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Defining Dixie: Creating and Deploying Country Music's Mythic South

Written at Rhodes College

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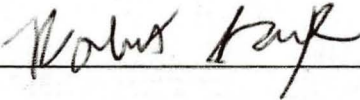
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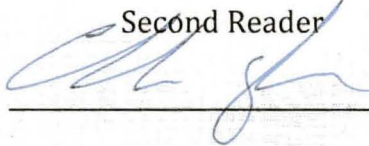
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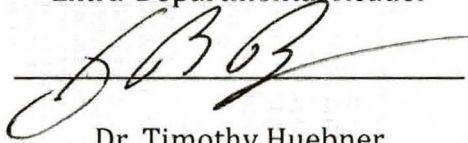
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## ABSTRACT

Defining Dixie: Creating and Deploying Country Music's Mythic South

by

Phoebe Strom

Tracing country music's evolution reveals that its mythic South is the result of a confluence of social, political, economic, and cultural factors involving both sides of the nation and of the aisle. The process of homogenizing the South in country music functioned to reaffirm the belief system the region ostensibly represented, serving as both a provocation and a reaction to alternate condemnation, mockery, and idealization in the larger American political context. Thus, country's Southernness cannot be understood as the inevitable product of the genre's Southern origins or static musical tradition. Rather, country emerged as hillbilly music in the 1920s and was promoted in racialized, regionalized ways. Attracting derision and expanding nationally, the genre adopted an overtly American tone and sound beginning in the 30s and continuing through the early Cold War. Underground segregationist music signaled the first signs of country's new conception of Southernness as an expression of white backlash to the Civil Rights Movement. In mainstream country, Southern nostalgia embodied everything that was missing from an America struggling with counterculture, the Civil Rights Movement, and Vietnam. 'Outlaw' country and Southern rock directly built off and challenged this view; the market power of their rebellious South and their connections to more progressive politics meant that their aggressive brand of Southernness became normalized. Modern country is defined by a combination of these two Southern identities, identities

whose construction provides insight into the role of popular culture in the political sphere and how to structure conversations on race relations and Southern memory.

“The country in ‘country music’ is America.”

--President Jimmy Carter, October 1979<sup>1</sup>

Country music represents both a political statement and a musical genre. As such, it has become uniquely associated by the general public with very specific views: racist, right-wing, and perhaps most importantly, Southern. While these stereotypes are not new, they have only gained momentum in recent years with the surge of interest in country music politics generated by the Dixie Chicks’ scandal in 2003 and the recent release of Brad Paisley’s “Accidental Racist.” This narrative ignores liberal, progressive, or non-Southern moments in favor of painting the industry and the music as a largely impenetrable bastion of Southern conservatism. As a result, the complexities of country’s love affair with the South are consistently overlooked, and it is assumed that neo-Confederate sympathies are and have always been an integral part of the genre. In reality, country music’s preoccupation with Southern pride and the Confederacy could not have become as omnipresent as it is today without a confluence of political developments from both sides of the aisle and both halves of the nation. Moreover, the use of Confederate symbolism and references in country music was not the inevitable product of the genre’s Southern origins or the result of a static musical tradition, but rather was influenced by and influential in larger political, economic, and social changes in the nation as a whole.

Understanding the history of country’s development as the musical embodiment of an essentialized South can only be done through analysis of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jimmy Carter, "Country Music Gala Remarks at the Fundraising Performance for Ford's Theatre," October 2, 1979. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=31467>.

genre's evolution over time. One of the factors impeding such analysis is the defensiveness of most country music scholarship. This is partially the result of a cultural context in which country has long been associated with an intellectual and economic underclass and has had to constantly strive towards 'respectability.' Defending the genre as worthy of study, then, often devolves into a defense of the genre itself. As Bill Malone wrote in his seminal work *Country Music U.S.A.*, "scholarly investigation of opera, classical music, or jazz would provoke neither haughty contempt nor derision, because those musical forms are accepted as proper and respectable" while country is deemed "unworthy of notice." Malone devotes a significant portion of his groundbreaking work to an explanation of the rationale behind viewing country as an important cultural and historical phenomenon. The tone and style of his writing speaks to the intense need of country music scholars for recognition of their work's validity, referring to the way other types of music "supposedly occupy higher positions in the American hierarchy of art or represent more accomplished musical disciplines" and to the "alleged nonquality" of country music.<sup>2</sup>

This implicit defense of country music prevents the type of historical narrative necessary to evaluating the genre's function as a political expression of an imagined Southern identity. The link between defense of country itself and defense of its historical worth has produced a body of country music histories that are not particularly historical in nature. Although some of this is attributable to the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968), 360.



many of those advocating country music's place in the larger pantheon of U.S. culture and history are not historians or even academics, this cannot fully explain the tendency to write about country music in ahistorical or even overtly promotional terms. The larger problem is that, as David Cantwell and Bill Friskics-Warren admit, "frustration with the limited ways that country gets talked about" motivates those who love country music to write their own versions of history.<sup>3</sup> Some works like Tex Sample's *White Soul: Country Music, the Church, and Working Americans* and David Fillingim's *Redneck Liberation: Country Music as Theology* do not even attempt to hide their bias in this matter. The anti-elitist and defensive nature of their writings is immediately evident just from the titles, and binding country up with religious overtones merely serves to add weight to their convictions.<sup>4</sup> This kind of visceral defense of country music, while most obvious in the huge body of anecdotally-based or almost memoir-esque country music histories, is apparent in even the most scholarly works on the topic.

Recent popular interest in and condemnation of country and its political leanings has fueled authors' need to portray country in a positive light. Numerous books, clearly designed to appeal primarily to a non-academic audience, eschew detailed investigation and rely almost entirely on trivia, personal experience, and

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<sup>3</sup> David Cantwell & Bill Friskics-Warren, *Heartaches by the Number: Country Music's 500 Greatest Singles* (Vanderbilt University Press & the Country Music Foundation Press, 2003), ix.

<sup>4</sup> David Fillingim, *Redneck Liberation: Country Music as Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003). Tex Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church, and Working Americans* (Abingdon Press, 1996).

supposedly emblematic stories.<sup>5</sup> The problem with this is twofold: one, it exacerbates the perception of country music as outside the purview of academia and two, it promotes the type of ahistorical analysis seen so often in media discussions of the genre. By taking a few instances as representative without proper historical context, the anecdotal trend in country music scholarship has actually perpetuated the very stereotypes it often tries to undermine, lending credence to what Peter La Chappelle refers to as the “ugly myth that country music performers and audiences are either devoid of politics or swayed by the unthinking populism of right-wing reaction.”<sup>6</sup> This reductionist approach, even when accompanied by explicit denials of a specific political affiliation, reinforces both the methods and the conclusions of those who oversimplify country by labeling it racist or Republican on the basis of a few examples.

Attempts to avoid this type of generalization through definition have erected yet another barrier to historical analysis of the genre. Indeed, one of the aspects of

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<sup>5</sup> Such works include, but are by no means limited to, the following: Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005); Mark Kemp, *Dixie Lullaby: A Story of Music, Race, and New Beginnings in a New South* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Curtis W. Ellison, *Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven* (University Press of Mississippi, 1995); Dorothy Horstman, *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy* (Nashville, TN: Country Music Foundation, 1996); *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America*, ed. Paul Kingsbury & Alanna Nash (DK Publishing, 2006); and Nick Tosches, *Country: The Biggest Music in America* (Stein & Day Publishing, 1977), later revised and released as *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock'n'Roll* (Da Capo Press, 1996) and *Country: Living Legends and Dying Metaphors in America's Biggest Music* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Peter La Chappelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 14.

country music that has received the most academic attention is what exactly constitutes the genre. The boundaries of country remain contested and function to distract from the weaknesses in the other aspects of country music scholarship. Even writers like David Cantwell and Bill Friskics-Warren, who acknowledge the problems of narrow definition, describing the “fences” of country music as “maddeningly porous” and striving to “err on the side of inclusion,” seem compelled to iterate certain qualities that country music must possess. Saying on the one hand that they are “not interested in defining country music so much as engaging in the tradition...to understand where the music, in all its manifestations, has been and where it’s going,” they then list off specific components of the country genre.<sup>7</sup> As America’s “truest music,” country represents a center of continuing definitional controversy in a way few other musical genres do.<sup>8</sup>

The counterproductive focus on country’s parameters causes scholars to overlook the totality of country has been as a historical and social phenomenon. While various scholars address the issue of definition in different ways, determining what country is (on the basis of musical features, artist characteristics, political views, fan basis, etc.) necessarily excludes elements essential to understanding its role as a larger cultural and political force. Bill Malone defines the genre as borne out of and shaped by the rural South but also the result of gradual adaptation to commercialism and industrialization. Thus, he constructs a musical spectrum

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<sup>7</sup> Cantwell & Friskics-Warren, *Heartaches by the Number*, xi.

<sup>8</sup> Bill Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 13-14.

ranging from the supposedly “pure” folk music that represents country’s origins and what he perceives as urban pseudo-country performed by those “not rural in origin” for other city-dwellers. His definition, largely predicated on heritage, buys into country’s mythology of authenticity by asserting that “one must be born into the culture” to produce real country music.<sup>9</sup> Malone’s later work adopts a similar stance, describing country as “an art form made and sustained *only* by working people” (italics mine).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, musicologist Aaron A. Fox argues that “working class culture is ‘country,’” that country is a “musical style emanating from everyday experience in a blue-collar lifeworld,” implying that, regardless of style, music produced outside of a working class context cannot be labeled country.<sup>11</sup> Others, like journalist Chris Willman, delineate the borders of country along political lines, calling it “the most patriotic of all musical genres,” with fundamental political leanings that distinguish it from its counterpart “alternative country,” a genre populated by so-called “expats” from country itself. By accepting country music’s supposed politics at face value, this approach inhibits further investigation.<sup>12</sup>

Country’s definitional debates also lead many scholars to treat it as an abstract entity, detached from the people involved in its production and consumption. Viewing country music as a mere reflection of political trends reduces its value to symbolism and ignores the way country music functioned to voice and create

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<sup>9</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, ix-x.

<sup>10</sup> Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’*, vii.

<sup>11</sup> Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 31-32.

<sup>12</sup> Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks*, 147 & 171

cultural norms. This oversight is apparent in most scholars' disregard for the industry behind country music, which they typically acknowledge only superficially to prove country's monetary power and popularity. The relationship between industry and art is integral to an understanding of how country music, more than just an interesting lens through which to view larger societal developments, actually contributed to such developments. However, those like Bill Malone or Jeffrey J. Lange, who present country as under siege yet "retaining its authenticity" or selling out under the pressure of "commercial exploitation," construct country as a passive musical edifice, a mirror in which larger social change becomes visible.<sup>13</sup> Framing country in this way separates the musical genre from its creators and from the society as a whole. Ironically, this impedes the elevation of country music as a legitimate field of study and thus accomplishes exactly the opposite of what most country music scholars are attempting to achieve. Strangely and counterproductively, these researchers partner with the very scholars who dismiss them—traditionalists who "celebrate high culture, barely acknowledge commercial country music as a form of music at all" and reduce the study of popular culture to an interesting side bar of 'real history.'<sup>14</sup>

"Defining Dixie" hinges upon a broader, societally-based understanding of country music. It is most informed by Diane Pecknold's *The Selling Sound*, which

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<sup>13</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 37. Jeffrey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me Hillbilly: Country Music's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 12.

<sup>14</sup> La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 15.

delves into the usually glossed over dynamic between commercialism and authenticity within the genre. As she writes, “the importance of commercialism in shaping the artistic development of country music has long been recognized,” but it has been treated as a “transparent concept...the falsehood to authenticity’s truth, the fabrication to authenticity’s spontaneity.” Instead of treating the industry of country music like a “shameful secret that pretensions to authenticity must labor to obscure,” as other scholars do with their artist-centric narratives, she argues that commercialism is as much a part of country as the music itself, that country music is not a distinct thing apart from its production and consumption. It follows, then, that Pecknold would suggest that country’s audience is just as relevant in understanding its social impacts as the artists themselves. In fact, she goes so far as to claim that “the failure to imagine the audience as active, critical participants in the culture industries” has “distorted traditional assessments of country music.”<sup>15</sup> Pecknold’s work echoes ideas introduced by Richard A. Peterson with his “production-of-culture perspective...that focuses on how the content of culture is influenced by the several milieus in which it is created, distributed, evaluated, and consumed.” Like Pecknold, Peterson breaks down the traditional duality of authenticity and commercialism, suggesting that the symbolical cultural meaning of country is “continuously negotiated in an ongoing interplay between performers, diverse

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<sup>15</sup> Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2-3, 6-8.

commercial interests, fans, and the evolving image.”<sup>16</sup> However, Pecknold goes one step further than Peterson in her treatment of this commercial structure as significant outside the bounds of country and in the realm of politics. Without this understanding, it is all but impossible to effectively argue the importance of country music politics (supposedly the task many country music historians are undertaking). Within her framework, country gains an active role as a forum for political discourse, both a product of and productive of larger societal trends.

Country music’s “special relationship with the South” further complicates historical investigation of its political leanings.<sup>17</sup> Interpreting the tensions between regional distinctiveness and national pride that came to a head with industrialization, America’s involvement in wars overseas, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights Movement, involves untangling a complicated web that scholars seem eager to oversimplify. Some dismiss these tensions as insignificant, others twist or ignore facts to force country into some unified trajectory of ‘Southernization,’ and several avoid the question altogether. Many, relying on the anecdotal and personal evidence so popular in discussions of country music politics, make sweeping generalizations about the nature of a so-called “Southern psyche,” defined by “sentimentality, feelings of nostalgia, the half-mythic memory of a time when things seemed to simpler, people were closer to the land, and life moved at a slower pace...the longing for an idealized past to replace the legacy of poverty,

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<sup>16</sup> Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 6, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’*, 15.

seeming backwardness, and hatred from outsiders.”<sup>18</sup> Still, these scholars do not go quite as far as those who claim that country music (and especially country music expressing “white Southern rage”) represented a “healing force” for a wounded South “mourning over the loss of a bygone era,” “tired of feeling guilty,” and afraid of change.<sup>19</sup> What is most problematic about this is that fact that it seems to take the carefully-constructed messages and themes of country music itself at face value. Instead of interrogating these ideas, they are reified, and the South of country music gradually becomes the South of reality.

Another consequence of the complicated connections between the South and country music is the subordination of local politics as less important than the genre’s alliance with national parties. This is evident in Pecknold’s argument that country music underwent a “social repositioning” following World War II, becoming representative of “a phantasmal silent majority of disaffected white, working-class Americans” alternately interpreted as a “menacing mass” by the left and “the noble common man” by the right. By constructing ‘country’ as a political statement in and of itself, vilifying or glorifying it became a safe way for politicians to court support without overtly taking a stance.<sup>20</sup> Malone’s argument that country underwent a “steady evolution towards commercialism and professionalism...obliterating regional distinctions” adopts the same rhetoric.<sup>21</sup> His thesis that country, because of

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<sup>18</sup> Cantwell & Friskics-Warren, *Heartaches by the Number*, 219.

<sup>19</sup> Kemp, *Dixie Lullaby*, xxii & 89.

<sup>20</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 95 & 201.

<sup>21</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 361.



its dual identity as regional and national (originating in the rural South and romanticizing the Southern lifestyle but indicative of the “the ascendancy of urban America—where the music was recorded, published, and broadcast”) could serve as a kind of bridge between the two echoes Pecknold’s ideas that country became part of politics in a less obviously Southern way as it was used to reinforce broader American ideals. For example, Malone asserts that the resurgence of country in the New Deal era was directly linked to a “desire to return to American roots and find a new unity in the nation’s cultural diversity,” a nationalism that was designed to both embrace and overwhelm regionalism.<sup>22</sup>

Following this logic, by the Cold War period, country was representative of the South only in the sense that it was representative of the racial and class dynamics identified with the South in national politics. This thesis fails to account for country’s own conceptualizations of Southern identity and in a sense, cleaves articulations of Southernness from the political and social milieu in which the genre is immersed. One of the most significant consequences of this inability to grapple with country’s expressions of Southernness is the almost complete scholarly disregard for the way Southernness became a kind of idealized Americanness in country music; therefore, while Southern identity may have become incorporated into national politics, it was not assimilated but retained a sense of difference and power in its own right, albeit on nationalistic and patriotic terms. The emergence of Confederate symbolism, particularly with the rise of Southern rock in the 70s (i.e.

