the border between cultural “insider” and “outsider”.

The “Other” Southerner

If the sociological and generic insight of Williams’ investigation of working-class Southern whites is modest, her investigation of a working-class Southern black social world in “2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten” is more ambitious in scope, articulating a particularly solemn yet glamorous anti-modern longing. The song focuses mostly on images of a rural Southern juke joint, not unlike the actual one featured on the album’s cover, Turk's Place in Leflore County, Mississippi. Williams was inspired to write this song after studying pictures of various rural Mississippi nightclubs in Birney Imes’ 1990 book of photography, *Juke Joint*. Imes’ influential

⁵⁶ Mundy, “Lucinda Williams’ Home-Grown Masterpiece,” 39-44.

⁵⁷ Keith Negus, “Authorship and the Popular Song,” *Music & Letters* 92:4 (November 2011): 624.

volume features color photographs of various juke joints, and occasionally the mostly African-American clientele who socialize at these clubs.⁵⁸ After beginning with the narrator's matter-of-fact, "You can't depend on anything, really/There's no promises, there's no point/There's no good, there's no bad/In this dirty little joint," Williams assembles most of the next several verses directly from text featured on signs posted by management in these various juke joints; for instance, "House rules, no exceptions/No bad language, no gambling, no fighting/Sorry, no credit. Don't ask." Williams lifted the phrases directly from numerous photographs in Imes' book, and then rearranged them in an order which made sense to her poetically. In this sense, her lyrics in this portion of the song could be considered "found art". This language ("No dope smoking, no beer sold after 12 o'clock") is the authoritarian language of management, the language of business owners attempting to control the behavior of intoxicated patrons who are having a bit too much of a good time. The scene this evokes stands in stark contrast with a sad lover's moment of truth on a Lakes Charles bridge in the final verse. I will offer my further thoughts on this "imagistic shift" momentarily; what is first of all noteworthy here is the relationship between Imes' images and Williams' appropriation of them in the language of her song.⁵⁹

In a fall 1994 essay for *Spot*, the journal for the Houston Center for Photography, writer Holly Hildebrand explains about Imes, who like Williams is a white Baby Boomer,

As a child growing up in the segregated South of the 1950s, Birney Imes says he never faced the question of race head on. What he calls the "richness and diversity of a culture" had been hidden from him, and when he began photographing in the 1970s he chose, as a way to overcome his "ignorance," the rural life and culture of his native Mississippi...At first look, the world of Imes' juke joints seems other-worldly, even ghostly. Imes himself

⁵⁸ Birney Imes, *Juke Joint: Photographs* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990).

⁵⁹ "Imagistic shifts" is an apt turn-of-phrase from Robert Christgau's 1998 *Rolling Stone* review of *Car Wheels*. Robert Christgau, "Lucinda Williams: Car Wheels on a Gravel Road."

admits that although he's been photographing the same subject for nearly twenty years and people understand what he is trying to accomplish, he remains "an alien of sorts, coming into a world in which I'm an outsider"...While Imes makes the juke joint seem exotic, he shows us all too much how they are rooted too solidly in this world.⁶⁰

First of all, it is striking that Imes describes himself as feeling like an outsider in these juke joint environments, even decades into his chosen profession of photographing them. It's especially interesting given that Imes was able to capture an image of such confidence as "Freedom Village Juke, Washington County", which became the primary source for Williams' renown "June Bug v. Hurricane" and "2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten" in her song. These phrases are written on the wall behind three young men who have paused their billiards game to strike a pose for Imes. The apparent pleasure with which these three black men fix their steady gaze on Imes' camera suggests a kind of intimacy, seemingly contradicting the uncomfortable feeling Imes implies he still feels while photographing juke joints. Furthermore, Imes' characterization of his taking up photographing black people as a way to overcome his "ignorance" reads somewhat similarly to the "conversion" narratives described above by Inscoe, wherein privileged Southern whites realized the extent of their own privilege through unexpected encounters with the proverbial "Other".

Perhaps Imes' discomfort springs from his historical understanding that photography has played a central role in the development of the American South as cultural entity. As scholars such as Katherine Henninger have noted, as early as the Civil War, photography of Southern people and places helped shape the South as "a representational Other, against which the United States could be defined and refined."⁶¹ But even *within* the South, Henninger argues,

⁶⁰ Holly Hildebrand, "Songs of the South," *Spot* 13:3 (Fall 1994), 14.

⁶¹ Katherine Henninger, *Ordering the Façade: Photography and Contemporary Southern Women's Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 27.

photographic images helped shape Southerners' own perception of reality in a Jim Crow social and political world, where appearances mattered greatly in terms of policing boundaries of race and class.⁶² Henninger thus mostly focuses on ways in which photography in the South could serve as a tool of oppression, and consequently she is interested in highlighting Southern women artists and authors who work to break down this tendency. She examines women novelists who write about fictional Southern photographs in order to critique photography's representational power; however, she also includes some real-life, documentary accounts of photography by African-American Southern scholars like Zora Neale Hurston. Most famous for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston was also a trained anthropologist who wrote scholarly prose about photographs of Haitian Vodoun practices in her book *Tell My Horse*. Henninger praises an instance in which Hurston is able to advocate for new visibility for the Creole/Caribbean South, by ironizing her scholarly description of a "Voodoo" photograph:

Moving from her own subjugated position within U.S. racist culture, Hurston seizes a technology that is in theory inherently exploitative. By inscribing her own gaze upon the further subjugated Haitian (including the ultimate "colonized" body of a Zombie), Hurston both invokes the colonizing power of the camera and revises it through a trickster strategy. Rather than disclaiming photography's evidential relation to the real, here Hurston uses photography's "realism" to appeal to her Western readers' cultural belief (that "photographs reflect reality") in order to assert and provide evidence for what they might otherwise deny as unreal—the power of African traditions embodied.⁶³

What Henninger appreciates most about Hurston's scholarly approach is her ability to harness white male assumptions about the "authenticity" of photography to advocate for the visibility of marginalized populations, including Haitians and even African-Americans such as herself.

⁶² Related work on how visual and consumer culture helped shape Jim Crow conceptions of race includes: Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998). Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

⁶³ Henninger, *Ordering the Façade*, 120-1.

Indeed, Henniger suggests that Hurston's self-consciousness about her subject position as a black woman is part of why she is able to be such a responsible anthropologist.

Perhaps this is the opportune moment to mention that Lucinda Williams briefly pursued a college degree in anthropology before dropping out to begin work in the music business. One could even go so far as to argue that Williams' vocally dispassionate presentation of juke joint philosophy such as "Bathroom wall reads: Is God the answer? Yes" has in it some of the detachment of a good anthropologist; as Holly Hildebrand wrote about Imes, through this style of presentation Williams can reveal the familiar as strange and the mundane as sublime. Furthermore, in interviews regarding *Car Wheels*, Williams demonstrated an attentiveness to the *visual* in her work, of which Henniger would surely approve: "I see the whole thing like a pitch for a little movie...Keeping things descriptive is very important to me. When you're writing, you should always put the name of the town in the songs, instead of just being generic and saying, 'I was walking down the street.' What street? What town? What state?"⁶⁴ From Henniger's perspective, part of why the South remains culturally distinctive is because Southern women auteurs such as Williams find ways to continually rework its visual iconography, paradoxically often using the precise descriptive powers of *language* to do so.