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<sup>22</sup> Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’*, 61 & 230.

Lynyrd Skynyrd), hardly mentioned in the entire body of scholarship, further problematizes theories based only on national political agendas.

Overall, then, the study of country music as a political force has been inadequate. The methodological weaknesses, specifically the heavy reliance on anecdotes over analysis and the theoretical framework, have prevented the scholarship from achieving its desired aims. In fact, the books on the subject are often confusing and contradictory. The only unity seems to be in the areas ignored by all or mentioned only in passing: the role of gender in country music politics and the emergence of a 'rebel' Confederate ethos.<sup>23</sup> The historical documentation of country music politics, then, is rife with contradictions, gaps, and generalizations that are telling of larger blind spots and misconceptions when it comes to the diverse collection of musical traditions incorporated under the ambiguous label of country.

While this work cannot and will not correct all of these oversights, addressing them at the outset will open up dialogue on aspects of country music history that have been marginalized for too long in academic discourse. Most

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<sup>23</sup> It is worth mentioning the few works that have specifically focused on gender in country music, although few have even attempted to do so within the larger political trajectory of country music. Fewer still have grappled with the ways gender intersects with country's politicized assertions of Southern heritage. Nevertheless, valuable foundational books on the subject of gender in country music include: Mary A. Bufwack & Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: Country Music, 1800-2000* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press & Country Music Foundation Press, 2003); *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, ed. Diane Pecknold & Kristine M. McCusker (University Press of Mississippi, 2004); and Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (University of Michigan Press, 2009).

obviously, the focus on country music's associations with the Confederacy is one that while prominent in mainstream conversation is largely secondary in academic writings. Previous discussions of this topic have, as Charles Hughes writes, "oversimplified the music's complicated cultural politics by either essentializing the forms...accepting their politics as one-dimensional...or dismissing their cultural relevance as merely the cynical products of a money hungry music industry."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps ignored altogether would make a suitable addition to that list. Regardless, country music's political leanings and its development as a genre uniquely associated with a certain brand of Southernness is a topic worthy of exploration. By tracing the chronological development of country's Southern politics and using this story to illuminate other elements along the way (including gender and race relations), I offer an alternative perspective of the genre and its history. Confining such discussion to the sidelines because of its controversial nature, its ugliness, or its supposedly 'natural' presence has reinforced stereotypes of country and its role in American society.

While scholars like Jeffrey J. Lange suggest that, "country music not only captures the dichotomies of the South and its inhabitants," but "thrives on it," in reality country's evolution in expression of stereotypically Southern themes erased dichotomies and diversity.<sup>25</sup> As country music progressed from its first commercialization, it musically constructed an image of the South through

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<sup>24</sup> Charles Hughes, "'Country-Soul': Race and the Recording Industry in the U.S. South, 1960-1980." (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2012), 241.

<sup>25</sup> Lange, *Smile When You Call Me Hillbilly*, 12.

immediately recognizable images. Signifying a set of political ideals—whiteness, ‘traditional’ power structure, a certain idea of race, gender, and class relations—that, while rarely explicitly spelled out by artists, were nevertheless commonly understood by the music’s audience, these images distilled a sort of mythical, Southern essence that served larger political agendas. The most blatant tension embedded in country’s conception of the South is that between the ‘traditional,’ often Christian-based morality of many songs and the more rebellious attitudes espoused by those like the Outlaws. The simultaneous existence of reveries of prosperous Southern planters and celebrations of the working class in opposition to the elite offer another obvious example. Nevertheless, such superficially oppositional ideologies acted in concert, each quietly ratifying the other; in the case of the latter example, Southern prosperity and the loss of it speaks to nostalgia for a better past, the righteousness of the Southern people, their continued independence in the face of adversity, their sense of shared economic oppression at the hands of the North, and their willingness to work towards the Southern ascendance they so clearly deserve. Moreover, seemingly contradictory expressions of Southernness were borne out of and essential to the larger cultural conception of one imaginary South. Despite differences in phrasing, at their heart these expressions played into the same narrative of the South, a narrative divorced in many ways from the constraints of reality. By embracing such dichotomies and folding them into an all-encompassing framework of what it meant to be Southern, the process of

homogenizing the South through country music functioned to reaffirm the belief system the region ostensibly represented, serving as both a provocation and a reaction to alternate condemnation, mockery, and idealization in the larger American political context.

Defining the South, then, will be left to the music, and I will analyze that definition, rather than creating my own. The term 'Southern' remains contested in contemporary discourse, as many question the distinctiveness of Southern culture and others equate anything deemed Southern with a neo-Confederate, racist ideology.<sup>26</sup> The South itself is both a place and a complex, historically-contingent concept rife with narratives and images of profound symbolic importance. Just as this work does not focus on strict musical boundaries, it will not construct strict boundaries around the South. In terms of Southern messages in country music, this piece does not subscribe to standard notions of authenticity that address only music produced in the rural South by rural Southerners. Country music can and does exist outside of these narrow confines, and although some label such music an intrusive imitation, other see their music and the messages contained within as

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<sup>26</sup> While there is an incredible amount of literature conceptually addressing the South (and whether the idea of the South even exists), some of the more important include: Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994); C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2008); Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); James Charles Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Pete Daniel, *Standing At The Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and John Egerton. *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974).

representative of their experiences and ideals. To ignore it is to buy into one of the most longstanding myths surrounding country music, that is, to naturalize country's Southern themes—nostalgia, notions of old-fashioned morality, the simplicity of rural life, the importance of family, the elevation of home, Christian values, self-sufficiency, resiliency in the face of wartime devastation, and hard work—as inevitable because of the music's origins in the region. Rather, these themes became synonymous with the South through country music as an effect of specific political, social, and economic forces and events.

Historicizing and contextualizing the emotionally fraught discussions of country's imagined South requires beginning from country's first emergence as a commercial phenomenon: the hillbilly music 'discovered' in the 1920s and 30s. The music of this period is often pointed to by critics as proof that country music was grounded in Confederate sentiment and support from its origins on; musicians and fans use the same argument to justify and legitimate their statements as heritage or tradition. However, the image of hillbilly music as intrinsically emblematic of Southernness was primarily the result of market forces and that in actuality the genre initially encompassed a wide spectrum of diverse perspectives. The Southern themes espoused by Tin Pan Alley, the way in which hillbilly music challenged those themes, and the resultant backlash against the genre further complicate essentializing narratives of country's Southernness that rely on this era.

As migration across the country, war, and depression reshaped the American landscape, hillbilly music worked to become more 'respectable.' This first emerged in the genre's move towards Western, rather than Southern, imagery. When changes

in the music industry gave hillbilly music the ear of the nation during World War II, the genre adopted patriotic messages and moved away from Southern themes. This process only intensified after the war with the adoption of the Nashville Sound and Americana exemplified by the records produced at the height of the Cold War. The essential disappearance of Southernness in the genre that consciously reframed itself as country in response to continued derision allowed it to gain national popularity. Detailing this process explains country's expansion on a national scale and the emergence of a powerful country music industry. More importantly, it points to the fact that articulations of Southern pride were not always a key component of the genre and that the essential erasure of Southernness from country during this timer period was clearly political, motivated by the concerns of the audience, the reactions of critics, the needs of a rapidly growing industry, and the realities of current events.

Underground segregationist music marked the first shift away from country music's positioning as purely American. Circulating informally and produced by independent regional record companies like Reb Rebel Records, these songs partnered Confederate imagery with racist and conservative political beliefs. This music is often dismissed by scholars as insignificant because of its separation from the mainstream country establishment and its limited distribution. However, the acknowledged involvement of individuals from the mainstream country industry (and the supposed anonymous involvement of many others) as well as stylistic similarities make the underground records essential to understanding how and why Southernness reemerged as a dominant feature of country music. Furthermore, the

underground records functioned as a precursor to the expressions of Southernness that followed in mainstream country. In this way, they provided a template of sorts (albeit one that was much more overt and aggressive than that adopted by most country stars), offered the first expression of these kind of Southern political values, and rationalized their polarizing statements with the same rhetoric that would be deployed by later country artists.

As America became increasingly divided over the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, country music began to depict the South as an idealized America. The patriotism that characterized the recordings of the 40s and 50s continued in the 60s but transformed as it became more and more difficult to defend specific policy choices, namely futile and traumatizing military action in Vietnam. This led to an emphasis on tradition in opposition to chaos, conflict, and counterculture. It was at this point that the regional dichotomy broke down and the South was reappropriated as more American than America, as the perfect foil to the perceived collapse of American values. Particularly as the Civil Rights Movement spread out of the South, stereotypical Southernness offered conservative whites across the nation a way to justify their beliefs as nostalgia. Country music's mythic South offered a convenient way for politicians to gain patriotic credentials and intimate their beliefs on polarizing issues (e.g. racial dynamics) without actually saying anything official, binding, or potentially problematic.

Although they brought Southern pride back into country, these assertions of Southernness were carefully couched in patriotism and morality, designed to be uncontroversial. The 'outlaw' movement and Southern rock reacted against this and



brought in strains of Rebel pride into the genre. With their connections to more progressive politics and a younger generation, these movements in many ways attempted to disconnect the South and the Confederacy from the associations built up by their more traditional counterparts. The liberal beliefs of many in these groups does not excuse their messaging. In fact, these beliefs served to normalize an essentialized neo-Confederate South. By rendering increasingly radical expressions of Southern pride acceptable to a broader audience and effectively closing off dialogue on the political implications of Southernness, these movements transformed country's concept of the South to the degree that it suited their image without fundamentally redefining the underlying politics. The potent combination of this alluring idea of the South with the earlier 'softer' version, precipitated by factors including the election of Jimmy Carter and the rise of the Sunbelt economy, is responsible for shaping country music's Southern identity to this day.

Exploring country's evolution of Southernness will provide insight into the way cultural products can communicate and create ideologies. Particularly in the case of country music, these products reach those removed from traditional modes of political conversation i.e. official records or elite news sources. The societal construction of Southern values offers a case study, then, that explains how and why phenomena like music enact the world around them. In light of continued clashes over race relations and Southernness, the story of country music as a Southern genre is especially relevant, for its involvement in the construction of a unique Southernness provides the knowledge needed to lessen that Southernness's power. Though the promulgation of a stereotyped white South has not caused all of

America's racial problems, it has justified and perpetuated them. An understanding of the development of the Southern messages contained within country acts as a key to unravel this image. Therefore, the history to follow is both timely and a precondition to remedying decades of prejudice.

## The Hillbilly Origins of Country Music

Often cited as evidence for neo-Confederate ideology's consistent presence in country music, the earliest iterations of country, promoted in sharply-defined racial terms as hillbilly music (in opposition to race music e.g. gospel, jazz, blues), designed for a primarily regional audience, and emerging from a South still scarred by the Civil War, demonstrate an unsurprising fascination with the Confederacy. Many early country musicians, for that matter, had close family connections to the fighting. Further, opportunities for success as a musician in the South following the Civil War necessitated involvement on some level with Confederate veterans' associations and the Klu Klux Klan. These groups were the primary force behind the fiddlers' conventions and barn dances that were so crucial for early country artists. For example, Fiddlin' John Carson, one of the first well-known hillbilly musicians, leveraged his performances at Confederate reunions and Klan rallies into the sales that caused the music industry to recognize the market potential of hillbilly music, a potential implicitly tied to the genre's Southern roots. Thus, Civil War songs such as "Dixie," "Just Before the Battle Mother," and "Lorena" remained staples of hillbilly repertoires despite the intervening years and were recorded over and over by hillbilly bands in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>27</sup>

However, the preeminence of these songs in the beginnings of commercialized country is less evidence of tradition and more evidence of outside

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<sup>27</sup> Andrew K. Smith & James E. Akenson, "The Civil War in Country Music Tradition," in *Country Music Goes to War*, ed. Charles K. Wolfe & James E. Akenson (University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 5-7. James Charles Cobb, "From Muskogee to Luckenbach: Country Music and the 'Southernization' of America," in *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (University of Georgia Press, 1999), 79-80.

manipulation. While songs idealizing Southern values and independence were undeniably included in most hillbilly repertoires, their ascendance over other songs like altered English folk ballads and Negro spirituals reflected marketing choices by music industry executives, who saw Confederate battle songs as a credential that affirmed the authenticity (and the whiteness) of the music they promoted. With advertising copy that glorified the prewar South and painted hillbilly music as authentic Americana, the music industry created an “idyllic white rural Mountain South that existed outside of modern urban America, a closely knit, socially homogeneous and harmonious world free from flappers, foreigners, and African Americans,” an image of what America should be to many cultural conservatives.<sup>28</sup> In an era of industrial expansion, urban migration, and social change, pandering to fears of modernization could be a highly lucrative tactic, and the promoters of hillbilly music hoped to capitalize upon it.

Accepting this manufactured image at face value supports the idea that country’s later embrace of neo-Confederate symbolism was the natural conclusion of a trajectory that hearkens back to the genre’s very beginnings; indeed to do so plays into what Bill Malone identifies as “the most enduring romantic myth concerning southern folk and their music,” the idea of both racial and cultural purity. The Southern identity of hillbilly music was much more complex than its promoters let on, and the songs about the antebellum South and the Civil War in the 20s and 30s were hardly a coherent collection. Rather, as early hillbilly musicians drew upon “a large and floating body of music that reflected Old World, American,

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<sup>28</sup> Patrick Huber, “Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924-1932,” in *Hidden in the Mix*, 24-27.

religious, pop, and diversely ethnic origins” and rarely wrote their own material, it is exceedingly difficult to pinpoint a clear pro-Confederate political statement in the music itself.<sup>29</sup>

The true extent of this diversity is most evident in the racial attitudes of hillbilly music. While the music industry attempted to split Southern music along racial lines, they could not undo years of black-white interaction and the development of a certain amount of shared musical heritage. Indeed, many of the hillbilly songs that seem the most racist at first glance, including “Run, Nigger Run,” recorded by at least four different hillbilly acts, originated in slave songs; the lyrics of course take on an entirely different connotation when sung by a white man in the post-Civil War South, but the cultural heritage cannot be ignored.<sup>30</sup> Other songs recorded by hillbilly artists were blatantly sympathetic to slaves and even the Union. “Those Cruel Slavery Days” recorded by Fields Ward and His Buck Mountain Band in 1929 recounts the tragic separation of families during the “agonizing cruel slavery days” when slaves were “sold for silver and gold.”<sup>31</sup> In a similar vein “Darling Nelly Gray,” written by an abolitionist in 1856, fit perfectly into the hillbilly canon with its account of lost love but somewhat awkwardly in terms of political views espoused.<sup>32</sup> Even more overtly political was the version of “Kingdom Coming” (also

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<sup>29</sup> Malone, *Don't Get above Your Raisin'*, 19-20.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Parker Eastman, *The Negro, his origin, history and destiny* (University of Michigan Press, 1905), 394. Dorothy Scarborough, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* (Harvard University Press, 1925), 23-25.

<sup>31</sup> Lyle Lofgren, “Remembering the Old Songs: Those Cruel Slavery Days,” *Inside Bluegrass*, May 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Hanby, “Darling Nelly Gray Sheet Music” (Boston: Oliver Ditson Company, 1882) in Ohio Civil War 150 Collections & Exhibits, Item #1942, <http://www.ohiocivilwar150.org/omeka/items/show/1942>.

known as “Jubilo,” “Year of Jubilee,” or “Massa’s Gone Away”) recorded by the McGee Brothers in 1927 under the name “Old Master’s Runaway;” the song, which celebrates the end of slavery, was popularized primarily by Union soldiers and expresses positive views of Northerners in contrast to the cowardly plantation master.<sup>33</sup> This is not to say that hillbilly music was a haven of progressive racial thought, as any number of ‘coon songs’ and songs glorifying the plantation lifestyle can disprove, but it nonetheless undermines the belief that hillbilly and country were inevitably linked to Confederate values and the particular brand of racism that necessarily accompanies.

Regional affiliations further complicate the issue of hillbilly music and the Confederacy. Although the sheer amount of Civil War songs recorded by hillbilly artists suggests lingering Confederate sympathies, the origins and content of these songs defy such convenient categorization. Many of the most popular Civil War songs said little about specific loyalties, but instead addressed the hardships of war, the sadness of families fighting each other, the difficulties of being far from home, and the longing to reunite with a lover. These songs, then, were able to transcend the boundaries of North and South and speak to people on both sides, sometimes with a few lyrical changes (which could be as simple as switching the word ‘Southern’ for ‘Northern’ or vice versa), but often completely intact. The implications of this are obvious in early recordings of hillbilly music that utilize songs written and enjoyed by those in both armies, rather than focusing solely on the music of the

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<sup>33</sup> “Kingdom Coming,” *Traditional Tune Archive*, last modified February 2, 2013, [http://tunearch.org/wiki/Annotation:Kingdom\\_Coming](http://tunearch.org/wiki/Annotation:Kingdom_Coming). Lyle Lofgren, “Remembering the Old Songs: The Faded Coat of Blue,” *Inside Bluegrass*, August 1998.

Confederacy. While few were blatantly pro-Union, many were written in the North or were popular primarily with Union soldiers. It is also worth noting that border states such as Kentucky, Missouri, and West Virginia, caught in between North and South, inherited and amalgamated conflicting musical traditions, producing songs like “Faded Coat of Blue;” familiar in style, but diverging in message, this song and those akin to it problematize the assumed set of values underlying early country music.<sup>34</sup>

In actuality, then, hillbilly music was far less overtly pro-Southern than the mainstream music of the time. Beginning with the “plantation songs” of Stephen Foster and his peers in the mid-1800s, the music of vaudeville and blackface minstrelsy idealized the antebellum South; the spread of these songs to the rural south via traveling shows and the appropriation of many, including the quintessential Southern anthem “Dixie,” to rally Confederate troops explains their presence in early hillbilly music.<sup>35</sup> That this “obsession with the South in American popular culture” gained momentum in the post-war period is counterintuitive, but by painting a romanticized picture of the South, Northern composers and lyricists attempted to mediate deep societal rifts along economic, racial, and regional lines.<sup>36</sup> Popular music idealizing the prewar South aligned neatly with renewed American sentiments of racism and nativism. In the most literal sense, the longing to return to Dixie in so many of these songs likely expresses a wish for the first Southern migrants, especially black migrants, to leave the North. Moreover, portraying the

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<sup>34</sup> Smith & Akenson, “The Civil War in Country Music Tradition,” 2-6.

<sup>35</sup> Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 10-13.

<sup>36</sup> Malone, *Don't Get above Your Raisin'*, 57.

Old South as a veritable paradise--prosperous, beautiful, peaceful, wholesome, and racially harmonious yet under white control--enforced a narrative that located black activism firmly in the radical and justified a paternalistic style of racism. The songs' stereotypes of "coons" and "mammies" also functioned to build common ground between Northern and Southern whites through their assertion of "Anglo-Saxon supremacy."<sup>37</sup> This theme of sectional reconciliation manifested itself explicitly in songs like "Wedding of the Blue and Gray" and "The Dixie Volunteers," in which the icons and imagery of Dixie (most notably Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee) are deployed for American ends.<sup>38</sup> By obfuscating the devastation, economic decay, and social upheaval of the South following the Civil War, these popular tunes symbolically absolved the North of responsibility for the conflict and affirmed American domination of Dixie; the reconciliation depicted in this music was not an equal exchange, but a way of channeling Southern fervor in a patriotic direction and reaffirming the superiority of white culture.

The emphasis on Southern identity in hillbilly music derives from the way that hillbilly's first promoters tried to shoehorn it into this pre-established and widely popular genre. Emboldened by the way hillbilly musicians had incorporated earlier vaudeville and minstrelsy favorites into their repertoires, record companies and radio stations somewhat disingenuously characterized hillbilly music as the

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<sup>37</sup> Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie*, 13-25.

<sup>38</sup> Harry Ruby & Edgar Leslie, "The Dixie Volunteers," (New York: Waterson, Berlin, and Snyder, Co., 1917) in University of Mississippi Libraries Digital Collections, <http://clio.lib.olemiss.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/sharris/id/1458/rec/15>. George M. Cohan, "The Wedding of the Blue and the Gray," (New York: F.A. Mills, 1906) in Historic American Sheet Music, Duke University Digital Collections, [http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/hasm\\_b0165/](http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/hasm_b0165/).



natural embodiment of the messages espoused by the songwriters of Tin Pan Alley. Invoking the same self-conscious rhetoric of antebellum nostalgia and Civil War pride that accompanied popular music, they overemphasized both the extent and the political stance of such themes in actual hillbilly songs. While names like “Old Southern Tunes” or “Songs from Dixie” were technically accurate, the implications of such word choice went beyond geographical location.<sup>39</sup> However, while lumped into the same category via their marketing, the two genres never quite agreed on the South they both discussed.

Although both shared a sense of nostalgia and old-fashioned morality (albeit diluted in popular music due to its stylistic pursuit of modernity), their ostensibly similar approaches to the South were in fact very different. Hillbilly did not shy away from the social and economic conditions of the South in the 1920s and 30s; a product of these conditions, hillbilly music’s very existence called attention to this aspect of the South that Tin Pan Alley tried so hard to ignore. With its associations to a poor white underclass, hillbilly music spoke with a voice purposefully absent from popular music’s caricatured discourse on Southernness and whiteness. The diversity of sound, subject, and message within hillbilly music also served to undercut the romantic uniformity of popular music’s monolithic South.<sup>40</sup> That hillbilly music circumvented the traditional economic structures of the music industry, offered a relatively cheap and plentiful alternative to popular music, and attracted, not just Southerners, but those seeking a simpler, more wholesome music

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<sup>39</sup> Huber, “Black Hillbillies,” 24-25.

<sup>40</sup> Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’*, 18-20, 22-24, 57-58.

than that offered by the urban-based popular music industry solidified it as a threat deserving of exclusion and vilification.<sup>41</sup>

Music professionals “mobilized cultural condescension” in response to the emergence of commercialized hillbilly music.<sup>42</sup> Building off a long history of derision towards Southern “plain folk,” this type of criticism was predicated on a fundamentally classist framework that became particularly relevant in the postwar period. As popular music and other cultural forms fetishized the antebellum South, they created an unstable dual conception of Southern identity. In this conception, the postwar South, supposedly controlled by “white trash” and rife with poverty, bigotry, ignorance, and violence, acted as an unspoken and subversive other to the ‘true’ South populated by happy slaves and benevolent planters.<sup>43</sup> When hillbilly music disrupted this paradigm and bucked popular music’s narrow definition of Southernness, it became a site of cultural controversy. The mainstream music industry’s patronizing approach, granted much attention by the press, strove to delegitimize hillbilly music as a valid art form and especially as a valid Southern art form. An article published in the music magazine *Etude* in 1933 marginalized hillbilly musicians and their Southern fans as a “great, unnumbered, inarticulate multitude” of “childlike” individuals existing within “a sort of subterranean musical world of their own.”<sup>44</sup> Even harsher was the indictment of hillbillies as a “type of illiterate white whose allegiances are to the Bible, the Chautauqua, and the

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<sup>41</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 25-28. Malone, *Don't Get above Your Raisin'*, 27, 61-62.

<sup>42</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 24.

<sup>43</sup> Malone, *Don't Get above Your Raisin'*, 17, 26-27.

<sup>44</sup> Arthur Smith, “Hillbilly Folk Music,” *Etude* 51, no. 3 (March 1933): 154, 208.

phonograph...of 'poor white trash' genera'...illiterate and ignorant, with the intelligence of morons" by *Variety* music editor Abel Green in the trade publication's 1926 retrospective.<sup>45</sup> Article after article questioned the quality and respectability of hillbilly music and thus implicitly the genre's ability to represent the South.<sup>46</sup> This criticism pervaded American thought to such an extent that the Klu Klux Klan began to strategically eschew hillbilly music. Given the longstanding connections between early hillbilly artists and the Klan, this was a conscious, tactical move intended to aid the organization's "quest for national respectability."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "Hill-Billy Music," *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 24-25. Don Cusic, *Discovering Country Music* (New York: Praeger, 2008), 103-110.

<sup>47</sup> Malone, *Don't Get above Your Raisin'*, 121.

## Mainstreaming Country

Southern migration in the 30s and 40s ushered in new trends in hillbilly music. Scattering the genre's primary fan base across the nation, migration out of the South only increased hillbilly music's importance to its transplanted Southern listeners. As the displaced Southern rural working class moved West or North, they brought their musical traditions with them, exposing hillbilly music to more non-Southern and urban audiences. While this process indubitably facilitated the spread of country music in the long run, it initially exacerbated negative perceptions of hillbilly music. The mass influx of poor Southern whites and their cultural products strengthened the already established belief systems characterizing hillbillies as inferior, degenerate, and backwards by placing the communities they entered on the defensive.<sup>48</sup> In California, for example, the extremely hostile stereotypes surrounding Okies portrayed them as barely white, genetically problematic, culturally stagnant, and un-American, all elements of the cultural criticism hillbilly music encountered earlier. Moreover, given the economic uncertainty of the time and their own fears about falling into poverty, members of the new middle class did everything they could to distance themselves from the migrants by accentuating differences that supposedly linked Okies to "depravity and a racialized Otherness." The hillbilly music that accompanied migrants out of the South, already implicated as a symptom of broader Southern social decay, provided the perfect tool for this "ethnic and cultural scapegoating."<sup>49</sup> Perceived invaders of both the "physical and

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<sup>48</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 45-52.

<sup>49</sup> La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 23-29, 33-38.

cultural space” to which they moved, Southern migrants were kept firmly on the outside.<sup>50</sup>

As a result of such exclusion, seemingly contradictory impulses towards distinctiveness and assimilation surfaced in migrant communities and the hillbilly music they liked. On one hand, these former Southerners simply missed the South, especially given the enmity they met with in their new homes. The familiar sounds of hillbilly music fulfilled this need and mediated the disparate identities within migrant communities, forming the basis of a common culture.<sup>51</sup> On the other, as migrants strove towards middle class respectability, they wanted their music to do the same. Reconciling these two impulses in hillbilly music caused a move away from traditional Southern tropes and a move towards the West. Given the Southwestern heritage of many migrants and the Western location of the large number in California, the Western style of hillbilly music first popularized by Jimmie Rodgers and Gene Autry was deeply embedded in the social and musical context of Southern migration. Although the romantic image of the West had long been a part of American thought, its lack of a lengthy musical tradition meant that it was necessarily less caught up in the type of conflicts over identity that characterized musical depictions of the South; North and South, East and West all seemed to subscribe to a similar, albeit largely artificial, image of cowboy culture. The relatively sophisticated presentation of the “singing cowboys” also subtly distinguished them from the poor Southern white milieu, shielding them from accusations of backwardness and making them more palatable to cosmopolitan

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<sup>50</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 48.

<sup>51</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 44-49.

consumers.<sup>52</sup> The proliferation of groups and individuals invoking the place names and heritage of the West, including a near-absurd number of performers taking the stage name Tex, points to the prevalence of a Westward shift in hillbilly music even among those with no credible connection to Southwestern culture.<sup>53</sup> The diverse musical traditions of white rural-to-urban migrants, synthesized with the music of their surroundings and coupled with the widespread American interest in the Old West, produced musical forms like honky tonk, western swing, and cowboy ballads. By softening the stark Southern iconography of hillbilly music but still offering migrants the familiar sounds they craved, the Western subcategories of the hillbilly genre moved the music away from its most polarizing conflicts without losing the sense of regional uniqueness so important in this era of demographic flux.

As World War II loomed on the horizon, then, hillbilly music had just begun to move away from its Southern roots, but had not yet emerged in any significant way as a national phenomenon. The war and concurrent changes in the music industry worked together to disprove the claim that—in one writer’s words—people “from the cotton lands...have never understood what America means.”<sup>54</sup> In 1941, the broadcasting boycott and eventual breakdown of ASCAP’s (American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers) essential monopoly on music licensing granted the largely unlicensed hillbilly music more airplay in the short term and the protections it had long been denied in the long term. The success of BMI (Broadcast Music Incorporated) in challenging ASCAP decentralized the music

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<sup>52</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 145-154.

<sup>53</sup> La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 81.

<sup>54</sup> Alice Reichard, “California’s Adult Children,” *Country Gentleman* 110, no. 2 (February 1940): 35.

industry, which was hugely beneficial for producers of “so-called grass-roots material” i.e. hillbilly and race music. The musicians’ strike less than a year later and the early acquiescence of the smaller, independent record companies specializing in race and hillbilly music to the musicians’ demands again catapulted hillbilly recordings to national heights due to the shortage of popular music. This chaos in the popular music industry gave hillbilly music the foothold it needed. As its traditional Southern audience migrated across the U.S. in even greater numbers than before and went overseas to fight, hillbilly music was perfectly placed to reposition itself as the genre of America.<sup>55</sup>

From 1941 to 1946 hillbilly music removed itself from expressions of specifically Southern sentiment and instead adopted an unwavering and entirely American patriotism. In message, these songs diverged little from wartime popular music, expressing a wide range of emotions, but little Southern pride. “Cowards Over Pearl Harbor” vocalized the tangible shock and anger that the attack and the U.S.’s subsequent entry into the war engendered in the American people.<sup>56</sup> “Smoke on the Water” traced this anger to its logical conclusion with lyrics incongruous to the pleasant two-step melody:

For there is a great destroyer made of fire and flesh and steel  
 Rollin’ towards the foes of freedom; they’ll go down beneath its wheels  
 There’ll be nothing’ left but vultures to inhabit all the land  
 When our modern ships and bombers make a graveyard of Japan<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 184-190. Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 54-57.

<sup>56</sup> Fred Rose, “Cowards Over Pearl Harbor,” Decca 6008, Denver Darling, 1942.

<sup>57</sup> Zeke Clements & Earl Nunn, “Smoke on the Water” Decca 6102, Red Foley, 1944.

Other hillbilly songs like “1942 Turkey in the Straw,” “We’re Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap (and Uncle Sam’s the Guy Who Can Do It),” “When Mussolini Laid His Pistol Down,” and “The Devil and Mr. Hitler” took an equally aggressive but more lighthearted approach while affirming the inevitability of American success and the rightness of American values. The most successful World War II hillbilly songs, however, demonstrate the genre’s origins in the balladeer tradition. Chronicling tragedy and poignancy, especially within the context of war, remained a strong suit of hillbilly singers and songwriters in the 40s. Songs of this type include “Searching for a Soldier’s Grave,” “There’s a Gold Star in Her Window,” “Send This Purple Heart to My Sweetheart,” “Stars and Stripes on Iwo Jima,” “The Soldier’s Last Letter,” “Are You Waiting Just For Me?,” “White Cross on Okinawa,” and the most successful World War II-themed song in any genre, “There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere.” Transcending the bounds of musical genre, the first recorded version of this song sold almost two million copies and inspired numerous other artists to record it in both popular and hillbilly styles.<sup>58</sup> By the end of the war, the genre once regarded as a “specialty product marketed in the Deep South” enjoyed national attention and sales.<sup>59</sup>

However, as the genre gained more national popularity and acceptance, it also attracted new levels of derision. While national publications covered and recognized the spread of hillbilly music across the nation, their reporting was

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<sup>58</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 198-200. Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks*, 148-149. *The Billboard Music Year Book* (1944), 46.

<sup>59</sup> “Corn of Plenty,” *Newsweek*, June 13, 1949.



typically tinged, if not rife, with surprise and scorn.<sup>60</sup> In fact to many writers, hillbilly music's growing popularity seemed only worth comment because it made the "naïve," "folksy," "raucous," and "obnoxious" sounds of the genre "a national earache."<sup>61</sup> In 1946 *Collier's* described the genre's growing popularity as an "epidemic of corn" and its musicians as "barefoot fiddlers who couldn't read a note but could raise a voice on endless tunes, especially with the aid of corn liquor."<sup>62</sup> Most offensive perhaps was the article "Hillbilly Heaven" published in *American Magazine* in 1952, which began in a profoundly condescending manner:

If you don't mind, I will write this report lying down. I feel giddy. Before my eyes are funny little men chasing each other with pitchforks and banjos. In my ears rings mournful sounds such as never were before on land or sea. No, it's nothing I et. It's because I have been exposed, in person, to a national phenomenon called the Grand Ole Opry, and I'm afraid it bit me...This noteworthy nation has been taken down bad with an epidemic called hillbillyitis.<sup>63</sup>

While these writers tried to play into the anti-hillbilly sentiment that was resurging after the war as Southern migration again became a point of contention, they failed to sway most Americans' musical tastes even as they gained traction with their social commentary. This speaks to the success of the country industry in distancing themselves from hillbilly stereotypes, something that such vitriolic and demeaning criticism unintentionally spurred on. The constant reinforcement of negative (and usually Southern) stereotypes introduced elements of defensiveness into the genre

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<sup>60</sup> Cusic, *Discovering Country Music*, 103-110. Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 59-60.