Generously, one could argue that Williams truly reinvigorates these Southern juke joint images which, over time, have aged badly enough to border on cliché; one could further argue she does this by weaving static images of the past in with a more contemporary story of love and loss. She transforms Imes' still photographs into her personal "little movie", if you will. One arguably sees this imaginative one-upping of Imes in her description, "Mr. Johnson sings over in

⁶⁴ Tom Cox, "Small Town Fireworks," *The Guardian*, November 27, 1998, 16.

a corner by the bar/Sold his soul to the devil so he can play guitar,” a magical-realist blurring of past and present which is certainly not even hinted at in Imes’ original photographs. One also notes an intense personalization of Imes’ juke joint milieu in the sudden, unexplained shift to a scene outside the bar toward the song’s end: “Leaning against the railing of a Lake Charles bridge/Overlooking the river, leaning over the edge/He asked me: Would you jump into the water with me?/I told him: No way, baby, that’s your own death, you see?” The juke joint and bridge scenes are then imaginatively joined together by the narrator’s refrain in the chorus, “Too cool to be forgotten/Hey, hey, too cool to be forgotten/June bug vs. hurricane/June bug vs. hurricane/Hey, hey,” complete with a dramatic break in Williams’ voice leading into the final set of “Hey, heys” (4:07).

To continue the generous reading, “June bug vs. hurricane” (a piece of “found art” from Imes’ photograph) is purposefully deployed by Williams to resonate on two interrelated levels: not only does it imply the impossible chances that her narrator’s romance with the man on the bridge could ever survive, it doubly implies the impossible chances that the relaxed, rural, working-class Southern juke joint lifestyle depicted in Imes’ photographs will ever survive in the face of post-industrial information-age 21st century modernity. Indeed, most of the juke joints photographed in Imes’ 1990 collection no longer exist today.⁶⁵ The alluring and even glamorous antimodernism of “2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten” is glamorous because—perhaps more than any other alt.country song in a similar lyrical vein, and there are many—it explicitly ties the narrator’s overwhelming sense of grief over a relationship’s end to an overwhelming sense that the idiosyncratic South insiders once knew has already been buried under sprawling strip malls,

⁶⁵ Clint Kimberling, “Music Monday: 2 Kool 2 Be 4Gotten,” University Press of Mississippi, December 4, 2012, accessed May 16, 2016, <http://upmississippi.blogspot.com/2012/12/music-monday-2-kool-2-be-4gotten.html>.

never to return. The genius of the glamor Williams creates here is that the death of a love affair feels as big and sweeping as the death of the South as “we” knew it; the personal becomes political in a fashion that almost eroticizes antimodernism.

Williams’ accomplishment is striking, but in a slightly less generous reading of her work, upon close inspection there are some problematic aspects with her liminal status as both insider (a native-born Southerner) and outsider (a white woman exploring a mostly black male culture of juke joints) in this scene. Similarly to Imes, she is a white Southerner of considerable cultural capital finding beauty in the abject qualities of African-American working-class social spaces, and presenting her vision primary to educated white audiences (i.e. the alt.country demographic). The song finds anti-modern romance in grieving the loss of an imagined idiosyncratic South, and it arguably does so in part through utilizing African-American musical forms in a way that at least strategically posits Williams as part of that tradition.

“2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten” is clearly a soul song in composition and instrumentation. More specifically, one could label it Stax (Southern) soul with 1990s pop-rock accents. For instance, the drum song’s drum groove, played unaccompanied for the first 11 seconds, is similar in style to Otis Redding’s “Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa (Sad Song),” except that Williams’ drummer Donald Lindley adds greater embellishment to the groove, and the crystalline quality of the production allows the listener to hear a level of detail impossible in a late-1960s recording. Williams frequently sings just behind the beat, such as “In this dirty little joint” (0:39-0:41), where the “dragged” quality of her vocals is reminiscent of many African-American soul singers of the ‘60s and ‘70s. Furthermore, throughout the song Gurf Morlix and Charlie Sexton’s electric guitars answer individual lyrics from Williams in a ‘60s soul/R & B “call and response” style (particularly the

opening riff, 0:11-0:16, which is repeated many times throughout). These are some of the key aspects which make the song signify musically as soul. Granted, the addition of Roy Bittan on accordion and organ adds a somber, even funereal touch which has more in common with *Blonde on Blonde*-era Bob Dylan than it does “classic” black soul music. However, within the tradition of late ‘60s white soul-rock groups such as The Band, the organ and accordion actually fit quite appropriately. In fact, “2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten” shares with The Band’s “King Harvest” an important quality: both recordings pair a lyric describing a white narrator’s longing for the South with an African-American-identified soul music composition.

These two songs, in turn, could be said to be part of a wider, deeper tradition: the identification of black music with romantic notions about the South and its role as a repository for good qualities that the U.S. as a whole has abandoned over time. Historians such as Marybeth Hamilton and Elijah Wald have identified a 20th-century practice of white collectors and fans of African-American Southern music romanticizing its practitioners, insisting that they were figures from another simpler, slower, purer time. For instance, Marybeth Hamilton describes that for white collector and field recordist Fred Ramsey, who recorded Leadbelly in 1948, the mythical archetype of the blues “rambler” was his platonic ideal—an ideal he felt Leadbelly embodied. In Ramsey’s book *Been Here And Gone*, he argued that the rural Southlands bluesmen like Leadbelly roamed were increasingly swallowed up by cities, but that the “rural world is alive in ways the modern, urban world is not, rich in a musical form—the blues—that is intensely personal and infused with passion.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 178-9.

I do not mean to suggest that Williams' understanding of black music and its relationship to Southern identity is as simplistic as this. For one thing, in a song like "2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten", she is playing '60s soul, a hybrid African-American form successfully updated 30 years distant from the Robert Johnson covers she recorded on her first album in 1978. Williams would not uncritically parrot paternalist notions about blues singers like Leadbelly that were commonplace among white tastemakers of Ramsey's generation. But she cannot fully escape labels that have been applied to her—"the blackest white girl in Louisiana (or the white woman with a black man's soul)," for one—or labels that she has apparently authorized intermediaries to employ as part of her public image.⁶⁷ For instance, in the updated liner notes to her re-released sophomore album *Happy Woman Blues*, John Morthland writes about "blues as metaphor" as the subject of Williams' first two records—"blues as a sort of two-way mirror."⁶⁸ While Morthland does not elaborate further what is illuminated by this two-way mirror, one likely possibility is "self" and "other." This dynamic, wherein Southern African-American "roots" provides inspiration for white performers, oftentimes in an asymmetrical power relationship, is as old as minstrelsy in the U.S., if not always quite the same cultural form as minstrelsy.

Williams' grandest achievement in "2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten" is the way she articulates antimodernism in the language of personal, romantic love and loss, alternating between institutional and intimate language to emphasize the distance between what is now and what will never be again. Williams contributed a thoughtful seriousness to the alt.country genre aesthetic through a song like "2 Kool," a stance toward the past that did not truck in the irony or pastiche

⁶⁷ Bill Buford, "Delta Nights," 52. Buford here suggests that said label has become attached to Williams over time, without crediting it to a particular person or people; through this rhetorical strategy he develops her musical acts of racial boundary-crossing as part of a larger-than-life, almost mythological, persona.

⁶⁸ Lucinda Williams, *Happy Woman Blues*, Folkways 31067, 1980, vinyl LP.

alt.country was sometimes accused of in the 1990s. Instead, she offered sincerity, which can be related to but is not synonymous with autobiographical “authenticity”. The one drawback of this sincerity is that Williams, influenced heavily by the classic rock of Bob Dylan and The Band, acted upon the very 1960s belief that black music can be played transparently by white musicians such as herself, can be used to express intense emotion in a self-evidently “straightforward” way. Given the complex, intertwined history and politics of white and black pop and roots styles in American music, in fact the emotion communicated to the audience is not always straightforward. This racial dimension—the problem that whiteness is always constructed via an “other”—was an occasional blind spot in the alt.country genre aesthetic as it matured through the 1990s. It also sometimes made the songwriting more susceptible to a *melancholia* that in turn fueled additional unproductive tropes about the U.S. South. Two additional songs on *Car Wheels*, “Joy” and “I Lost It” are instructive cases in point on this question.