<sup>61</sup> "Pistol Packin' Mama," *Life* 15, no. 11 (October 11, 1943).

<sup>62</sup> Doron K. Antrim, "Whoop-and-Holler Opera," *Collier's* 117, no. 4 (January 26, 1946): 18, 85.

<sup>63</sup> Don Eddy, "Hillbilly Heaven," *American Magazine* 153, no. 3 (March 1952).

that do much to explain its consistent drive to distance itself from its Southern roots, a drive that only intensified in the postwar years.<sup>64</sup>

Building upon the patriotic momentum it had accumulated during the war, hillbilly music tried to solidify its position as a “national desire” not just a “regional manifestation.”<sup>65</sup> Simultaneously affirmed and challenged by rock and roll’s emergence and separation from its hillbilly roots, the Nashville-centered industry worked to promote itself as a bastion of ‘traditional’ values. Integral to this conception was the supplantation of hillbilly musical styles by what became known as country-pop; as the industry became more and more interested and successful in crossing over to the pop charts, it abandoned many supposedly Southern stylistic traits and instruments, producing the famous (or infamous, from the perspective of those disparaging the dilution of ‘real’ country) Nashville Sound. Fiddles and steel guitar were replaced with string sections, keyboards, background vocals, and a crooner style; this sound valued a ‘smoother’ sound with slick production values. By 1960, almost half of all pop singles were products of the Nashville country industry.<sup>66</sup> As *Newsweek* wrote in 1966, the Nashville Sound became an “all-American sound” because of its evolution towards “popular taste” and its rejection of “the raw, nasal ‘hillbilly’ sound alien to urban ears.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 100-103, 158.

<sup>65</sup> “Country Music is Big Business and Nashville is Its Detroit,” *Newsweek*, August 11, 1952.

<sup>66</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 91-94. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 231-270. Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years, Volume III: From 1900-1984* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 428, 256.

<sup>67</sup> “The Gold Guitars,” *Newsweek*, April 4, 1966, 96-97.

While this musical transformation was underway, the songs of the 50s and early 60s were just as patriotic as the songs produced during World War II. Invoking anti-Communism (“No, No, Joe,” “Advice to Joe,” “I’m No Communist,” and “The Red We Want is the Red We’ve Got (In the Old Red, White, and Blue)”), pro-war attitudes (“Thank God for Victory in Korea,” “Douglas MacArthur,” “Old Soldiers Never Die,” and “Korea Here We Come”), and traditional Christian values (“Deck of Cards” “They Locked God Outside the Iron Curtain,” and “The Bible on the Table and the Flag upon the Wall”), these songs resounded with the voice of the nation, not the South. Perhaps most symbolic of the genre’s all-out Americanism was Tex Ritter’s release of “The Pledge of Allegiance/The Gettysburg Address” at the beginning of the post-war period, which spoke to the way the last tinges of Southern rebellion had been quelled in the genre.

Hillbilly music’s renunciation of Southern heritage and wholehearted embrace of Americana paved the way for its reframing as the more respectable country or country and western. Although the term hillbilly had in many ways been appropriated with a sort of self-effacing pride by earlier singers and fans, by the 40s, the word, with all its negative, Southern, and working class associations, no longer suited the needs of the rapidly-expanding industry. Musicians, songwriters, and record executives initiated an all-out campaign for the abandonment of the denigrating hillbilly label.<sup>68</sup> Although some of the rationale was certainly based in anger and wounded pride, as evidenced by Roy Acuff’s comment that “we’re not

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<sup>68</sup> Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 216. La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 126. Ronnie Pugh, “Country Music Is Here to Stay?,” *Journal of Country Music* 19, no. 1 (1997): 32-38.

ignorant and shouldn't be ridiculed" and Johnny Bond's reference to hillbilly as an "uncomplimentary putdown," the strongest reasoning was focused on public perception and consumption, not feelings. As Ernest Tubb explained, "a lot of people don't understand what hillbilly means; they think of somebody...out there in the hills, barefooted, with a long beard, and making moonshine...then they think of our music as inferior music."<sup>69</sup> Music publisher and songwriter Fred Rose agreed with this perspective in his 1946 letter to *Billboard* arguing that calling country music hillbilly was a dismissal of it as music at all, something which was commercially foolish given the "75 percent of all the people in the United States" to whom the genre appealed.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, Columbia Records' Art Satherly's dictum that all artists he worked with "from Autry on down the line" remember "we [don't] consider ourselves to be 'hillbillies'" and substitute other terms including "folk music," "mountain music," or "country music," especially when talking to reporters, demonstrates a keen sense of image's importance in the genre's commercial success.<sup>71</sup>

As Diane Pecknold suggests, "this wrangling over terminology" represented both a "battle for respect" and "the music industry's struggle to grasp the meaning and magnitude of country's potential popularity." Forced to pay attention to the genre they had so long maligned, the mainstream music industry's obvious confusion over country music's cultural transition is exemplified in the pages of *Billboard*. *Billboard's* first coverage of hillbilly music in 1941 relegated it to sharing a

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<sup>69</sup> Qtd. in Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 99-100.

<sup>70</sup> Fred Rose, *Billboard*, August 3, 1946, 123.

<sup>71</sup> Qtd. in Pugh, "Country Music Is Here to Stay?," 34-35.

column with foreign hits, tacitly undermining the music's American credentials. By 1942, *Billboard* was granting the genre greater respect as music popular across the nation and moving gradually away from the hillbilly moniker. The publication cycled through various names and groupings of musical styles including "Western and Race," "Western, Race, Polkas," "American Folk Records: Cowboy Songs, Hillbilly Tunes, Spirituals, Etc.," and "Folk Talent and Tunes." In 1944, in a move that symbolically marked the country as truly worthy of notice, *Billboard* incorporated popularity charts into their coverage of the genre, and by 1949, they boasted a whole "Country & Western" section, including retail sales and radio airplay charts.<sup>72</sup>

Although the transition was in no way smooth, with hillbilly stereotypes persisting into the 50s even among country artists and fans, hillbilly music had become country. Record labels almost universally adopted the label of country and pressured stores and radio stations to do the same.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, as *Country Music Life* put it, the term hillbilly had become "as obsolete in the country music field as the term 'flying machine' is to the aircraft industry."<sup>74</sup> The few who still used the phrase justified their choice within the context of historicity or tradition. For example, Tex Ritter utilized the term (reportedly after much debate) to pay homage to past icons in "I Dreamed of a Hillbilly Heaven."<sup>75</sup> Likewise, a 1962 *Broadside* article discussed hillbilly music as part of the evolution of folk with a sidenote clarifying that hillbilly

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<sup>72</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 58-59. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 191, 216.

<sup>73</sup> Rachel Rubin, "Sing Me Back Home: Nostalgia, Bakersfield, and Modern Country Music," in *American Popular Music: New Approaches to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Rachel Rubin & Jeffrey Paul Melnick (University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 104-109. Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 114-116. Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 100.

<sup>74</sup> *Country Music Life* qtd. in La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie*, 127.

<sup>75</sup> Johnny Bond, *Reflections: The Autobiography of Johnny Bond* (Los Angeles: John Edwards Memorial Foundation, 1976), 13-14.

was “not a pejorative term.”<sup>76</sup> By and large, however, the country music industry had successfully distanced itself from the label that tethered it inexorably to a poor, unsophisticated, Southern image. Publications devoted to the genre did not hesitate to reaffirm its newfound respectability, claiming that those who enjoyed country were “home-owning, tax-paying, Cadillac-driving, sartorially splendid citizens with the highest ideals and morals,” that “country music lovers” made up “the MAJORITY” of U.S. citizens, and that the music was integral to “the American way of life.”<sup>77</sup> Country had placed itself firmly in middle America.

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<sup>76</sup> Walter Camp, “Folking in Los Angeles,” *Broadside* 1, no. 3 (May 1962): 3.

<sup>77</sup> “An Open Letter to the U.S. Congress,” *Pickin’ and Singin’ News*, February 26, 1954, 2.

## Segregationist Country Music

The first signs of trouble with country's new position as American music emerged in the early to mid-60s outside the major record labels in underground segregationist music. Arising from the proliferation of independent regional record companies that had sprung up during and immediately after the war, this music represented white Southern backlash to the Civil Rights Movement among other political developments deemed detrimental to the Southern lifestyle.<sup>78</sup> The liner notes of the most prominent segregationist label Reb Rebel's album *For Segregationists Only* spell out their political views as follows:

These selections express the feeling, anxiety, confusion and problems during the political transformation of our way of life...Transformations that have changed peace and tranquility to riots and demonstrations which have produced mass destruction, confusion, bloodshed, and even loss of life; transformations that have changed incentive for self-improvement to much dependency on numerous federal 'Give Away' programs, under the guise of building a 'Great Society'. For those who take a conservative position on integration, this 'Great Society' program, the controversial war in Viet Nam and the numerous so-called 'Civil Rights' organizations, this record is a must!

While the South is not mentioned explicitly in these notes, the name Reb Rebel and the Confederate flags that served as a logo for the label made it clear that "our way of life" meant a Southern way of life, something that held true for all the

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<sup>78</sup> Nick Pittman, "Johnny Rebel Speaks," *Gambit Weekly*, June 10, 2003, <http://www.bestofneworleans.com/gambit/johnny-rebel-speaks/Content?oid=1241588>.

underground country labels responsible for the segregationist sound.<sup>79</sup> It is possible that in light of segregationist politician George Wallace's increasingly national focus, segregationist music too had national goals.<sup>80</sup> This could explain not mentioning the South in promotional materials but utilizing racial symbolism through the display of the Confederate flag.

This is borne out in the music itself, which consistently promotes Southern pride as the natural corollary to racist and conservative messages. While some songs like Hatennanny Records' "Ship Those Niggers Back" ("America for whites, Africa for blacks") and "We Is Nonviolent Niggers" by Odis Cochran & the Three Bigots focus almost solely on race and others like "Robert E. Lee," "The South's Gonna Rise Again," "Here I Follow Johnny Reb," and "The Long Grey Line" only on themes of Southern pride, the majority combine the two in no holds barred attacks on Civil Rights politics. The song "Segregation Wagon" by Colonel Sharecropper on Reb-Time Records expresses some of the most overtly pro-Southern, Confederate-sympathizing lyrics inviting "all sons of freedom" to join a "Southern band" and "rally round the stars and bars" to protect the "Southern way of life." The song also links segregation explicitly with the Confederacy—"Segregation is our watchword/States rights we demand."—and invokes other traditional Southern tropes such as "carpetbaggers" and "the quiet life." At the same time, however, the song insists that the "segregation wagon" was not a wholly Southern concept, for "conservatives across the land" will join in the movement, perhaps representing an

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<sup>79</sup> Liner notes to *For Segregationists' Only*, Reb Rebel Records 1000, 1971, qtd. in "Label History: The Story about Jay Miller and his Reb Rebel label," *Reb Rebel*, last modified 2001, <http://www.aryan88.com/whiterider/reb rebel/homepage.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Cobb, "From Muskogee to Luckenbach," 82-83.



evocation of Wallace's national plans.<sup>81</sup> Still, with its complementary A-side "Move Them Niggers North," this record propagated unabashed regional and racial pride.<sup>82</sup> Similarly Johnny Rebel's "Stay Away from Dixie" suggests that if the "jigaboos" and the NAACP did not leave "Dixieland" alone, the region would rise up again and win by virtue of a somewhat confusing alliance with "Yankee-land."<sup>83</sup> Other Johnny Rebel songs including "Who Likes a Nigger," "Kajun Klu Klux Klan," "Nigger Nigger," and "Nigger Hatin' Me" blame the North and the federal government for supporting uppity blacks through welfare and tolerating the actions of agitators and painted Southern whites as long-suffering guardians of racial purity. Big-K Records and The White Riders, obviously more associated with the Klan than the others in this canon, pair the quintessential KKK song "Stand Up and Be Counted" with a recording of "Dixie."<sup>84</sup> A violent racist and Southern tone pervaded these recordings so much so that one of the least militant, Conservative Records' release of "Old Uncle Joe" by The Dixie Greys, seems positively soothing in its softer form of racism and Southernness that calls to mind (and in fact uses snippets of) the plantation songs of Stephen Foster to reinforce its 'Uncle Tom' message of black love and respect for their white superiors and hatred of Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>85</sup>

While it remains unclear exactly how and to what extent this music circulated, the voices of segregationist country singers were not ignored. Bill Malone asserts that a musical underground developed to distribute such records "covertly

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<sup>81</sup> Cobb, "From Muskogee to Luckenbach," 82-83.

<sup>82</sup> "Move Them Niggers North/Segregation Wagon," Reb-Time Records 1861, Colonel Sharecropper.

<sup>83</sup> "Stay Away From Dixie," Reb Rebel Records 518, Johnny Rebel.

<sup>84</sup> "Stand Up and Be Counted/Dixie," Big-K Records 1915, The White Riders.

<sup>85</sup> "Old Uncle Joe," Conservative Records 139, The Dixie Greys.

through mail-order or ‘under the counter’ purchases.”<sup>86</sup> Likewise, journalist Nick Pittman quotes Floyd Soileau, a contemporary and competitor of Reb Rebel founder J.D. Miller, to prove that radio stations rarely played such music and that most sales came from an “underground trade” involving “certain juke joints” that played the music and bought copies to resell. Soileau also makes sure to distance the popularity of such records from Reb Rebel’s home region of southwest Louisiana where “people didn’t want them that much” in contrast to other states where “they sold pretty well.”<sup>87</sup> Reb Rebel’s website contradicts this, claiming their music enjoyed airtime on radio stations throughout the state, including black radio stations. While it is plausible that Reb Rebel’s music was broadcast across Louisiana, it seems unlikely that black radio stations would play their music; the inclusion of these stations probably represents an attempt to retroactively excuse the hatred and racism of Reb Rebel’s albums.<sup>88</sup>

Either way, the influence of this music extended beyond the prejudiced few. That Reb Rebel’s initial releases were more moderate and satirical gained the label many fans. Leroy “Happy Fats” LeBlanc’s “Dear Mr. President” sets up a less hostile and more amusing presentation of racism. Playing a confused farmer addressing Lyndon Johnson, Happy Fats asks patently absurd questions such as “I’d like to know if I’ll be permitted to plant white and black peas in separate rows of equal length or will I have to mix them together?” and “My white coon dog won’t hunt with my black bird dog. Could I get an injunction to make them hunt together?...Do you

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<sup>86</sup> Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’*, 236.

<sup>87</sup> Qtd. in Pittman, “Johnny Rebel Speaks.”

<sup>88</sup> “Label History,” *Reb Rebel*.

suppose the judge could use legal persuasion on them or will you send troops to make them hunt together?.”<sup>89</sup> Poking fun at the Civil Rights Movement paid off; according to Reb Rebel, the song sold somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 copies.<sup>90</sup> Another early release, “Flight NAACP 105,” a highly racist version of an Amos n’ Andy skit, also uses comedy and became an even bigger hit than “Dear Mr. President.”<sup>91</sup> With little or poor documentation of segregationist sales, it is difficult to assess their reach, but what statistics remain give a sense of fairly widespread appeal in a white South unready to integrate. The fact that this music attracted attention from several national news sources further illustrates its importance as a cultural phenomenon.<sup>92</sup>

Personal accounts from record collectors and fans of the genre also point to a broader listening public than one would expect. According to one collector, who began his interest in the 60s:

People all over the place liked and agreed with the music...it was just fun...and had solutions for the problems we were facing. The trouble with the numbers is that they wouldn’t admit they liked it because it seemed low-class or they were trying to impress someone or they listened to the records at the bar or with their friends but never bought them.<sup>93</sup>

This statement touches on one of the biggest difficulties in assessing the underground records’ reach: any of the statistics gathered (of which there are few)

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<sup>89</sup> “Dear Mr. President,” Reb Rebel 501, Happy Fats.

<sup>90</sup> “Label History,” *Reb Rebel*.

<sup>91</sup> “Flight NAACP 105,” Reb Rebel 500, Son of Mississippi. “Label History,” *Reb Rebel*.