The Melancholic

The booming sales of *Car Wheels On A Gravel Road* was a vindication of sorts for Williams, but it also marked the period where she began to be characterized by journalists as obsessive, needy, difficult, and above all else, *sad*. This trend got started before *Car Wheels* was even released, with the aforementioned 1997 Darcy Frey profile in the *New York Times Magazine*, entitled “Lucinda Williams is in Pain.” Though Williams had long admitted her so-called perfectionist tendencies (though rejecting that precise term), Frey’s article portrays her search for the right blend of instrumental and vocal flavor in the studio as pathology, a pathology driven by desire and anxiety. Going over various studio mixes into the wee hours, Frey claims

that Williams “stomps her foot and curls her hands into little fists; she looks as if she's about to cry.” He quotes her as telling her bandmates “I’m feeling way out of control right now,” and then bolsters this idea a bit later with a description of Williams’ lean years in the 1980s: “Much of the time she was depressed, broke, oppressed by lousy part-time jobs (handing out sausage samples at a grocery store) and pulled this way and that by whatever relationship she happened to be in at the time.”⁶⁹

Frey contrasts this depiction with portraits of Williams’ all-male band and crew as sage and in control. This includes producer Roy Bittan, presented to readers as “the epitome of low-key confidence.” Frey ends the article with a seemingly all-knowing statement by her drummer, Donald Lindley: “I think this girl really wants to go home.”⁷⁰ What is going on here? Why is Williams’ “pain” essentially put on display for the entertainment of the reader? I have a suggestion here which seems to fit the tenor of the article: Frey is depicting Williams as what Sigmund Freud defined as a “melancholic,” and her diagnosis as such reveals to us elements of her feminine soul.

In his 1917 article “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud draws distinctions between processes of grief he labeled mourning and melancholia. Mourning is characterized by Freud as “regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”⁷¹ Freud describes a process whereby the mourner “decathezes” from the lost love object over time: “all the libido

⁶⁹ Darcy Frey, “Lucinda Williams is in Pain,” 53.

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 53.

⁷¹ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *Penguin Freud Library Volume 11* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 164.

shall be withdrawn from its attachments to this object.”⁷² Freud defines successful mourning as complete acceptance of “reality”: “when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.”⁷³

In contrast, melancholia is grieving which is perpetually unfinished, unprocessed, forever in limbo. Freud describes a process whereby the melancholic is unable to decathect from their lost love object, and thus *internalizes* their loss into their own sense of self: “The narcissistic identification with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis...[It is a] kind of substitution of identification for object-love...It of course represents a regression from one type of object-choice to primal narcissism.”⁷⁴ Freud states that melancholia is pathological in its ambivalence toward loss and the self; that the mourner blames *herself* for the loss, and even derives masochistic pleasure from this self-hate.⁷⁵

It is interesting that one of the key hypothetical examples Freud offers regarding melancholia is female: “the case of the deserted bride.”⁷⁶ Certainly, popular and scientific depictions of women as in the thrall of their own sadness have a long history, from the Middle Ages to Freud. Joy Press and Simon Reynolds document how the related concept of *hysteria* (which derives from the Greek term for the uterus) is often deployed in regard to women working in popular music. They discuss musicians such as Lydia Lunch who pointedly problematize their own “hysteria,” but also emphasize how women performers are often labeled “out of control” by male music critics, against their will. For instance, Janis Joplin “made a

⁷² Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 164-5.

⁷³ *ibid*, 166.

⁷⁴ *ibid*, 170-1.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 172.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, 166.

spectacle of herself' in the eyes of masculinist rock writers.⁷⁷ Within the parameters I have described above, in the male parlance of modern music criticism, a woman such as Joplin could be considered a melancholic: ruled by her sadness, unable to let go of the man that got away, and ready to sing you the blues about it.

Given this context, I hope I have demonstrated that "female musician as melancholic" is an easy trope for male writers to fall back on when trying to make sense of a variety of emotional responses and actions they might encounter while profiling complex, creative women. Certainly, Darcy Frey's portrayal of Williams as melancholic set the tone for the interviews and profiles of her which followed during the *Car Wheels* era. Time and again during the promotion of the album, Williams was confronted with interview questions that were all variations on the theme "Why are your songs so sad?" These kind of approaches found their seminal crystallization in a lengthy profile of Williams in the *New Yorker* magazine written by journalist (and editor of *Granta* literary magazine) Bill Buford; a piece to which I will now turn my extended attention. Entitled "Delta Nights: A Singer's Love Affair with Loss," the article was published in June 2000 and chronicles the period of time post-*Car Wheels* where Williams was adjusting to her newfound fame and enhanced financial stability. Nearly the length of some novellas, the profile was certainly the most detailed and thoughtful thing which had ever been written about Williams and her work. It also was highly regarded by Buford's peers: Robert Christgau declared it "a classic portrait...the best thing ever written about an artist journalists have long adored."⁷⁸ The

⁷⁷ Simon Reynolds and Joy Press. *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 276.

⁷⁸ Robert Christgau, "Encore from a Utopia," Robert Christgau: Dean of American Rock Critics, June 12, 2001, accessed May 17, 2016, <http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/rock/lucinda-01.php>.

article was nominated for the National Magazine Award, and was anthologized in the 2001 edition of the *Da Capo Best Music Writing* book series.

I regard Buford's profile with genuine ambivalence. As a fan of Williams and her work, I certainly appreciate Buford's attention to biographical minutia here, as he covers everything from Williams' parents and siblings, to her romantic relationships, to her relationship with Southern culture. But importantly, I would like to suggest here that the "success" of Buford's piece builds off of his portrayal of her as a kind of archetypal female melancholic. This sort of approach finds what it wants to find in Williams' character. As Williams' friend Emmylou Harris put it in an interview with Salon.com, "He took license. He drew certain conclusions that were very one-sided. Hurtful to Lucinda. Detrimental to her person."⁷⁹

Buford begins his depiction of Williams as melancholic early on during the piece, suggesting that her songs are "unforgiving because they are so relentlessly about pain or longing or can't-get-it-out-of-your-head sexual desire, but most often they're about loss, and usually about losing some impossible fuckup of a man." Surveying her house, he suggests that her room of exercise equipment "betrays a certain unease." When Williams relates to him difficulties surrounding making music videos, he suggests that she has a "paralyzing anxiety" about appearing on television. When we learn that Williams seeks editorial assistance on her lyrics from her poet father, Buford psychoanalyzes "You get the sense that what she wants is not Dad's advice but his approval, almost like a report card."⁸⁰

⁷⁹ David Bowman, "Emmylou Harris," Salon Entertainment News, September 11, 2000, accessed May 17, 2016, http://www.salon.com/2000/09/11/harris_5/.

⁸⁰ Bill Buford, "Delta Nights," 52, 54 and 55, respectively, are the source of these remarks.

A theme of Williams' unstable, eternally painful relationships with men in her life emerges. Buford describes a scene at a Nashville restaurant where Williams argues intensely with her boyfriend Richard Price, who also (at the time) was the bass player in her band. He suggests that Williams derives a kind of sadomasochistic pleasure from these sorts of arguments, characterizing her laugh during the fight as "deeply sexual." Throughout his description of the scene, he paints her as near-hysterical, "always being on the verge of losing it." This also jives with a response he elicits from Williams' manager Paul Monahan regarding her ability to handle touring: "Suddenly, the pressure will freak her out, and she doesn't know why it's freaking her out, and she can see she's freaking out but can't do a thing about it." I find characterizations such as these troubling in the amount of agency they deny Williams over her own life, as though her sadness and anxiety have complete control over her. This seems quite consistent with gendered definitions of melancholia put forward by Freud, as I have described.⁸¹

Perhaps most importantly, Buford's approach denies Williams agency over her songwriting process and creativity in general, in the way it equates biography with artistic intent. To his credit, throughout the profile Buford makes efforts at separating the artist from the art. For instance, when describing the loss and longing in "2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten", he writes, "[Williams] has never been to Rosedale, Mississippi. She's never seen the Magic City juke joint, except in a picture book. For that matter, she's never been to a juke joint."⁸² Ultimately, however, Buford concludes at the article's end that:

I'm wanting her to be normal. But Lucinda isn't "normal." On some level, the person and the persona in her songs are related, as though her volatile character—this capacity for

⁸¹ Bill Buford, "Delta Nights," 64, 63, respectively.

⁸² *ibid*, 63.

not knowing how to stop—is a manifestation of the same unguarded personality who can't stop herself from falling wholly in love, over and over again.⁸³

Buford closes on the sucker punch that Lucinda and her boyfriend have recently broken up and that she is writing songs again. In the final line, he glibly remarks, “This happiness thing, who needs it?”⁸⁴

Williams did not take this characterization of herself—as pathologically sad, ruled by her emotions, essentially melancholic—lying down. Responding in an interview to both Buford's profile and Frey's earlier piece, she commented about the articles:

I hated them both. They really pissed me off and upset me. I felt misunderstood and betrayed. The *Times Magazine*, that guy came in when I was recording *Car Wheels*, and I trusted him, and it all came back to bite me in the ass. The Bill Buford thing, I felt the same way. I asked him to try to be discreet when he talked about members of my family, and he ignored all that. What is the deal with the New York magazines?⁸⁵

Williams' hatred of the profiles is not that surprising, given their insistence upon a kind of essential female melancholia which in its depiction borders upon misogyny. But what I find especially interesting here is Williams' hint at some kind of regional bias in portrayals of her (also suggested by the interviewer), i.e. “What is the deal with the New York magazines?” Perhaps some of the reason Williams felt “misunderstood and betrayed” goes beyond straightforward questions of gender. Perhaps some of Williams' frustrations comes from the way Buford's piece also essentializes her as a mournful *Southerner*.

Buford's portrait of female melancholia in the article is built upon a larger portrait of a southeastern United States eternally in mourning as well, a kind of distinct *regional* melancholia.

⁸³ *ibid*, 65.

⁸⁴ Bill Buford, “Delta Nights,” 65.

⁸⁵ Chris Smith, “Heartstrings,” *New York Magazine* Nightlife, accessed May 17, 2016, <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/music/pop/12170/>.

Car Wheels on a Gravel Road contains so many references to Southern place names, it is not surprising that a journalist might be interested in investigating the meaning of this in a broader social context. I admire Buford for being the first writer to make a real attempt at untangling the value of the South in Williams' work. However, I believe that his depiction of the South in the profile trades upon certain assumptions about melancholy, historical memory, and regionalism which may be just as limiting as those he applies to gender.

Buford begins his article with a particularly stylized portrayal of the Mississippi River Delta Deep South, before we are even introduced to Lucinda Williams. He visits a small town called Lambert in the Delta, looking for a hidden juke joint where an old African-American bluesman is playing guitar that night. Describing the homes in Lambert as "relics," he says "the feeling of the place is of impoverished improvisation," and that "it's impossible not to be impressed by that profoundly unmodern, unreconstructed feeling that you still find in the South." The following day, he encounters an old (presumably African-American) church which he describes as "a garish thing" sitting in the city of Rosedale, an "*unchanged, unchanging* picture that could have been taken any time in the last hundred years [*italics mine*]."⁸⁶ The overall portrait here is that of a place which does not possess even the *will* to change or evolve.

Later in the article, surveying the Southern folk art on the walls of Williams' home, he synthesizes his earlier thoughts on juke joints with new observations in order to define a kind of Southern essence: "that inimitable Southern way, which finds its aesthetic not in what is pleasing or symmetrical or obvious but in the miserable thing that—indirect, off center, out of focus—is distinguished by its overwhelming authenticity." Buford later emphasizes such an

⁸⁶ Bill Buford, "Delta Nights," 50.

interpretation again when describing Williams' "country" friends: "Is this another illustration of that odd, indirect Southern aesthetic of *miserable originality* [italics mine]?"⁸⁷ The message here seems fairly clear to me: the South, like Williams, is in pathological pain. It's miserable—self-hating, even—because it has internalized and can't let go a long-ago loss (presumably, the South's loss to the North in the Civil War).

Buford makes explicit this charge of Southern melancholia toward the end of his article:

The South has a history of mythmakers, and at the heart of the Southern myth is a love affair with loss. It's what underlies the myth of the good Southern family; or the notion of the Southern gentleman, of honor and Old World grace and hospitality; or the filthy romance of the Confederate flag; or the sugary fables of "Gone with the Wind." These myths [are] still current, even if anachronistic...In forty years, the South has changed, but mythmaking remains a habit of mind. I'm not sure that the myths Southerners fashion today are even necessarily that different—less obvious, sometimes subtle to the point of obscurity, but fundamentally founded on the principle that the South has got something that the rest of America doesn't have anymore. Some of this is in Lucinda Williams's songs ("I'm going back to the Crescent City, where everything's still the same"), although the myths she makes are more sophisticated and of her own private order...Like her Southern accent and her sense of "country," it's a vision built on her possession of uniqueness.⁸⁸

Buford argues persuasively that even if Southern distinctiveness in a networked globalized world exists primarily on the level of mythology, that distinctiveness matters, in the ways it can be read as resistant to modernity. To be fair, it is also a mythology which seems to hold real meaning for Williams herself. Buford describes Williams' substantial collection of photography books depicting "juke joints, hillbillies, cross-eyed Appalachian sharecroppers, rural pig guttings," and so on—in other words, the same sort of pathological Southern longing Buford seems intent on

⁸⁷ Bill Buford, "Delta Nights," 53, 54, respectively.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 62.

valorizing.⁸⁹ And at one point as Williams and Buford page through a photo album of her old boyfriends, she suddenly exclaims, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Clyde is dead. And Frank is dead. What a thing. All my old boyfriends were in love with the idea of Louisiana, and they're dead!"⁹⁰ From declarations such as these, as well as some of the content of her songs, it is clear Williams does at least occasionally draw specific connections between the South and mourning. But as I will suggest momentarily, the relationship is more complex in Williams' work than Buford is prepared to admit.

Buford's characterization of the South as melancholic wouldn't be so troubling if it did not happen to fit into an already-extant tradition of discourse about the region, both by Southerners and Northerners. In many ways, ideas about Southern melancholy began with the concept of the Lost Cause, essentially an assertion that the South was robbed forever of a vibrant and sustainable way of life when the North won the Civil War. Defining the Lost Cause, scholars such as David Goldfield have argued that following the "war between the states," white Southerners constructed a mythology of nobility to give the traumatic violence of the War real meaning. Goldfield argues, "They needed a sterling vision of the Old South, a heroic war, and eventually a glorious Redemption to extract them from the mirror, to set things right—maybe not exactly like before, but tolerable, and maybe someday better."⁹¹ This mythology, Goldfield and others such as David Blight have argued, scrambled Southern pasts and presents together into one temporality, one whose overall theme suggested the South had been grievously wronged.⁹²

⁸⁹ Bill Buford, "Delta Nights," 54.

⁹⁰ *ibid*, 61.

⁹¹ David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 20.

⁹² See David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

And as Stephen A. Smith argues in *Myth, Media, and the Southern Mind*, quoting Frances Wilhoit, “In short, the Southerners’ massive resort to symbolism was in itself a kind of sickness.”⁹³ Please keep in mind here that I am not suggesting that *all* Southerners believed in the Lost Cause, or that it *necessarily* constituted a form of pathology. Rather, I am simply hoping to illustrate that ideas about an endless Southern mourning have been discussed and pathologized previously.