<sup>92</sup> Neil Maxwell, “The Bigotry Business: Racist Records, Books Are Hits in the South,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 1967. “Crowley Today,” *Blues Unlimited* 47 (October 1967): 4-7.

<sup>93</sup> Anonymous Record Collector, Personal Interview, December 2013.

rely on the number of records bought, not necessarily the number of records enjoyed. Another record collector, who goes by the screen name LouisianaRebel1861, suggests that “given the type of people” that the segregationist music attracted, many would have been “unable to afford the luxury of buying records themselves.” The collector goes on to say that this question of demographics is “why the underground stations were smart to produce only limited numbers of records and target a circuit of radio stations, bars, and some stores that would promote and play their music.”<sup>94</sup>

The two collectors seem to contradict each other; one argues that the audience for segregationist country was largely too poor to buy records, and the other claims that the audience included a wider spectrum of people who could buy the records but chose not to because of concerns over their reputation or status. In all likelihood, given the types of working-class venues utilized by companies like Reb Rebel to spread their message as well as the simple ‘down-to-earth’ motifs of the music itself, the target audience, at least initially, was primarily poor Southern whites. However, the concerns expressed in the underground country records were not concerns unique to a Southern underclass, and it is not surprising that middle or even upper-class white Southerners, once exposed to the genre, latched onto and even sought such music as an expression of their frustrations as well. The records’ associations with a poor and disreputable (i.e. “the juke joint crowd”) segment of the population prevented these fans from publicly affirming their interest in them but facilitated circulation through informal networks (i.e. “borrowing or listening

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<sup>94</sup> Anonymous Record Collector, LouisianaRebel1861, Personal Interview, October 2013.

together at a friend's house"). Indeed, a former distributor for Reb-Time and Big-K Records recalls, "once they found out about this kind of music, they had to have it, but they wouldn't admit it." In his work, this distributor interacted with "numerous secret groups of friends or families that would share the records...and have political discussions together." In his opinion, these types of networks were always founded the same way: "one of them went to a bar or a general store and heard our songs and loved it and wanted to share it, but he didn't want to be associated with that crowd."<sup>95</sup> Essentially segregationist salons, these gatherings allowed an upward and outward percolation of the idea of Southern identity espoused by Reb Rebel and its counterparts.

While segregationist country is typically dismissed from larger studies of the genre—few scholars include it and then only in passing—its importance in understanding country as a whole cannot be overlooked. Although segregationist labels were outside the purview of the mainstream Nashville-based country industry, many of the individuals involved were not. J.D. Miller, founder of Reb Rebel, for example, signed with influential Nashville music publishers Acuff-Rose after Kitty Wells made his song "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" a hit and achieved moderate success as a country writer and producer until he moved away from the field in favor of blues, "swamp-pop," R & B, and Cajun sounds.<sup>96</sup> He was also connected to the famous "singing governor" Jimmie Davis, serving as his campaign manager in Acadia Parish, a position which likely gave him unique insight

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<sup>95</sup> Anonymous Distributor for Reb-Time & Big-K Records, Personal Interview, November 2013.

<sup>96</sup> Shane Bernard, "J.D. Miller and Floyd Soileau: A Comparison of Two Small Town Recordmen of Acadiana," *Louisiana Folklife Journal* (December 1991).

into the intersection of country music and Southern politics. In addition to his own involvement in Jimmie Davis' campaigning, Leroy "Happy Fats" LeBlanc possessed strong ties to Nashville as well, having recorded on major country labels RCA Victor and Decca, worked with country greats Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb, and made appearances on both *The Grand Ole Opry* and its competitor *Louisiana Hayride*.<sup>97</sup> *Reb Rebel* and other labels like it further claim that some of their performers were well-known country stars performing anonymously to avoid controversy; the extensive use of pseudonyms makes this impossible to prove or disprove.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, the segregationist form of country was not as removed from the mainstream as it would appear.

Stylistically these records were also connected to the mainstream, and as such, they presented a model of sorts for the mainstream country music that would later incorporate similar, if less aggressive, messaging. Many songs appear to intentionally mimic the styles of artists popular in mainstream country at the time. The most obvious comparison is between Johnny Rebel and Johnny Horton. Particularly in songs that rely heavily on elements of the Southern past as a structure or are meant to be inspirational, Johnny Rebel adopted a sound remarkably similar to that of the Horton's saga songs. This similarity is so pronounced at times that some, including collectors of the records, still insist that Horton, not Clifford Joseph Trahan, is the man behind Johnny Rebel. While this is unlikely, Horton's time in Louisiana and his recording of "Johnny Reb" fuel the

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<sup>97</sup> "Label History," *Reb Rebel*. Ryan Andre Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown: The Emergence of an American-Made Music* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 150, 201-203.

<sup>98</sup> "Label History," *Reb Rebel*.

rumor.<sup>99</sup> The underground records also employ conventions of mainstream country such as the use of marches and snippets of patriotic songs, providing an intangible connection between Southern heritage and Americanness that foreshadows the way mainstream country hits would later explicitly link the two. The anti-elitist sentiments that pervaded the segregationist albums further aligned with attitudes characteristic of the coming wave of explicitly Southern mainstream country.

Similarly, the absence of female voices from these records laid the groundwork for the way in which women were marginalized in mainstream country's discourse of Southern identity. A fan of these records asserts that "no one wanted to listen to a girl singing about the Confederacy...that was man's territory."<sup>100</sup> Another collector agrees, suggesting that the underground records also served as an unstated backlash against increasing female empowerment, "reminding Southern men how important it was for them to be *men*" [italics mine]. Implicit in many songs of the segregationist canon is a sense of defense of a Southern homeland and thus Southern womanhood. Female acts, then, had no place in this narrative; in fact, part of the narrative's importance hinged upon them being excluded.<sup>101</sup> While some fans and collectors defend this as not that different from mainstream country, segregationist country went further in that it was completely male. Representing country's first overt political expression of Southern identity, these records offer some insight into why women were largely uninvolved in the construction of mainstream country's version of Dixie that followed. That the fans of

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<sup>99</sup> Anonymous Record Collector, Personal Interview, October 2013. Anonymous Record Collector, Personal Interview, December 2013.

<sup>100</sup> Anonymous Record Collector, Personal Interview, December 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Anonymous Record Collector, Personal Interview, October 2013.

the music were mainly men also emphasizes the way in which this notion of Southernness was contingent in many ways on notions of masculinity, which goes a long way to explaining the later emergence of male-centric rebel imagery in mainstream country.<sup>102</sup>

Building off feelings of poor white Southern male disenfranchisement and marginalization, this music both was part of and facilitated a grassroots upswell of popular sentiment that linked Southern pride to an aggressive ideology of superiority (over blacks, Northerners, women, liberals etc.). Its popularity thus provides a way of understanding the motivations and justifications of the country establishment's turn Southward. For example, the label history section of Reb Rebel's website tells the story of encountering some black families on the road, who recognized J.D. Miller, told him how much they loved his work, and bought copies. On the basis of this factually questionable episode, the section goes on to claim this as proof of many black fans and therefore the lack of racist content in their music.<sup>103</sup> While this justification may seem patently absurd when listening to "Nigger Hatin' Me" or "Kajun Klu Klux Klan," it is often deployed to defend mainstream country's less obviously hostile and offensive Southernness. Joe Johnson, who worked with Little Jimmy Dickens, Marty Robbins, Ray Price, Patsy Cline, and Gene Autry among others, echoed Reb Rebel's rationalizations when he stated that "country being southern isn't about race...black people enjoyed country music...they were even part

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<sup>102</sup> Anonymous Record Collector, LouisianaRebel1861, Personal Interview, October 2013. Anonymous Distributor for Reb-Time & Big-K Records, Personal Interview, November 2013.

<sup>103</sup> "Label History," *Reb Rebel*.



of it. Have you ever heard of Charley Pride or Stoney Edwards?"<sup>104</sup> Rick Sanjek, former head of Atlantic's Nashville branch, performs a similar leap of logic when he uses Willie Nelson's public embrace of Charley Pride and his friendship with Ray Charles to prove that the 'outlaws' were not racist.<sup>105</sup>

Segregationist record collectors also speak of their sense of turmoil and confusion during the change of the 60s and 70s and how the segregationist hits were really just a way of expressing a desire to return to a better past. According to this rationale, the songs' racial and political connotations (however explicitly expressed) were incidental components of the greater goal of navigating the chaos of the era.<sup>106</sup> This focus on heritage and the 'naturalness' of Southern themes in country music characterizes much of mainstream country's defense of their stereotyped South and the disavowal of that South's political connotations. Sanjek, for example, points to a Southern "cultural heritage" in country music, defined by its "limited...rural, uneducated background." According to him this heritage always resonates with symbols of region" and "overtones of racism" and makes country "culturally prejudiced without realizing it."<sup>107</sup> Jim Bessman, a reporter for *Billboard*, elaborates:

"The Confederate flag has always been part of Southern culture...artists didn't understand the implications of the flag to African-Americans...but just

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<sup>104</sup> Joe Johnson, Personal Interview, September 2013.

<sup>105</sup> Rick Sanjek, Personal Interview, July 2013.

<sup>106</sup> Anonymous Record Collector, Personal Interview, October 2013. Anonymous Record Collector, Personal Interview, December 2013.

<sup>107</sup> Rick Sanjek, Personal Interview, July 2013.

saw it as a way of talking about pride, politics, and the South...it wasn't meant to offend or be hateful...if they were educated, they would stop.<sup>108</sup>

Like Reb Rebel's rhetoric, these explanations strive to distance Southernness from racial hostility and to link it to the past in a way that makes Southern pride the default for country music. If this overlap in justification is combined with stylistic similarities, crossover of individuals, and related approaches to gender politics, the gap between extreme segregationist labels and the mainstream Southernized country to come becomes much smaller than one might expect.

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<sup>108</sup> Jim Bessman, Personal Interview, July 2013.

## Constructing the South as America

In fact, a renewed sense of Southern heritage and interest in the Confederacy first began around the same time as the segregationist hits, likely sparked by the same white backlash to Civil Rights advances that produced these more extreme records. The beginnings of this shift were fairly mild. Country music artists began to again record Civil War favorites including “Just Before the Battle Mother,” “My Pretty Quadroon,” and “Darling Nellie Grey.” At the same time, songs like “Johnny Reb” and “The Ballad of the Blue and Grey” surfaced and achieved remarkable popularity. However, none of these songs truly glorified the Confederacy or the antebellum South. While they embraced the Civil War as a thematic framework, the country singers recording such songs in the early to mid-60s seemed much more focused on the destructive power of the war. “The Ballad of the Blue and Grey” tells the story of brother fighting brother, calling the war “a war that both sides had to lose, no matter which side won.”<sup>109</sup> While “Johnny Reb” is more pro-Confederate in the way it honors fallen soldiers and their bravery (and has been adopted in recent years by white power and neo-Confederate groups), it too advocates a poignant sense of reconciliation and mutual respect in its account of “honest Abe” playing Dixie at the end of the war to heal the nation.<sup>110</sup>

Several factors played into country’s renewed interest in the war. For one, these initial songs seem to have functioned on a symbolic level. In a country ever more deeply split over the war in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement, songs

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<sup>109</sup> Harlan Howard, “Ballad of the Blue and Grey,” Columbia 4-41455, Lefty Frizzell, 1959.

<sup>110</sup> Merle Kilgore, “Johnny Reb,” Columbia 4-41437, Johnny Horton, 1959.

about the Civil War were truly topical. The visceral and emotional way in which these conflicts wracked the nation, creating divisions within communities and families, found its natural musical accompaniment in songs about the last time the nation split in two. The tragedy in these musical accounts of the Civil War offers a critique of dissension that avoids vilification but still upholds the ideal of a united American people. A more simplistic, but probably equally important explanation is the arrival of the war's centennial, which generated a spate of Civil War themed concept albums by country artists like Jimmie Driftwood, Don Reno, Red Smiley, and Tennessee Ernie Ford. Johnny Horton even used the centennial as a publicity stunt for his release of "Johnny Reb," singing the song to a 116-year-old former Confederate General.<sup>111</sup> Still, these initial recordings can hardly be characterized as a wave of Southern pride, and the role of Civil War songs in the country industry remained marginal.

As the 60s progressed, a number of trends coalesced to pave the way for the reemergence of mythical Southernness as a dominant feature of country music. During the Vietnam War, the patriotism that had characterized country music since World War II remained strong. Unlike World War II, the Cold War, and the Korean War country songs, songs about the Vietnam War tended to avoid talking about the war itself, perhaps because of its fundamentally contested identity. Instead of taking the complicated and messy route of "defending American policy in Southeast Asia," these songs chose the easier and more familiar task of representing 'traditional' values like "service to one's country, deference to authority, unquestioning

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<sup>111</sup> Smith & Akenson, "The Civil War in Country Music Tradition," 7-8.

patriotism, or, better yet, loyalty to a policy even if one questions it.”<sup>112</sup> With the rise of the New Left and increasing protest over the war, country music, as the self-determined voice of middle America, did not so much align itself with the war as against the new, radical elements of American society. Songs such as “Day for Decision,” “What We’re Fighting For,” “The Minute Men (Are Turning in Their Graves),” “The Battle Hymn of Lt. William Calley,” “Fightin’ Side of Me,” “It’s America (Love It or Leave It),” “Ballad of Two Brothers,” “Vietnam Blues,” “Must We Fight Two Wars,” “Where Have All Our Heroes Gone?,” “The Marching Hippies,” and the majority of Harlan Howard’s patriotic, anti-protester concept album *To the Silent Majority With Love* exemplify this theme, discussing not the Vietnam war per se, but the decline in American values represented by the countercultural activism of the period.

While a diverse group of country singers including Bobby Bare, Johnny Cash, Jan Howard, Wanda Jackson, Kris Kristofferson, Loretta Lynn, Billy Joe Shaver, and the Wilburn Brothers expressed the sadness, cruelty, and seeming futility of the war, or any war, that was as far as they went. Indeed, the moments of ambivalence—outright criticism of the war in country music was essentially absent—and the moments of patriotism seem borne from the same impulse. Both project the desire to preserve a proud American heritage based on self-reliance, family, democracy, and Christian morals—in other words God, kin, and country. For example, Bobby Bare and Billy Joe Shaver’s “Christian Soldier,” renamed “Good Christian Soldier”

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<sup>112</sup> Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’*, 240.

when Kris Kristofferson covered it, questions war in general terms because of how hard it is to reconcile Christianity with fighting:

He just prays to make it through another day.  
 'Cause Lord it's hard to be a Christian soldier when you tote a gun  
 It hurts to have to watch a grown man cry  
 But we're playin' cards and writin' home and havin' lots of fun  
 Telling jokes and learning how to die.  
 Things I'm seeing now seem so confusin'  
 Lord it's gettin' hard to tell what's wrong from right  
 I can't separate the winners from the losers anymore  
 So I'm thinking bout just giving up the fight.<sup>113</sup>

A similar rueful attitude manifests itself in “Little Johnny from Down the Street,” in which the demise of an idealized small-town youth can be understood as a loss of innocent small-town values.<sup>114</sup> Not necessarily pro-war, but emphatically pro-soldier and pro-America, this attitude was famously summed up by Johnny Cash, hardly an aggressive warmonger, when he evoked powerful overtones of American masculinity: “If you’re not going to support the president, get out of my way, so I can stand behind him.”<sup>115</sup>

This ideology laid the basis for the emergence of the South as a national ideal. The implicit critiques of modern America embedded in country music’s condemnation of war protesters and counterculture created a need for an

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<sup>113</sup> Bobby Bare & Billy Joe Shaver, “Christian Soldier,” *I Need Some Good News Bad*, Mercury SR 61342, Bobby Bare, 1971. Bobby Bare & Billy Joe Shaver, “Good Christian Soldier,” *The Silver Tongued Devil and I*, Monument ZQ 30679, Kris Kristofferson, 1971.

<sup>114</sup> Doyle Wilburn & Teddy Wilburn, “Little Johnny From Down the Street,” *Little Johnny From Down the Street*, Decca CL 75173, The Wilburn Brothers, 1970.