Many scholars have noted that depictions of the South as self-hating, melancholic, and endlessly stuck in the past continue to this day. Tara McPherson sees it in conflicted constructions of white Southern masculinity featured in “Lost Cause” and “Southern heritage” websites.⁹⁴ Howard L. Preston sees it in popular films such as *Deliverance* and *Mississippi Burning*, which he argues present the stereotype that the South “remains by and large the most backward, isolated, and rural part of the country,” haunted by the violent spectre of intolerance it will never overcome.⁹⁵ Though these are Hollywood understandings of the South, David Goldfield argues that certain segments of Southerners profit from selling a “moonlight and magnolias” image of themselves back to outsiders. For instance, “visitors to the Atlanta [1996 Olympics] could not help but notice the numerous Taras and other Deep South references in advertisements and names of shopping centers, movie theatres, and subdivisions.”⁹⁶

⁹³ Stephen A. Smith, *Myth, Media, and the Southern Mind* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1985), 42.

⁹⁴ Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 109.

⁹⁵ Howard L. Preston, “Will Dixie Disappear? Cultural Contours of a Region in Transition,” in *The Future South: A Historical Perspective For the 21st Century*, eds. Joe P. Dunn and Howard L. Preston (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 195.

⁹⁶ David Goldfield, *Still Fighting the Civil War*, 9.

These ideas are explored fully in Jessica Adams' 1999 article "Local Color: The Southern Plantation in Popular Culture," wherein she argues that guided tours of former Southern plantations (designed for tourists) are constructed around a white Southern melancholia. For outsider visitors, the emphasis on the beauty and grandeur of the homes (while simultaneously erasing the black slave labor needed to sustain this luxury) creates a kind of interrupted mourning: "Tours of plantation homes manufacture nostalgia for the days of slavery through depictions of plantations as tragic tableaux of an American dream rudely curtailed by war."⁹⁷ Importantly, Adams notes that the tour guides appointed to facilitate this mourning are almost entirely female, thus coding the nature of this particular Southern sadness—with its links to family and homestead—as distinctly feminine.⁹⁸ Tara McPherson substantiates this with her argument about the centrality of the "Southern belle" to the region's culture as a whole: "The South, responding to its own feminized position vis-à-vis the North—a feminization that was both literal, owing to the loss of a large portion of the male population, and figurative, given the South's status as defeated—turned to a hyperfeminized figure of the southern woman as discursive symbol for the region, with the land itself being figured as feminine as well."⁹⁹

Could this kind of hyperfemine sadness and nostalgia, this kind of regional female melancholia, be the mysterious "something that the rest of America doesn't have anymore" which Bill Buford (in the passage I quoted above) seems bent on proving exists? Buford seems to take sadness as constitutive of Southernness, and is eager to offer Williams as Exhibit A of this phenomenon. As I briefly sketched above, Williams herself seems to buy into this approach from time to time in her songwriting and public statements. But just as valid a texture in her

⁹⁷ Jessica Adams, "Local Color: The Southern Plantation in Popular Culture," *Cultural Critique* 42 (Spring 1999), 168.

⁹⁸ *ibid*, 170.

⁹⁹ McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 19.

work is a determination to mine a *different* structure of feeling, one which is resistant to tropes of the melancholic Southern female. Specifically, I contend that Buford's profile misses Williams' utilization of a kind of "female masculinity" to create personal growth and *transformation* through the experience of trauma (even "everyday" traumas such as the end of a romantic relationship).

Williams' public persona, especially on stage, does not square at all with the image of the "Southern belle." As one journalist put it in a recent live review for the *Boston Phoenix*, "with her mussed-up hairdo and thin, boyish figure, she looked every bit the Keith Richards/Paul Westerberg rocker."¹⁰⁰ Tom Cox of the *Irish Times* concurs, writing of Williams' image, "she is Nanci Griffith with boxing gloves, Joan Baez with a motorbike and Sheryl Crow without an image consultant, all at the same time."¹⁰¹ One could safely say that Williams projects an image of the female masculine, although academic originators of the term might have a difficult time initially conceptualizing how Williams fits into this category.

Theorist Jack Halberstam was one of the first to explore the concept of female masculinity in depth, arguing in his book of the same name that masculinity can be separated from men, and that when it is (and subsequently appropriated by women) we recognize it as constructed.¹⁰² Halberstam's analysis is fascinating, but one of the potential limitations of his work is that he focuses almost exclusively upon lesbian and transgender applications of female masculinity. He admits in his book that he chooses not to address heterosexual cisgender female masculinities, but suggests that an area for further study may be "some rural [heterosexual]

¹⁰⁰ Matt Ashare, "Lucinda Williams: Country and Blues," *The Boston Phoenix*, October 17-23, 2003, accessed May 17, 2016, <http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/music/live/documents/03232397.asp>.

¹⁰¹ Tom Cox, "Three Parts Honey, Two Parts Bourbon," *The Irish Times*, December 5, 1998, Weekend 65.

¹⁰² Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 1-2.

women [who] may be considered masculine by urban standards.”¹⁰³ This gesture seems to point the way toward the kind of Southern female (heterosexual) masculinity I believe that Williams embodies, at least in her performance persona.

Our understanding of this possibility broadens when we consider that Williams borrows much of her swagger from rock ‘n’ roll, a genre where female masculinity has been explored since the early days of rockabilly music. In their book *The Sex Revolts*, Joy Press and Simon Reynolds outline four ways in which women who desire to play rock can take on a “macha” persona. These include a wholesale imitation of masculine postures (physical and philosophical), an injection of a “female strength that’s different but equivalent” into rock, a postmodern wearing of “tough” female masks as constructs, and, finally, the idea of “female gender [as] neither an essence nor a strategic series of personae, but a painful tension between the two.”¹⁰⁴ To be a woman is to be torn between the fact of biology and the fiction of femininity. This tension reflects the unresolvability of the nature v. culture debate.”¹⁰⁵ Press and Reynolds are quick to emphasize that most female rock performers move between *multiple* of these “macha” positions, and I would argue this is certainly the case with Williams. However, I might suggest that she gravitates most strongly toward the last of these models, especially since Press and Reynolds argue that this model “concerns itself not with the consolidation of female subjectivity, but with the trauma of identity formation.”¹⁰⁶

The authors’ words here make me think of Williams, because many of her songs, especially on the *Car Wheels* album, concern a female protagonist picking up the pieces of her

¹⁰³ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 57.

¹⁰⁴ Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts*, 233.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, 234.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, 234.

life after being deserted by a man. Many of these songs focus on identity construction, asking “What am I without you?” to the man who left her behind. This scenario sounds potentially maudlin and weepy, but at her best Williams takes the question deadly serious, imagining rebuilt lives for these Southern women where they can stand on their own feet—where they can move beyond melancholia and find a transformed new identity. Since popular music (even rock) rarely offers women an opportunity to explore identity questions in this way, the language of the masculine may prove useful to Williams in uncovering structures of feeling which are distinctly *her* and distinctly *Southern*.

Williams’ song “Joy,” the penultimate song on the *Car Wheels* album, is instructive in this regard. First of all, the song is a loud electric blues, sung in a raspy monotone by Williams which seems to recall male electric blues masters such as Muddy Waters. The lyrical structure is similar to that of a classic blues song, and its referents immediately establish it as Southern in character. In the song’s verses, Williams’ heroine again and again address a “you” (presumably the man who left her behind), telling him variations on “You got no right to take my joy, I want it back.” A series of choruses follow where the narrator says she will journey to the Southern cities of West Memphis, Arkansas and Slidell, Louisiana to find her joy again: “Maybe in West Memphis I’ll find my joy” she intones, almost in a chant. One insightful and amusing commentary on this lyric comes from a Williams fan named Erik Loomis, who blogged on June 21, 2005: “I was reminded when listening to ‘Joy’ of something I had wanted to say for a long time. You will not find your joy in West Memphis. I’ve been to West Memphis. I don’t think there’s any joy to be found there unless you win big at the dog track.”¹⁰⁷ Another fan answers in

¹⁰⁷ Erik Loomis, “A Message to Lucinda,” *Alterdestiny*, June 21, 2005, accessed May 17, 2016, <http://alterdestiny.blogspot.com/2005/06/message-to-lucinda.html>.

the comments on Loomis' blog that he always felt the song was suggesting that joy will *not* be found in those Southern cities, despite the narrator's protestations.

I believe that the song is meant to be ambiguous on this matter; that perhaps the *journey* to reach these destinations is actually more important than the destinations themselves. This is in keeping with the masculinist tradition in blues which places an emphasis upon the spiritual importance of *rambling*. Regional scholar James C. Cobb characterizes the blues as a 20th century African-American (largely) male art form which specifically grew out of Southern change brought on by industrialization. Finally shaking off the legacy of slavery and moving north on the railroads, Southern African-American men were free as never before, free to transform and create a new identity. Cobb writes that the music reflected this: "The blues offered an alternative lifestyle in which rambling, hedonism, aggressive sexuality, and a general disregard for authority were the norm."¹⁰⁸ Moving to the latter half of the 20th century, both male "beat poetry" and rock music cultures appropriated the "cool" African-American Rambler pose in search of a bohemian identity, as Sheila Whiteley points out: "'On the road' [is] typically the male domain of rock, evocative of Jack Kerouac and the *gestalt* of Route 66."¹⁰⁹ As discussed earlier in this chapter, this pose is potentially problematic, but irresistible to a Baby Boomer like Williams, raised on Dylan and The Rolling Stones.

When Williams takes on a lyrical posture of rambling, she is also appropriating male power—the power to move beyond melancholia and (re)construct the self through a quest for experience. But as is the case with any gender politics, the reality is more complex than what

¹⁰⁸ James C. Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1999), 98.

¹⁰⁹ Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

I've just written. "Joy" is notable chiefly for its ambivalence about the process of grief and moving on (from a failed relationship). In fact, some of the depression hidden within the song's strut actually hews toward the endless sorrow Buford's article seems determined to articulate. The song can be described as a sort of dialogue *between* the processes of mourning and melancholia.

This is most immediately evident in the musical structure of the song itself. Though "Joy" may resemble a blues, it does not at all follow the traditional "one-four-five" chord progression of traditional 12-bar blues. Rather it is, as Robert Christgau describes it, a "a one-chord rant-chant."¹¹⁰ Despite a thick funk bassline, bluesy guitar licks, and a bass drum-heavy rhythm which drives the verses forward relentlessly, it is notable that the song never leaves an A7 chord for its entire four minutes. The vocal melody possesses a "stuck" quality—notes only travel a few pitches up and down a blues scale before always returning to a low A tonic. Williams could be interpreted as straining for freedom when she sings the song's highest notes, "Maybe in West Memphis, I'll find my joy," but the melody immediately returns to that low tonic again and again. Thus, musically, the idea of a transformative journey promised by Southern blues is pointedly curtailed and questioned by the surreal one-chord jamming Williams subjects the blues form to. The listener experiences a musical ambivalence as she waits for a change in pitch which never arrives.

Ambivalence is also certainly expressed in the lyrical structure of "Joy," which alternates pointedly between past and present tenses. In the song's choruses, Williams' narrator looks back to the past, returning obsessively to the scene of the "crime" in order to try and regain a sense of

¹¹⁰ Robert Christgau, "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road."

her old self. She makes demands upon her former boyfriend: “You took my joy. I want it back.” This phrasing suggests neediness, an intimate relationship where—despite her angry assertions—the woman is in the subservient position, dependent upon the man to bring back her joy. The chorus is worded as though Williams’ narrator is still in regular contact with her former lover, as though they are still together. This depiction fits rather neatly with Freud’s observation that for the melancholic, “in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up.”¹¹¹ For Williams’ heroine, in the choruses it is as though she has internalized the identity of her ex-boyfriend, and her anger toward him is arresting her own ability to move through the mourning process and eventually find “joy.”

The verses in “Joy” are a different matter. Williams declares with the bravado of a Southern bluesman, “I’m gonna go to Slidell/And look for my joy/Go to Slidell/And look for my joy/Maybe in Slidell/I’ll find my joy/Maybe in Slidell/I’ll find my joy.” Here the wording has switched completely to the present tense, and is declarative: Williams’ narrator tells what she will do in the future to work through her grief. The intended audience is more vague than in the song’s choruses; she could be singing this to her ex-lover or to herself (or both). In any case, the heroine is set to take to the road for a new adventure, an experience which may *change* her. The enumeration of plans is reminiscent of Freud’s observation that mourning a loss involves “carrying out the behest of reality bit by bit.”¹¹² Ambivalence over what she’ll find in West Memphis still lingers (articulated in her “maybe,” and in Erik Loomis’ blog comments), but the potential for transformation and real hope can be found in these verses.

¹¹¹ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 170.

¹¹² *ibid*, 166.

Therefore, in “Joy” Williams utilizes the masculine language of the blues to articulate a mournful ambivalence Bill Buford (but not necessarily I) might characterize as feminine. If the song’s choruses might find a bombed out Southern belle hysterically begging for her personhood back, the verses find that anger transformed into something more productive; a cocky young man wandering the roads of Arkansas and Louisiana looking to be born again. Or perhaps, rather, a young woman: scholars such as Sarah Brabant have noted a long line of mythical Southern heroines (beginning with Scarlet O’Hara) who have been “taught not only to survive, but to do so with dignity.”¹¹³ In any case, Williams’ constant switch between both modes of address, between mourning and melancholia, signals that she is only partially buying into the models of Southern gender roles a discourse such as Buford’s sets up. Or perhaps she is suggesting that real-life mourning is complex: in moving one’s way through a process of grief, several emotional structures are available, and each offer *something* to the mourner.

If “Joy” offers the listener ambivalence, once could say that “I Lost It,” *Car Wheels*’ hardest-rocking song and my personal favorite on the album, offers something approaching the declaration of a meaningful personal identity. This makes sense when one considers that it was the longest-gestating song of Williams’ entire career. “I Lost It” first appeared as a zydeco stomp on Williams’ 1980 album *Happy Woman Blues*, and I consider the original musical style the song’s main signifier of “Southernness,” especially given Williams’ own roots in Lake Charles. A full eighteen years later, the main difference in the *Car Wheels* version of the same song is that the zydeco stylings have been replaced by a straight 4/4 beat and extremely loud electric guitars with a distinct twang. The musical context has shifted to countrified hard rock,

¹¹³ Sarah Brabant, “Socialization for Change: The Cultural Heritage of the White Southern Woman,” in *Southern Women*, ed. Caroline Matheny Dillman (New York: Hemisphere Publishing Co., 1998), 107.

although lyrically the song is the polar opposite of many country songs written for, by, and about women.

Country music is a strange territory when it comes to confident expressions of selfhood through the lens of gender. As Gloria Nixon-John notes, many country songs (at least in the 1970s and 80s) sung by men focus on work, travel, and hellraising, while many sung by women focus on the emotional terrain of interpersonal relationships.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, Nixon-John argues that while the feminine in most popular music is “contained,” “this is not the case in country music. While this realm is thought to be geographically limited, the voice, the protagonist, and ‘the diva’ are clearly female. Its history is female as well. This is strange when one considers that the territory south of the Mason-Dixon line has been, on the surface, slower to embrace feminism, slower to replace the skirt with trousers.”¹¹⁵ Thus, Nixon-John suggests, there is something about Southern country music culture which uniquely nourishes female agency and selfhood, as long as it is “properly” expressed (i.e. within certain gender, race, and class-bound expectations of emotional expressivity).