<sup>115</sup> Qtd. in Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’*, 241.

alternative. The stereotypical South, once lambasted for its backwardness, offered the perfect image to counteract the turmoil of America during the Vietnam War. By reappropriating the South, country music brought it in to the genre's patriotic thought and made it a representation of all the things missing from 1960s America. Using the idealized South in this way offered a chance of redemption, a way for the entire nation to reclaim its Americanness through Southernness. Marty Robbins' "Ain't I Right" embodies this theme, placing a "southern town" in direct opposition to "a bearded bathless bunch," "two-faced politicians," and "tramps that march out in our streets" in an effort to ensure that "Communistic boots will never trod/Across the fields of freedom that were given to us/With the blessings of our great almighty God."<sup>116</sup> Harlan Howard took a more unusual tack in "A Little More Time," lamenting the passing of an unlikely trinity of JFK, Jesus, and Stephen Foster; by linking Foster, the most famous of the songwriters elevating the South in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the other two, Howard weaves Southern nostalgia into his patriotic, Christian, and tradition-based worldview.<sup>117</sup> Country's refashioning of Southern stereotypes as positive is also evident in the Nashville establishment's acceptance of the hillbilly humor found on the nationally popular show *Hee Haw*.<sup>118</sup>

This idea of the South as a better version of America is at its most potent in Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee," often viewed as the ultimate expression of country's jingoistic and narrow-minded tendencies, which elevated rural Muskogee as a haven of American values (unpolluted by drugs or radicals, free of racial strife,

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<sup>116</sup> Marty Robbins, "Ain't I Right," Sims Records 296, Johnny Freedom, 1966.

<sup>117</sup> Harlan Howard, "A Little More Time," *To The Silent Majority With Love*, Nugget Records NR LP-105, 1971.

<sup>118</sup> "Episode Guide," *tv.com*, <http://www.tv.com/shows/hee-haw/episodes/>.

and chockfull of patriotic ideas). Haggard has long maintained that the song was a joke or at least originated as one, written off the cuff in a moment of banter on tour. The opening line “We don’t smoke marijuana in Muskogee” supports this, as Haggard was known to be enmeshed in 70s drug culture. The phrases “pitching woo” and “manly footwear” along with Haggard’s “uncharacteristically flat reading” further the notion that the song was a dry, satirical parody of “patriotic provincialism” and small-town morals.<sup>119</sup> Yet Haggard’s disclaimers are muddied by some of his other statements; for example, he stated that “Okie from Muskogee” was “documentation of the uneducated that lived in America and that time, and I mirror that. I always have. Staying in touch with the working class...”<sup>120</sup> Undeniably, Haggard’s audience did not interpret “Okie from Muskogee” as a joke; the song’s incredible success “freed [Haggard] forever from mere country stardom while also chaining him tightly” to the Southern cultural conservatism he was ostensibly mocking.<sup>121</sup> Haggard has since gone on the record saying he regrets the song’s release, especially as a single and especially followed by “The Fightin’ Side of Me,” which was lumped in with “Okie from Muskogee” as representative of “angry, proud conservatives.” Following the release of these songs, segregationist George Wallace asked Haggard for an endorsement. Though Haggard rejected his offer, that

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<sup>119</sup> Merle Haggard, “Okie from Muskogee,” Capitol 2626, 1969. David Cantwell, *Merle Haggard: The Running Kind* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013).

<sup>120</sup> Qtd. in Fox, “White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime,” 51.

<sup>121</sup> Cantwell, *Merle Haggard*.



overtures were made at all testifies to the fact that the conservatism of both songs was implicitly *Southern* conservatism.<sup>122</sup>

Presenting the South as more American than America troubled the regional dichotomy that had long plagued country music. Surrendering one's Southern roots was no longer necessary to be recognized nationally or to indicate national pride; in fact, Southern pride and American pride now seemed capable of existing side by side. Arguably, this approach only gained strength after the war's conclusion, as the United States collectively engaged in a struggle for meaning. Country music, and the South it began to espouse, had fought for high moral and patriotic concepts throughout the war, and their refusal to relinquish these in its aftermath provided a soothing counterpoint to what James Cobb refers to as "the self-flagellation that had become almost a national pastime as the United States backed out of Southeast Asia."<sup>123</sup>

At the same time, the negative racial associations that had long been used to malign the South were largely disappearing. The Civil Rights Movement was moving out of the South, riots were happening in Northern ghettos, and black activists were challenging white hegemony in new and uncomfortable ways. Northern whites could no longer treat racism as a problem endemic to and indicative of Southern backwardness. The increasing national popularity of segregationist politician

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<sup>122</sup> Chris Parker, "Merle Haggard outlasts and outshines all those shiny Nash-Vegas pretty boys," *Charleston City Paper*, February 5, 2014, <http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/merle-haggard-outlasts-and-outshines-all-those-shiny-nash-vegas-pretty-boys/Content?oid=4857425>. Chris Heath, "The Last Outlaw," *GQ*, November 2005, <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/music/200511/merle-haggard-profile-chris-heath>.

<sup>123</sup> Cobb, "From Muskogee to Luckenbach," 83.

George Wallace in the 60s and 70s highlights the way Southern identity had become a nostalgic touchstone of whiteness. Key to Wallace's campaigning was his evocation of a Southern 'good old boy' image, bolstered through his use of country acts.<sup>124</sup> This link is not as intangible as it might at first seem; when an unnamed worker in Detroit said, "We're all hillbillies. What Wallace says goes," he spoke for many Americans, who found in the Southern stereotypes they had so long reviled an affirmation of their racial beliefs.<sup>125</sup>

Mainstream country's studious avoidance of explicit discussion of racial issues (minus a few oblique recordings like "Irma Jackson" and "Skip a Rope") and the widespread popularity of a select few black artists (most notably Charley Pride) actually strengthened its appeal in this regard by playing into white feelings that they were not bigoted but just wanted things the way they used to be. The way country's assertions of Southernness disguised and justified prejudice as nostalgia helped uphold one of the central myths of white backlash to the Civil Rights Movement, that everyone knew their place and was happy with it before the involvement of outside agitators and that the restoration of traditional hierarchies would benefit all. "Resoundingly white without being expressly anti-black," country's expressions of Southern pride offered a kind of "white escapism" to those across the United States.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Cobb, "From Muskogee to Luckenbach," 82. Malone, *Don't Get above Your Raisin'*, 238-239.

<sup>125</sup> Qtd. in Joseph Kraft, "Michigan Apathy," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 20, 1972.

<sup>126</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 225-226.

Country music and its refashioned Southern identity, then, became a convenient political statement. After George Wallace, this was first taken advantage of by Nixon as a key component of his 'Southern strategy.' This brand of cultural populism, which took advantage of the liberal bent of many of country music's strongest detractors, is evidenced by Nixon's invitation of Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash to the White House and his designation of October as Country Music Month. In his mobilization of country music, Nixon overlooked the fairly diverse political views of country artists and emphasized the traditional, patriotic, down-to-earth, and thus, Southern ideals the music depicted.<sup>127</sup> Nixon strategist Kevin Phillips summed this process up when he wrote about how country music spoke to "the forgotten Americans...who drive the trucks, plow the farms, man the factories, and police the streets" and provided a way to "use the emotional issues of culture and race" to polarize without alienating.<sup>128</sup> When he became the first President to appear on *The Grand Ole Opry*, Nixon elaborated further:

What country music is, is that first it comes from the heart of America, because this is the heart of America, out here in Middle America. Second, it relates to those experiences that mean so much to America. It talks about family, it talks about religion, the faith in God that is so important to our country and particularly to our family life. And as we all know, country music radiates a love of this Nation, patriotism.<sup>129</sup>

As is apparent in this quote, the Southern values of country music became an easy way for politicians, particularly on the right, to make a statement of their beliefs and

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<sup>127</sup> Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 219-226. Malone, *Don't Get above Your Raisin'*, 243.

<sup>128</sup> Kevin Phillips, "Revolutionary Music," *Washington Post*, May 6, 1971.

<sup>129</sup> Richard Nixon, "Remarks at the Grand Ole Opry House, Nashville, Tennessee," March 16, 1974. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4389>.

attract support without actually saying much at all. Coding their political stances through country was a conscious and meaningful choice on the part of these politicians, who sought to benefit from country's Southern traditionalism and patriotism. Conservatives' wholehearted embrace of Southernness as an emblem of Americanness marked a turning point in country music; Southern identity was no longer something to divest but something to celebrate.

### **The Resurgence of Rebel Pride**

Though “law-and-order authoritarianism” was essential to the reintroducing Southern motifs into country music, these themes were taken to their most extreme heights by “the image of ‘outlaw’ authenticity,” which stood in “fundamental opposition” to staid Southern values.<sup>130</sup> The two musical movements in country music that were particularly responsible for making increasingly radical assertions of Southernness palatable to the mainstream were both breakaway movements, trying to differentiate themselves from the uniformity of sound and message coming out of the country music establishment. Country ‘outlaws’ and southern rockers took the more traditional Southern pride evident in the recordings of the 60s and early 70s and transformed it into a rebellious statement.

Although the ‘outlaw’ movement is to some degree a nebulous concept, many view Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings’s successful fight for creative control, upsetting the record companies’ and particularly Chet Atkins’s dominance over country music production, as the beginning. While other individuals including Johnny Cash, Jack Clement, Bobby Bare, and Mickey Newbury laid groundwork for and in some cases, became incorporated into, the ‘outlaws,’ the movement did not fully solidify until this moment. Ironically, this was due in part to support from music executives also eager to escape the stranglehold of the country music industry’s elite and keenly aware of the marketability of an ‘outlaw’ narrative. Being an ‘outlaw,’ then, became as much about promotion as about bucking the Nashville

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<sup>130</sup> Aaron A. Fox, “White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime: Country as ‘Bad’ Music,” in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, ed. Christopher J. Washburne & Maiken Derno (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 51.

establishment. Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Kris Kristofferson, and other 'outlaws' moved away from their traditional country origins and towards a rebel image. Shedding suits for long hair, leather jackets, and a scruffier look, these artists integrated sounds from folk, rock, blues, and honky tonk into their repertoires, simultaneously hearkening back to the music of Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell, and George Jones (pre-Nashville Sound) and incorporating new elements.<sup>131</sup> Their roughening and complicating of standard country formulas, then, was justified through a sense of tradition, like the music that preceded it. However, in order to fit the 'outlaw' mold, these artists had to reject the tradition-oriented Southernness of their immediate predecessors and contemporaries, dismissing conventional country sounds and messages as corrupted through corporate control. This is exemplified by Waylon Jennings's album *Honky Tonk Heroes* and his song "Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way?"; both elevate the style and ethos of 'real' country and call for a move away from 'inauthentic' country characterized by "rhinestone suits and shiny cars."<sup>132</sup> Constructing a narrative of a coup to redefine country, the 'outlaws' called upon a different kind of Southern nostalgia than that embodied in "Okie from Muskogee" and ended up in the Confederate South.

Confederate references and symbolism offered an obvious way for 'outlaw' performers to build up their rebel reputations while not taking them too far away from the Southern pride that was proving so lucrative to their more mainstream

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<sup>131</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville* (HarperCollins, 2013), 2-4.

<sup>132</sup> Waylon Jennings, "Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way?/Bob Wills is Still the King," RCA Victor PB-10379, 1975.

peers. Willie Nelson frequently wore a Confederate cap during performances.<sup>133</sup> Alongside various Confederate war anthems, Waylon Jennings recorded “The Ghost of General Lee” and was involved with the Civil War concept album *White Mansions*, both of which presented a superficial balance but a true Southern bias. Johnny Cash also recorded Confederate songs old and new including “God Bless Robert E. Lee” and “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down.” Sometime ‘outlaw’ Merle Haggard did not mention the Confederacy when he released the aggressive song “I’m a White Boy.” In terms of racial implications, the song, in which Haggard explains how he “ain’t black” or “yella” because his “daddy’s name wasn’t Willie Woodrow” and he “wasn’t born and raised in no ghetto,” was more overt but meshed with other ‘outlaw’ hits. The song lyrically affirmed the ‘outlaw’ lifestyle as well through its sense of independence (“don’t want no handout livin,’” “just lookin’ for a place to do my thang”) and endorsement of an unstable, pleasure-seeking day-to-day (“good time fella,” “ramblin’ man,” “out to find me a wealthy woman”).<sup>134</sup>

The renewal of Confederate themes in ‘outlaw’ country, however, is most abrasive in the personas cultivated by Hank Williams, Jr. and David Allan Coe. William’s publicity materials often featured the Confederate flag prominently.<sup>135</sup> This even went so far as the distribution of Williams-themed Confederate flag boxer shorts at Nashville’s annual Fan Fair.<sup>136</sup> The music matched the promotion as he

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<sup>133</sup> Cecil Kirk Hutson, “More Smoke Than Fire,” *America Under Construction: Boundaries and Identities in American Popular Culture*, ed. Kristi S. Long & Matthew Nadelhaft (Routledge, 1997), 99.

<sup>134</sup> Merle Haggard, “I’m a White Boy,” *A Working Man Can’t Get Nowhere Today*, Capitol Records ST-11693, 1977.

<sup>135</sup> Hutson, “More Smoke Than Fire,” 99.

<sup>136</sup> Jim Bessman, Personal Interview, July 2013.

recorded “The South’s Gonna Rattle Again,” “If Heaven Ain’t A Lot Like Dixie,” and “If the South Woulda Won.” The last is especially overt in its politics, playing “Dixie” in the background and claiming that “we woulda had it made” if the Confederacy had been victorious. With a restored capital in Alabama, this mythical Southern government would create national holidays for Patsy Cline, Elvis Presley, Hank Williams, Sr. and other Southern icons, notably all white.<sup>137</sup> David Allan Coe also used Confederate imagery extensively, often in his clothing or sets.<sup>138</sup> In “I Still Sing the Old Songs,” Coe’s narrator boasted that he had “never crossed the Mason-Dixon line” and longed “to see the day the South will rise again.”<sup>139</sup> This theme is echoed in “If That Ain’t Country” when Coe describes “workin’ like a nigger” as one of the many attributes that define his country-ness and implicitly his Southernness.<sup>140</sup>

Coe’s releases through his own label D.A.C. Records took this rebel pride a step further. Later consolidated into *18 X-Rated Hits* (with crossed Confederate flags on the cover), the *Underground* and *Nothing Sacred* albums contain racist and neo-Confederate content so extreme that David Allan Coe and segregationist singer Johnny Rebel are often confused and their songs misattributed to each other. Coe’s song “Rails” discusses how “niggers made me vote for segregation” and concludes “Well it’s hard to work for a dollar a week/and the Klu Klux Klan is bigger/So Take

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<sup>137</sup> Hank Williams Jr., “If the South Woulda Won,” Warner Bros. Records/Curb Records 7-27862, 1988.

<sup>138</sup> Rick Sanjek, Personal Interview, July 2013.

<sup>139</sup> David Allan Coe, “I Still Sing the Old Songs,” *The Mysterious Rhinestone Cowboy*, Columbia KC 32942, 1974.

<sup>140</sup> David Allan Coe, “If That Ain’t Country,” *David Allan Coe Rides Again*, Columbia KC 34310, 1977.



the sheets off of your bed/And let's go hang a nigger."<sup>141</sup> Even more offensive is "Nigger Fucker," a song dedicated to "nigger lovin' whores:"

And to think I'd ate the pussy  
 Where that big, black dick had been  
 And kissed the lips that sucked him off  
 Time and time again  
 It's enough to make a man throw up  
 Sure is hard to figure  
 How any decent girl could ever fuck  
 A greasy nigger...  
 Cause there's nothing quite as worthless  
 As a white girl with a nigger<sup>142</sup>

While not mainstream Coe hits, these songs were inextricably tied to his 'outlaw' image, an image that for all of the self-proclaimed 'outlaws' had to on some level include support for the South's Confederate past.

Southern rockers continued in this same vein. While not precisely country, this genre was undeniably borne out of and in many ways overlapped with country both stylistically and lyrically. Like the 'outlaw' movement, it represents an important disavowal of mainstream country sounds, in this case through the integration of them with rock and roll. Southern rockers were also closely associated with the 'outlaws.' For example, Willie Nelson toured with the Marshall Tucker Band and covered one of their songs. Such behavior was not unusual and ensured that the 'outlaw' style of country and Southern rock overlapped and

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<sup>141</sup> David Allan Coe, "Rails," *Nothing Sacred*, D.A.C. Records LP-0002, 1978.