In the lyrics of “I Lost It,” one could say that Williams celebrates the tradition of “classic” country women like Loretta Lynn expressing themselves, while chucking the genre’s limits on the language of that expression (as in: she speaks in blunt axioms). This is a “female masculine” move. It’s also underscored as such by its distance from the idiom of “confessional” female folk-rock singer-songwriting, which—at the risk of oversimplifying—“so often slots

¹¹⁴ Gloria Nixon-John, “Getting the Word Out: The Country of Bronwen Wallace and Emmylou Harris,” in *The Women Of Country Music: A Reader*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 51-56.

¹¹⁵ *ibid*, 53.

woman into the stereotype of victim, vulnerable, defenseless.”¹¹⁶ The female protagonist of Williams’ song is confident in what she wants and feels little need to “confess” much of anything to her audience (presumably a man). There *is* ambivalence in the song, but rather than a fuzziness between mourning and melancholia (as in “Joy”), the ambivalence in “I Lost It” concerns the pain the heroine has endured and the character of her future relationships with men. This is not a song particularly stuck in the past.

“I Lost It” begins with a chorus that, lyrically, seems to function more as a verse. Williams’ narrator tells her (presumably male audience) that she lost an unspecified “it,” and to “Let me know if you come across it/Let me know if I let it fall/Along a back road somewhere.” These statements are imperative: Williams’ narrator is requiring that her audience do something for her. But the language of her “demand” is casual, almost offhanded: “Let me know if you come across it.” Unlike confessional female songwriting modes which require a direct connection between singer and (male) audience in order to communicate emotional “*truth*, pure and unmediated,”¹¹⁷ Williams’ narrator seems not to really care whether her audience fully understands her or not. We get the sense that her loss involves the traumatic end of a romantic relationship, but the singer keeps the precise dimensions of the “it” for herself. The singer’s conclusion at the end of the chorus that “I know I’m never gonna find another one to compare” suggests the kind of acceptance of present realities which Freud associates with healthy mourning. It also demonstrates a self-reliance which Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun argue is often a welcome by-product of successfully working through traumatic experiences.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts*, 255.

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, 256.

¹¹⁸ Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, *Trauma and Transformation: Growing In the Aftermath of Suffering* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 31.

The song's first (real) verse is also imperative, in that it demands of her male friend (and potential new lover?), "Give me some love to fill me up/Give me some time/Give me some stuff/Give me a sign/Give me some kind of reason." The singer then turns and asks, "Are you heavy enough to make me stay?/I feel like I might blow away/I thought I was in heaven/But I was only dreaming." This pointed juxtaposition of neediness and assertive demands, lightness and heaviness, fits with an appreciation of *paradox* which Tedeschi and Calhoun also argue can be part of successful transformational growth after a traumatic event.¹¹⁹ As with "Joy," this verse involves a paradox of *time*: the narrator lives in the present, but imagines a near-future where her male audience will give her what she wants. According to theorist Lynda Hart, this kind of liminal temporality—"the future anterior"—is crucial to overcoming trauma: imagining "the past that *will have been*." To accomplish this, Hart argues, the trauma survivor must have an audience which bears *witness* to their story of survival.¹²⁰ This is certainly the case with the singer's (presumably) male friend/lover who listens to her story that "I thought I was in heaven, but I was only dreaming."

A gender paradox in this first verse is also particularly interesting: Williams' narrator demands a personal transformation by elucidating what she wants, but part of what she wants is to be "filled up." Masculine and feminine are particularly well-balanced in this verse: each time a seemingly masculine image is presented, it is countered with an image usually considered feminine. Tedeschi and Calhoun argue that part of overcoming trauma often involves a re-recognition of one's own vulnerability, something we could definitely say is true for the singer in

¹¹⁹ Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, *Trauma and Transformation*, 86.

¹²⁰ Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 181.

this song.¹²¹ Since, according to these authors, *invulnerability* is often coded as masculine, recognition that one is human and will eventually die is a positive gender deconstruction prompted by working through trauma.¹²² As a corollary, I might add that since Williams already addresses her audience in this verse in a manner which might be considered masculine, the effect of what Tedeschi and Calhoun describe here is further complicated. Perhaps Williams is suggesting an understanding of human vulnerability which, while still gendered, moves beyond binary understandings of male and female.

Williams pushes the gendered aspects of working through grief even further in the song's remarkable final verse, which I consider the most liberated lyric she has perhaps ever recorded. Importantly, the language here shifts away from imperatives, as Williams *declares*, "I just want to live the life I please/I don't want no enemies/I don't want nothin'/If I have to fake it." She then goes on to articulate love and human relationships in essentially capitalistic terms, which (as Judith Halberstam puts it) "often symbolically refers to the [masculine] power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth:" "Never take nothin' don't belong to me/Everything's paid for, nothing's free."¹²³ But then, as with the gender paradoxes of the first verse, she immediately turns around from this masculinist statement with perhaps the most vulnerable question any human being can ask another: "If I give my heart/Will you promise not to break it?"

This final pairing of ideas speaks multitudes about gender, social relations, and identity with the barest economy of language. It can be read in multiple ways. Through a "status quo" interpretation, Williams could be read as saying that since she has been revealed as dealing in

¹²¹ Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, *Trauma and Transformation*, 33.

¹²² *ibid*, 34.

¹²³ Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 2.

love transactions, she had sure better get her money's worth. A more subversive interpretation, however, would suggest that Williams is positing her love outside the boundaries of the patriarchal capitalist system. If everything is a transaction, she could be arguing, then I (the empowered female speaker) choose to reject that logic (or at least work outside it), by *giving* (instead of selling) you my love as a gift. Gift-giving in turn promotes equal, non-gender-biased relationships between men and women, which might dare to go beyond patriarchal understandings of women as commodities.

There is the potential to overreach in this analysis, but in light of the remarkable ground Williams covers lyrically in "I Lost It," it is worth considering an additional element of how her troubling of the links between capitalism and patriarchy play out in a particularly *Southern* context. Many scholars of Old South (especially plantation) culture have noted that the maintenance of a feudal slavery system in the region depended on the encoding of white women as a kind of valued property, where (as Eugene Genovese puts it) "racial subordination derived from class subordination, which derived from gender subordination."¹²⁴ In that particularly virulent patriarchy, proper behavior constituted social position and vice versa: as Susan Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones put it, "the virtuousness of Southern ladies," helped enforce "the rigid boundaries of race" set up by the slavery system.¹²⁵ Thus, the kind and obedient Southern belle was central to Southern culture and economic structure seemingly forever, and took over a century to shake loose from.

¹²⁴ As quoted in Susan Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones, "Haunted Bodies: Rethinking the South through Gender," in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, eds. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 2.

¹²⁵ *ibid*, 2.

Thus, when one reads Peggy Prenshaw's interpretation of current-day Southern women's autobiographies as a "cultural record of the constraints and tensions attending upon an effort to maintain connection with community and family while enacting a self that struggles to locate a separate life and find a personal voice," one can't help but consider where we've come since the Southern belle.¹²⁶ One also can't help but see this as transformative new versions of female Southern selfhood, which in their creation perhaps mourn the positive elements of the "belle" which were lost in the transformation. Certainly, the struggle Lucinda Williams enacts in "I Lost It" to define herself as independent (while still in love with a man) fits within the larger cultural struggle I describe here. And since Williams' depictions of a transformative sorrow in "I Lost It" fit with a process of successful mourning (*not* melancholia) Freud describes, maybe there is tentative proof that perpetual sadness is not her style (nor the South's) after all.