<sup>142</sup> David Allan Coe, "Nigger Fucker," *Underground Album*, D.A.C. Records LP-0003, 1982.

appealed to a similar audience.<sup>143</sup> Marketing executives also played a role in the creation of Southern rock, arguably in response to the success of the rebelliously Southern country ‘outlaws.’ Southern rock was promoted with an unprecedented “self-conscious southernness” exemplified by Capricorn’s marketing technique of distributing “Buy Southern” buttons.<sup>144</sup> Likewise, Lynyrd Skynyrd drummer Artimus Pyle explains, “MCA was trying to sell a Southern rock band and figured that the Confederate flag would be the way to go.” While others in the band, notably Ronnie Van Zant, claimed the Confederate image as their own, all acknowledged the influence of MCA in promoting and marketing the band through Confederate references, most obviously “Dixie” and the flag.<sup>145</sup> What this demonstrates is that the ways in which Southern rockers’ articulations of the South were formed and produced is comparable to the ‘outlaws.’

The most blatant example of Southern rock’s linkages to Confederate pride is found in Lynyrd Skynyrd. Lynyrd Skynyrd used the Confederate flag on almost all their album covers and at most of their concerts, as well as opening with or at least including “Dixie” in the vast majority of their performances.<sup>146</sup> Their song “Sweet Home Alabama” is perceived by many as an overt expression of white Southern bigotry. This view is summed up by Michael Butler, who writes that the band “went a step further than other southern rock groups in projecting an adherence to

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<sup>143</sup> Streissguth, *Outlaw*, 2-4.

<sup>144</sup> Bill Malone & David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 113.

<sup>145</sup> Qtd. in Lee Ballinger, *Lynyrd Skynyrd: An Oral History* (Los Angeles: XT377 Publishing, 2003), 58-59. Gene Odom, *Lynyrd Skynyrd- Remembering the Free Birds of Southern Rock* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 106.

<sup>146</sup> Hutson, “More Smoke Than Fire,” 96-99.

traditional southern racial ideals in their glorification” of Alabama governor and ardent segregationist George Wallace.<sup>147</sup> Scholars Paul Wells and Bruce Schulman concur.<sup>148</sup> Interpreting the song is complicated by the conflicting statements and political beliefs of various band members, some of whom endorsed Wallace’s populist politics and some of whom compared him to Hitler or appeared unconcerned with the whole controversy.<sup>149</sup> Ronnie Van Zant and producer Al Kooper defended the song, saying that the boos following “in Birmingham they love the gov’nor” signaled disapproval of Wallace’s racial politics and the ambiguous line “now we all did what we could do” meant that they tried to oust Wallace from office. This seems questionable in light of the fact that the song later includes the line “the gov’nor’s true.”<sup>150</sup> Wallace himself certainly viewed the song as an endorsement or at least found it politically expedient to act as if he did, naming each member of the band an Honorary Lieutenant Colonel in the Alabama State Militia because “there were a lot of Lynyrd Skynyrd fans in Alabama at the time, and Wallace figured that some of them might be voters.”<sup>151</sup> The characterization of the song offered in *Southern Music/American Music* is probably the closest to accurate, describing the piece as a “militant hymn of praise” to Southern identity “with at least an ambivalent

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<sup>147</sup> J. Michael Butler, “‘Luther King was a Good Ole’ Boy’: The Southern Rock Movement and White Male Identity in the Post-Civil Rights South,” *Popular Music and Society* (Summer 2003): 46-47.

<sup>148</sup> Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies- The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: DeCapo Press, 2001), 103. Paul Wells, “*The Last Rebel: Southern Rock and Nostalgic Continuities*,” in *Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Culture*, ed. Richard King and Helen Taylor (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 122.

<sup>149</sup> Kemp, *Dixie Lullaby*, 155. Ballinger, *Lynyrd Skynyrd*, 74-75.

<sup>150</sup> Ed King, Gary Rossington, & Ronnie Van Zant, “Sweet Home Alabama,” MCA-40258, Lynyrd Skynyrd, 1974. Ballinger, *Lynyrd Skynyrd*, 74-75.

<sup>151</sup> Odom, *Lynyrd Skynyrd*, 108.

defense” of Wallace.”<sup>152</sup> While the lyrics surround Wallace are disputed, the rest are not in question and undeniably elevate a sanitized and idealized South that, when coupled with the Confederate flag on the album cover, signifies a profound sense of Southern ascendancy.<sup>153</sup>

Although Lynyrd Skynyrd has become most associated with Confederate references in song and imagery, they were hardly unusual among Southern rock groups. Molly Hatchet and the supposedly progressive Allman Brothers both featured Confederate costuming in publicity photos and album art. Black Oak Arkansas’s lead guitarist Stanley Knight played a guitar emblazoned with the stars and bars, and the flag also hung from the drum riser during concerts.<sup>154</sup> Several of the bands also featured “Dixie” in their regular concert repertoire. The Allman Brothers went so far as to include pictures of slaves and Confederate soldiers on posters for concerts, making the connection between the Southern rockers’ use of Confederate symbolism and the racial politics of the Confederacy all too clear.<sup>155</sup> The Charlie Daniels Band’s “The South’s Gonna Do It Again” exhorted its listeners to “be proud you’re a rebel,” and Wet Willie’s “Dixie Rock” affirmed the way white Southerners coopted black music.<sup>156</sup> Clearly, the Southern rockers embraced, if not the full political implications of Southern symbolism, the symbolism itself.

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<sup>152</sup> Malone & Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music*, 114.

<sup>153</sup> Ed King, Gary Rossington, & Ronnie Van Zant, “Sweet Home Alabama,” MCA-40258, Lynyrd Skynyrd, 1974.

<sup>154</sup> Hutson, “More Smoke Than Fire,” 96-99.

<sup>155</sup> Butler, “‘Luther King was a Good Ole’ Boy’,” 46.

<sup>156</sup> Charlie Daniels, “The South’s Gonna Do It Again,” Epic 15-2393, The Charlie Daniels Band, 1975. Jimmy Hall, Jack Hall, & Ricky Hirsch, “Dixie Rock,” Capricorn Records CP 0149, Wet Willie, 1975.

This symbolism had little room for female participation. Some of the Southern rock groups included female backup singers.<sup>157</sup> The ‘outlaw’ phenomenon was slightly more friendly to women, and several did achieve some level of ‘outlaw’ status. However, these women did so largely because of their connections to male ‘outlaws.’ Jessi Colter, wife of Waylon Jennings, took her place in the ‘outlaw’ pantheon through her inclusion on the famous *Wanted! The Outlaws* album with Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Tompall Glaser. Combining a “one of the boys” attitude with an overtly sexualized and feminine image, she functioned in a supporting role to the male ‘outlaws.’ The *I’m Jessi Colter* album cover offers visible evidence of this; Colter is depicted in a saloon, posing sensually and exposing skin, calling to mind a prototypical Western outlaw’s female companions: barmaids and prostitutes.<sup>158</sup> Similarly, Sammi Smith’s friendship with Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, and Waylon Jennings allowed her entry to the ‘outlaw’ realm, although her music rarely aligned with its values. Her role as an ‘outlaw’ was limited to recording songs written by the ‘outlaws’ like “Help Me Make It Through the Night,” attending Willie Nelson’s Fourth of July picnics, and being labeled a “girl hero” by Waylon Jennings.<sup>159</sup> Because of the fundamental maleness of the ‘Lost Cause’ ethos surrounding both the ‘outlaws’ and the Southern rockers, women were restricted and marginalized as sidekicks or backups and rarely touched on the Southern themes addressed by their male counterparts. Their presence and support

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<sup>157</sup> Malone & Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music*, 114.

<sup>158</sup> Dana C. Wiggins, “From Countryopolitan to Neotraditional: Gender, Race, Class, and Region in Female Country Music, 1980-1989.” (PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2009), 5-6. Jessi Colter, *I’m Jessi Colter*, Capital Records ST-11363, Jessi Colter, 1975. Bufwack & Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 380-381.

<sup>159</sup> Bufwack & Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 381-383.

implicitly affirmed and ratified their “mythical Southern machismo...the South of hell-raising good old boy who lives only to play music, get drunk, make love, and fight if the need arises” and its connections to the Confederacy.<sup>160</sup> Southern rock and ‘outlaw’ country projected a notion of white Southern masculinity as 1) self-sufficient in contrast to slaves, women, or inferior men; 2) chivalrous and bound by a code of honor that requires protection of women and communities; 3) racist and desiring control of African-Americans; and 4) reminiscent of W.J. Cash’s “helluva fella” in terms of rowdy behavior and attitude towards violence.<sup>161</sup>

The significance of these two musical movements is found in the way they made the South the possession of a younger generation and a broader political base. Both had connections to progressive politics and even to counterculture, which in a way softened the stridency of their Confederate pride. Politically, the ‘outlaws’ were a diverse bunch, ranging from Kristofferson’s activism for the United Farm Workers to Hank Williams, Jr.’s staunch conservatism to the largely apolitical stance of Waylon Jennings. Mixing in social circles that included folk and rock artists and emerging out of a “Greenwich Village vibe,” these artists cultivated a hedonistic lifestyle and rebellious attitude that attracted young people, hippies, radicals, and druggies. At the same time, the ‘outlaws’ focused on a musical past and Southern themes that appealed to an older generation, conservatives, and racists, as well as loyal fans of their earlier music. This resulted in confusing amalgamation of

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<sup>160</sup> Malone & Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music*, 113-114.

<sup>161</sup> Ted Ownby, “Freedom, Manhood, and the Male Tradition in 1970s Southern Rock Music” in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, ed. Ann Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 370-371.

audience, a “bobbing, visually bizarre mix of beehive hairdos, naked midriffs, and bare hippie feet.” Kristofferson and Nelson, in particular, possessed strong ties to liberal political beliefs. Strongly influenced by his connections to left-wing folk artists like John Prine, Kristofferson gradually turned more and more towards progressive politics as he aged and became more secure in his stardom. Nelson is famous for his friendship and support of black country star Charley Pride, an anecdote often cited to prove that ‘outlaw’ assertions of Southernness were not racist.<sup>162</sup> Not only does it do little to prove that point, it renders the aggressive Confederate pride of the ‘outlaws’ all the more potent. When produced and consumed by individuals who professed sympathy with progressive politics, the idea that Confederate pride could be divorced from its political implications gained traction and therefore minimized dissenting, usually black, voices.

Southern rock was even more closely tied to liberal politics and black culture. Many of the groups’ members grew up poor in interracial neighborhoods and were exposed at an early age to elements associated with black culture. Likely because of this, many Southern rock groups covered songs from and worked with black artists. While this was nothing new, most of the groups did acknowledge the influence of these artists and treated their covers as homage, which stands in stark contrast the unspoken cooptation of black music done by many other artists.<sup>163</sup> The Allman Brothers had several black band members, and along with Wet Willie, occasionally featured positive multi-racial imagery (i.e. holding a black child or socializing in a

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<sup>162</sup> Streissguth, *Outlaw*, 2-8. Jan Reid, *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock* (University of Texas Press, 2004), 10-14. Rick Sanjek, Personal Interview, July 2013.

<sup>163</sup> Brandon P. Keith, “Southern Rock Music as a Cultural Form.” (PhD diss., University of Southern Florida, 2009), 14-16, 18-22.

mixed race group) on their albums.<sup>164</sup> Lynyrd Skynyrd toured with artists like Dr. John, BB King, and Muddy Waters.<sup>165</sup> Members of these bands specifically acknowledged their affinity with black musicians and culture. For instance, Rick Hirsch of Wet Willie linked his Jewish identity with an understanding of the black struggle.<sup>166</sup> Their music reflected a degree of racial sensitivity. Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Things Goin' On" asks "Have you ever lived down in the ghetto? Have you ever felt the cold wind blow?," which can be interpreted as an indictment of racial inequalities.<sup>167</sup> The Allman Brothers recorded "God Rest His Soul," a song designed as a tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr. The song laments King's passing and suggests that the Civil Rights Movement will only escalate in his absence:

A man lay dying in the streets.  
 A thousand people fell down on their knees.  
 Any other day he would have been,  
 Preaching, reaching all the people there,  
 But Lord knows I can't change what I saw.  
 I Say God Rest His Soul.  
 The Memphis battleground was red,  
 Cause blood came pouring from his head.  
 Women and children fallin' down crying,  
 ☒For the man they loved so well  
 The morning sun will rise again,

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<sup>164</sup> Butler, "'Luther King was a Good Ole' Boy,'" 51. Marley Brant, *Southern Rockers: The Roots and Legacy of Southern Rock* (New York: Billboard Books, 1999), 42. Scott Freeman, *Midnight Riders: The Story of the Allman Brothers Band* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 143.

<sup>165</sup> Odom, *Lynyrd Skynyrd*, 205.

<sup>166</sup> Keith, "Southern Rock Music as a Cultural Form," 15-16.

<sup>167</sup> Gary Rossington, "Things Goin' On," *Pronounced...*, MCA-363, Lynyrd Skynyrd, 1975.



With all the passions growing thin.<sup>168</sup>

In a similar vein, Lynyrd Skynyrd's "The Ballad of Curtis Loew" mourns fictional black figure, "the finest picker to ever play the blues" and in what could be a critique of discrimination calls out those who labeled him "useless." However, the song relies on stereotypes of African-Americans, by portraying Loew as poor drunk whose paramount significance in life is his influence on the young white protagonist.<sup>169</sup>

Southern rock's associations with liberal politics were fairly overt as well. As teenagers, members of The Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd complained of harassment as hippies because of their style and long hair.<sup>170</sup> The fact that the Southern rockers campaigned for Democrat Jimmy Carter, while primarily a choice borne of convenience and "southern unity," inextricably tied Southern rock to more liberal values.<sup>171</sup> Indeed, even at the time, Southern rock was viewed as key to Carter's success; a *New York Times* article from 1977 suggested that Southern rock bands "predated" and "helped create the climate for Jimmy Carter."<sup>172</sup> Although few Southern rocks make specific statements on public policy, but rather refer to general and vague ideology, Lynyrd Skynyrd's recording of "Saturday Night Special" advocating gun control is a unique exception. The song flies in the face of stereotypical Southern masculinity, associated with violence, independence, and

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<sup>168</sup> Keith, "Southern Rock Music as a Cultural Form," 33-34. Steve Alaimo, "God Rest His Soul," *Duane Allman & Gregg Allman*, Bold Records 33-301, The Allman Brothers, 1972.

<sup>169</sup> Allen Collins & Ronnie Van Zant, "The Ballad of Curtis Loew," *Second Helping*, MCA-413, Lynyrd Skynyrd, 1974.

<sup>170</sup> Odom, *Lynyrd Skynyrd*, 40. Freeman, *Midnight Riders*, 96.

<sup>171</sup> Keith, "Southern Rock Music as a Cultural Form," 41-45.

<sup>172</sup> Robert Palmer, "Southern Rock is Spreading Across the Country," *New York Times*, July 24, 1977.

thus inevitably guns. It also locates the band firmly on the liberal side of the debate, at least over this particular social issue. However, the song adopts self-consciously Southern, countrified language (i.e. vernacular, 'Southern' phrases, and standard country symbols) to make its point:

Hand guns are made for killin'.  
 Ain't no good for nothin' else.  
 And if you like your whiskey,  
 You might even shoot yourself.  
 So why don't we dump 'em people,  
 To the bottom of the sea,  
 Before some fool come around here,  
 Wanna shoot either you or me?  
 It's a Saturday night special,  
 Got a barrel that's blue and cold,  
 Ain't no good for nothin',  
 But put a man six feet in a hole.<sup>173</sup>

Southern rock, like and arguably even more than 'outlaw' country, had the effect of rendering Confederate imagery acceptable and mainstream. With liberal politics and black connections as a convenient excuse of sorts, Southern rockers could be rebelliously Southern while distancing themselves from the political implications of such an image.

Though this process was mainly intangible, some artists actively tried to musically reconstruct the South as more tolerant version of itself. Forefather of the 'outlaw' movement Mickey Newbury's efforts to reclaim "Dixie" produced "An American Trilogy," a combination of "Dixie," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and the

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<sup>173</sup> Ed King, "Saturday Night Special," *Nuthin' Fancy*, MCA-2137, Lynyrd Skynyrd, 1975.

spiritual “All My Trials.” One of the rare female ‘outlaws’ Tanya Tucker recorded the most famous version of “I Believe the South is Gonna Rise Again;” urging listeners to “forget the bad and keep the good,” the song depicted an idyllic post-racial South with “everybody hand in hand” achieving ascendancy but “not the way we thought it would back then.”<sup>174</sup> Similarly, Black Oak Arkansas’ “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down,” praises Martin Luther King, Jr. in stereotypically Southern terms as “a good ole boy.”<sup>175</sup> Nonetheless, the inclusion these songs advocated was premised on a basis of white Southern ideology and ratified by white Southern supremacy. By normalizing the borderline neo-Confederate tone emerging in country music, songs like this attempted to distance Southern pride from its racial overtones, a move that in and of itself had profound racial overtones.