These kind of nuances are what Bill Buford's equations of region, gender, and melancholy miss in the final analysis. In "Delta Nights," Buford claims that the South has a love affair with loss, as though the South itself is a person, with desires. Perhaps this specific kind of anthropomorphism is a limitation of Buford's analysis. How can the psyche of a region accurately be compared to that of a person's—in this case, Lucinda Williams's psyche? Recently, work by sociologist Neil J. Smelser suggests that cultural trauma (traumatic events on a regional and/or national scope, that is) and individual trauma may be two different phenomena which are mourned in different ways.¹²⁷ Perhaps Lucinda Williams' attention to sad detail in *Car Wheels*

¹²⁶ Peggy Prenshaw, "The True Happiness of My Life: Reading Southern Women Autobiographers," in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, 461.

¹²⁷ Neil J. Smelser, "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey Alexander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 34-75.

on a Gravel Road can teach us that while the personal is political—and *sometimes* vice versa—it can be dangerous to paint palindromical arrows of causality *too* freely between the two.

Postscript: The Business of Car Wheels

Williams' success in articulating a wide range of contradictory emotions—longing, anger, regret, fortitude, optimism, desire—and to do so using strong melodies and even stronger recorded performances, helped drive *Car Wheels* to a level of sales success exponentially higher than Williams' work had performed previously. With the benefit of eighteen years' distance, it is now evident that the surprisingly explosive sales of this album helped fuel the maturation of alt.country as a full-fledged commercial genre of music. At the same moment, however, Williams was lucky to release *Car Wheels* in 1998, a time when the nascent alt.country industry was growing to the point wherein her album became truly part of a genre-based phenomenon in terms of sales and media attention. In a 2011 interview with John Moser, Williams provided an explanation for some of the long gaps between her earlier albums, an explanation based on *industry* expectations and problems, instead of her so-called perfectionism:

Yeah, well I'll tell you the real reason for that, 'cause I get asked this a lot. [sighs] You know, really – looking back on it, it's because when I got signed, when the *Car Wheels* album came out, I was signed to Mercury and then 'Lost Highway' was developed, which was still part of Mercury. 'Lost Highway' was developed by Rick Lewis, who was the head of Mercury in Nashville and my late manager, Frank Callare who got together because of the success of *Car Wheels*, which was surprising everybody because of the style of music it was. So they said, 'Well, let's start a label, a subsidiary of Mercury, around that kind of music.' So basically I had a home then, and when you're signed to a record label – I had a six-album, I think it was – you have to put a record out once a year. That's the general. All my other record labels had gone out of business, folded, whatever. That's why there was all that kind of inconsistency before that.

At first I couldn't even get a record deal, because my music fell in the crack between country and rock. There was no Americana. There was no alternative country. There was no market for that. So I was kind of swimming around, and then I got signed to Rough

Trade Records, and went from there to RCA, and that didn't work out. Then I went to Chameleon, which was part of Elektra. And then they folded. And then I got signed to American, Rick Rubin's label, and then *Car Wheels* was in the can for a whole year, which a lot of people don't realize. Because Rick couldn't put it out – he was in negotiations between Warner Brothers and Sony. So that's when Danny Goldberg at Mercury in New York bought the masters from Rick Rubin, and that's the *Car Wheels* album. So you can see how all ... But like I said, then I had a home. And that's how you see all that consistency [presently].¹²⁸

Williams' remarks here on the early history of Lost Highway demonstrate that even a subgenre of rock as comparatively small and insular as alt.country benefitted tremendously from a modified "star system" more common to big major labels, wherein *Car Wheels* was the rising tide that lifted all roots-rock boats of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

But at the same time, it is an overstatement to ascribe too much singular power to Williams as *the* sales force that made a major alt.country label like Lost Highway possible. There was a growing U.S. and global audience for roots-rock singer-songwriters like Ryan Adams (then still recording with his band Whiskeytown) in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and on some level the audience interest has sustained. So what did Williams' success with *Car Wheels*, and the growth of commercial interest in roots-rock singer-songwriters mean for 1990s rock, the parent genre (so to speak) of alt.country?

According to Eric Weisbard, writing in the *New York Times* in 1999—more in cranky critic mode as opposed to the popoptimist academic he later became—it meant the "gentrification" of rock, a regrettable phenomenon in his estimation. Weisbard begins his state-of-the-rock-union by pointing out that for "a certain breed of rock fan", *Car Wheels* was indisputably the best rock record of 1998. Despite praising the album's "perfectly turned roots songs with novelistically

¹²⁸ John J. Moser, "Talking with Lucinda Williams: Americana queen tells why her trickle of work has become a flood," Leigh Valley Music, October 23, 2011, accessed May 17, 2016, <http://blogs.mcall.com/leighvalleymusic/2011/10/talking-with-lucinda-williams-americana-queen-tells-why-her-trickle-of-work-has-become-a-flood.html>

precise lyrics”, Weisbard goes on to label Williams, along with techno-roots-pop artist Moby and even the poppy late-‘90s incarnation of the Flaming Lips as “genteel” wanna-be rockers, unabashed in their pursuit of a more “highbrow” audience, exemplified by public television shows of the era such as “Sessions At West 54th”. He then laments,

The richness of much of this genteel rock can't obscure the cost. Rock's most glorious works have generally been accessible or, as with punk, raw, intensified versions of the mainstream. The recent movement by smart artists away from the popular has created a schism: alternative and harder-edged rock gets more inane while subtler musicians rock less and less. To the latter, rock's riotous impulses seem suspect, one more vulgar marketing ploy.¹²⁹

Weisbard later goes on to explain why audiences feel a need to reconnect with what he describes as the elemental virtues of “rocking out”:

The genteel pleasures of maturity, erudition and suaveness all have a place in pop. But it's long past time for thoughtful people to remember the rock virtues: unresolved angst, risky leaps and cheap thrills. As Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols once sang, "Anger is an energy." Admittedly, that reminder came after he had cleaned up his act and renamed himself John Lydon. And before he went to work for VH1.¹³⁰

Weisbard has one great point: though music such as the performances I have analyzed on *Car Wheels* may be meticulously and beautifully arranged and executed, it is not exactly sonically innovative. Instead, Williams expands subtly on musical tricks borrowed mostly from ‘60s and ‘70s classic rock, to flesh out literary lyrics focusing more on the paradoxes of *place* than most any other contemporary rock. This combination of old and new, “unfiltered” feeling and measured artifice is what Williams contributed to rock via *Car Wheels*. As Robert Christgau articulated in 2001 while reviewing her follow-up album *Essence*, “Only a convinced cornball

¹²⁹ Eric Weisbard, “Smart, Lyrical, Even Genteel, But is it Rock?”, *New York Times*, August 1, 1999, accessed May 17, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/08/01/arts/music-smart-lyrical-even-genteel-but-is-it-rock.html>.

¹³⁰ *ibid*

like Lucinda Williams can manipulate tradition with the emotional skill to save it from an untimely end.”¹³¹

Weisbard’s formulation suggests an end to “real” rock at the dawn of the 2000s, because rock values of youthful rebellion weren’t being evoked as often as they were in the 1960s and ‘70s. But Weisbard’s analysis leaves out the crucial factor that rock’s “rebellious” quality was being tempered and redefined in order to keep pace with the expectations and desires of its aging fanbase. Alt.country was never a music for teenagers, even at its inception. Instead, alt.country listeners characteristically wanted to hear songs about “grown-up” concerns, such as failed romances in the context of a post-industrial age (tongue-in-cheek, serious, and both of the above). Weisbard’s analysis attempts to define rock too much in terms of sound, when what the growth of alt.country within rock really demonstrates is that rock in the late ‘90s—at least a certain strain of popular rock—was becoming increasingly focused on taking stock of what was lost during the so-called “boom” times of the 1990s.

¹³¹ Robert Christgau, “Encore from a Utopia.”

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