Journalist Chet Flippo speaks for many when he suggests that Southern rock, specifically The Allman Brothers, was responsible for “returning a sense of worth to the South.”<sup>176</sup> In light of Southern rock and ‘outlaw’ country’s embrace of Confederate symbolism, this sense of worth seems to be more of a sense of vindication. Responding to years of criticism and mockery of the South, the turbulence of the post-Civil Rights era, and the rise of the feminist movement, white Southern masculinity reasserted itself through these musical forms.<sup>177</sup> These challenges to white male Southern authority combined to make Rebel pride a viable

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<sup>174</sup> Bobby Braddock, “I Believe the South is Gonna Rise Again,” CBS 3134, Tanya Tucker, 1974.

<sup>175</sup> Black Oak Arkansas, “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down,” *10yr Overnight Success*, MCA-2224, 1976.

<sup>176</sup> Qtd. in Malone & Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music*, 114.

<sup>177</sup> Ownby, “Freedom, Manhood, and the Male Tradition in 1970s Southern Rock Music,” 370. Butler, “‘Luther King was a Good Ole’ Boy’,” 43.

and marketable musical strategy. This involved “culture reflecting culture,” as record executives and artists studied the very social trends shaping their own lives to “produce what they thought people would buy.”<sup>178</sup> Unlike their underground predecessors, few ‘outlaws’ and Southern rockers explicitly flaunted racist or conservative beliefs. In fact, many did precisely the opposite. However, their actions normalized Confederate pride, elevated a Southern past hostile to African-Americans, and created an easy out for those using Confederate or Southern rhetoric to enforce specific racial dynamics.

Looking back on it, some of those involved in the country music industry speak of “a different time,” “not understanding those things were offensive,” “a shared vision of the south that wasn’t as politicized as everything is now,” and “more innocence, less political correctness.” Excuses are offered, blaming the racial connotations of country’s rebel South on the fact that many country artists grew up with segregation and racist politics or the fact that they were “not part of the liberal world that consumes a lot of news.”<sup>179</sup> The fact that there was no outcry over this musical Confederate resurgence is taken as evidence that there was no problem with it, that “no one took issue with it or paid attention to it because it wasn’t news...it was normal.”<sup>180</sup> Given the climate in which the Southern rockers and ‘outlaws’ existed and the cultural political they themselves participated in, this idea of massive social ignorance is unconvincing. Even though the “NAACP doesn’t go to country shows,” the integration of Southern rock and ‘outlaw’ country into

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<sup>178</sup> Rick Sanjek, Personal Interview, July 2013.

<sup>179</sup> Jim Bessman, Personal Interview, July 2013. Rick Sanjek, Personal Interview, July 2013. Joe Johnson, Personal Interview, September 2013.

<sup>180</sup> Jim Bessman, Personal Interview, July 2013.

progressive and racially liberal segments of society proves that they were not unaware of the implications and heritage of Confederate symbolism.<sup>181</sup>

Furthermore, the “normal” nature of such symbolism is patently false, as its disappearance from country’s discourse prior to the 60s indicates; rather, it was *normalized* through the power of a dominant, white, male, Southern perspective that encoded a certain set of Southern viewpoints to the exclusion of all others.

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<sup>181</sup> Rick Sanjek, Personal Interview, July 2013.

### Forget the Past? The Elements of Modern Country's Idealized South

The election of Jimmy Carter initiated further blurring of boundaries between North and South. This loss of regional distinctiveness functioned on one level to make Southern pride and culture seem safe to outsiders and on the other to push Southerners more towards strong claims of a unique culture even as their uniqueness was vanishing.<sup>182</sup> Carter, the first President from the South since 1848, had relied extensively on Southern rock throughout his campaign and did not hide his Southern identity. He provided an image of Southern success as someone who “put decency back in the White House,” and Southerners responded to this image, winning him every Southern state except Virginia.<sup>183</sup> With headlines exulting “We Ain’t Trash No More” or seriously suggesting “The South as The New America,” the resultant surge of aggressively pro-Southern music somehow couched in the trappings of respectability is unsurprising.<sup>184</sup> The rise of the Sunbelt economy coupled with Carter’s presidency to spark greater Northern fascination with the South and catalyze the growing strains of Southern pride in country music.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Hutson, “More Smoke Than Fire,” 104-107. Melton A. McLaurin, “Songs of the South,” in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, ed. Melton A. McLaurin & Richard A. Peterson (Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1992), 26. Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’*, 46, 245.

<sup>183</sup> Kemp, *Dixie Lullaby*, 135. Dewey Grantham, *The South in Modern America- A Region at Odds* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 293.

<sup>184</sup> Larry L. King, “We Ain’t Trash No More: How Jimmy Carter Led the Rednecks from the Wilderness,” *Esquire*, November 1976. Reg Murphy, “The South as The New America,” *Saturday Review* 4, September 1976.

<sup>185</sup> Hutson, “More Smoke Than Fire,” 104-107. Melton A. McLaurin, “Songs of the South,” in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, ed. Melton A. McLaurin & Richard A. Peterson (Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1992), 26. Malone, *Don’t Get above Your Raisin’*, 46, 245.

While remnants of rebel hostility remain in country, it has become more common for artists to combine rebel imagery with a the traditional Americanized South of “Okie from Muskogee.” The career and music of Alabama exemplifies this combination. Alabama’s *My Home’s in Alabama*, *Feels So Right*, and *Mountain Music* album covers are all emblazoned with the Confederate flag.<sup>186</sup> The band also deployed Southern symbolism in the form of sexual innuendo in “See the Embers, Feel the Flame” (“just like the south, girl, we’re gonna rise again”) and “Burn Georgia Burn” (“how he made her yearn, burn, Georgia burn”).<sup>187</sup> They do something similar in “Dixieland Delight” discussing “a little turtle dovin on a Mason-Dixon night...with my Dixieland delight” but also clearly allude to traditionalism. They affirm working-class values through the narrator claiming to have “worked hard all week,” American capitalism through the “spend my dollar” phrase, the elevation of rusticity as an idealized self-sufficient Americanness through the depiction of animals and scenery “free as the feelin’ in the wind,” and the idealized, dependent womanhood embedded in the “homegrown country girl” held tightly by the masculine narrator.<sup>188</sup> “Song of the South” also hearkens back to this glorified and patriotic Southernness. The song’s references to picking cotton and poverty deploy the stereotype of poor Southerners as simple people with a good work ethic and play into the agrarian, yeoman conception of American identity. The fact that “Daddy was a veteran, a southern democrat” is somewhat confounding, although it obviously

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<sup>186</sup> Smith & Akenson, “The Civil War in Country Music Tradition,” 17.

<sup>187</sup> Jeff Cook, “See the Embers, Feel the Flame,” *Feels So Right*, RCA Victor AHL1-3930, Alabama, 1981. Roger Murrah & Tim Lewis, “Burn Georgia Burn,” *Feels So Right*, AHL1-3930, Alabama, 1981.

<sup>188</sup> Ronnie Rogers, “Dixieland Delight,” RCA GB-13786, Alabama, 1983.

injects an element of patriotism. The “southern democrat” component is slightly more confusing, given that the song later references “Mr. Roosevelt.” If meant in absolute historical terms, at the time of Roosevelt’s presidency, this would imply support for racist policies, but it seems plausible that this was intended to be seen through a modern lens of democratic policies, tied to liberal politics and as is evident throughout the song, populism. Additionally, “Song of the South” upholds emblems of that epitomize the ‘American Dream’: “a washing machine and then a Chevrolet.” The South portrayed in the song is becoming assimilated into the American way of life “gone, gone with the wind/there ain’t nobody looking back again.”<sup>189</sup>

Rhett Akins offers a less clear-cut example. His *Friday Night in Dixie* album is presented as a Confederate statement. The album insert has Confederate flags on almost every page, Akins is pictured wearing a Confederate States of America belt buckle, images of Southern rock legend Charlie Daniels (featured on the album) are prominently displayed, the inscription “Any Fate But Submission” adorns one page, the Georgia state seal constitutes the background for the whole CD, and the album’s dedication makes reference to Akins’s “love of Southern history” and his relative who fought in the Civil War. Only the title song, however, addresses the Confederacy, mentioning a “rebel yell” in the context of a Southern party including “pickup trucks,” “an old buck knife,” “shotgun shells,” “four wheel drives,” “a mason jar of shine,” and “500 watts of Hank.” The inclusion and acceptance of an authority figure in the form of the sheriff, the presence of a sweet “blue-eyed cutie,” and the

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<sup>189</sup> Bob McDill, “Song of the South,” RCA 8744-7, Alabama, 1988.



overall aura of a wholesome and well-deserved good time shows how Akins's construction of Dixie relates back to the Vietnam-era country espousing American ideals through Southernness. This is reinforced by the album's inclusion of traditional and less aggressive Southern symbolism including magnolia blossoms and an idyllic, rural scene drawn by Akins's great-aunt.<sup>190</sup> In his later songs "Kiss My Country Ass" and "Down South," Akins' sound and lyrics are reminiscent of Hank Williams, Jr., and 'outlaw' rhetoric overshadows any hint of the traditional South. Probably the result of desperate attempts to chart by pandering to extreme Southern stereotypes, these songs differ dramatically in tone from their predecessors and did not do very well on the charts.

The marriage of the 'outlaw'/Southern rock conception of the South and the earlier more nostalgic South, then, defines much of country music today. The rebel ethos has migrated into 'softer' country. Pop country favorites The Bellamy Brothers have produced songs "You Ain't Just Whistlin' Dixie" and "Redneck Girl." At the same time, less rebellious components of Southern-style patriotism crept into the rougher brands of country. Conway Twitty sang about womanizing in his *Southern Comfort* album, but on the cover, he wore a suit and embraced a single, demure representative of Southern womanhood for a stereotypical antebellum portrait on a plantation-style porch.<sup>191</sup> Dwight Yoakam's "I Sang Dixie" adds critique of urban modernity and defense of the South as a bastion of tradition to its discussion of

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<sup>190</sup> *Friday Night in Dixie*, Audium Records 8153, Rhatt Akins, 2002. Smith & Akenson, "The Civil War in Country Music Tradition," 12-15.

<sup>191</sup> *Southern Comfort*, Elektra 60005, Conway Twitty, 1982.

“rebel pride.”<sup>192</sup> These processes have made linkage to the Confederacy and the South virtually inescapable in country music. Artists Jason Aldean, Brooks & Dunn, Garth Brooks, Luke Bryan, Kenny Chesney, Eric Church, the Dixie Chicks, Florida Georgia Line, Alan Jackson, the Josh Abbott Band, Toby Keith, Josh Kelley, Lady Antebellum, Miranda Lambert, Tim McGraw, Old Crow Medicine Show, Brad Paisley, Kellie Pickler, the Pistol Annies, Blake Shelton, Carrie Underwood.

‘Outlaws’ still exist, but they are perceived as lovable, fun, Dukes of Hazzard-style rascals. Waylon Jennings’s involvement with the Dukes of Hazzard symbolizes this transition, rendering the hard-drinking, hard-partying ‘outlaw’ family-friendly.<sup>193</sup> While the actions of these outliers are not condoned, they are rarely explicitly condemned and are seen as excesses, not affronts. In this context, songs like Deacon Lunchbox’s “Loweena, the Urban Redneck Queen,” which speculates on whether “Robert E. Lee would have won that damned Civil War” with the help of the Hell’s Angels, NASCAR driver Richard Petty, and Elvis Presley, are merely seen as humorous deviations from the norm.<sup>194</sup> Rebel Son’s “forthright tunes for the unreconstructed” get a similar treatment.<sup>195</sup> More conventional artists that draw upon the ‘outlaw’ and Southern rock canons to express aggressive rebel pride, most

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<sup>192</sup> Dwight Yoakam, “I Sang Dixie,” Reprise Records 7-21868, 1988.

<sup>193</sup> Waylon Jennings, “Theme from the Dukes of Hazzard,” RCA PB-12067, 1980. “Welcome, Waylon Jennings,” *Dukes of Hazzard*. Episode no. 131, first broadcast September 28, 1984 by CBS. Directed by Robert Sweeney. Written by Gy Waldron, Len Kaufman, Myles Wilder, & David R. Toddman.

<sup>194</sup> Smith & Akenson, “The Civil War in Country Music Tradition,” 17.

<sup>195</sup> “Bio,” *Rebel Son: The Official Rebel Son Band Website*, last modified 15 March 2014, <http://www.rebel-son.com/bio.htm>.

prominently Hank III and Confederate Railroad, are tolerated and can even crossover to mainstream country popularity.<sup>196</sup>

The evolution of country's Southernness has continued in recent years, and there have been several important developments in the genre. First is the use of 'country' as code for Southern. While this has its roots in earlier country and is intimately bound up with country's notions of authenticity as dependent upon origins, it has become ever more common in modern country. In Jason Aldean's "She's Country," Southern stereotypes and images (cowboy boots, pick up trucks, prayers, etc.) are used to describe a "real...true blue, out in the woods, down home, country girl." Notably this girl speaks in a "thick Southern drawl" and hails from any number of Southern locations.<sup>197</sup> "Rock My World (Little Country Girl)" utilizes the same tactic, describing a girl "listens to Merle," "looks good in denim and pearls," and is "all ribbons and curls" on Sunday. The song does not explicitly mention the South, but especially in the chorus, structured like a country two-step, it is heavily implied.<sup>198</sup> Other compelling examples include Randy Houser's "How Country Feels" and Alan Jackson's "Gone Country." What this demonstrates is that the country, both the abstract idea and the music, has become entrenched as Southern in the American consciousness. It also shows how country music is beginning to come full

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<sup>196</sup> "Hank Williams III," *Billboard*, last modified 2014, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/276385/hank-williams-iii>. *Hank: Tennessee Hellbilly*, <http://www.hank3.com/index.html>. *Confederate Railroad Official Site*, <http://www.confederaterailroad.com>. "Confederate Railroad," *Billboard*, last modified 2014, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/299587/confederate-railroad>.

<sup>197</sup> Danny Myrick & Bridgette Tatum, "She's Country," *Wide Open*, Broken Bow BB74372, Jason Aldean, 2009.

<sup>198</sup> Bill LaBounty & Steve O'Brien, "Rock My World (Little Country Girl)," *Hard Workin' Man*, Arista Records 07822187162, Brooks & Dunn, 1993.

circle as criticism of the genre's politics accelerates, betraying an unsurprising reluctance to be associated with the Southernness that has been crucial to the genre's success.

Another new development in the genre's expression of Southern identity is its interaction with hip-hop and rap. Country-rap/hip-hop partnerships like "Accidental Racist," "Over and Over," "Cruise (Remix)," "Superman," "Both of Us," "Dirt Road Anthem (Remix)," and "Thug Story" present one aspect of this troubled relationship. Although Taylor Swift and T-Pain's "Thug Story" is intended as a joke, it nevertheless reveals the underlying problems with these collaborations. Swift, a blonde, skinny, white country star functions as the embodiment of all things white, appropriating rap culture in a way that reinforces negative stereotypes of blacks.<sup>199</sup> The superiority of white culture and country is a constant underlying theme, with rap or hip-hop serving as the discursive opposite, defining whiteness through its expression of blackness. In "Dirt Road Anthem (Remix)," Ludacris adopts a subtly subservient position when he raps "turn it up and let the speakers scream for Mr. Aldean."<sup>200</sup> In the video for "Cruise (Remix)," Nelly drives his own car, separate from Florida Georgia Line. Unlike the white country singers, he does not have a woman in the car with him for most of the video. When one does join him, she is one of the only black women in the video and is, like Nelly himself, dressed differently from the white 'country' individuals, reminding viewers of the importance and purity of white Southern womanhood and its need to be distanced from dangerous black

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<sup>199</sup> Taylor Swift, Ryan Follese, & Nash Overstreet, "Thug Story," Taylor Swift & T-Pain. Filmed for the CMT Music Awards, June 2009.

<sup>200</sup> Brantley Gilbert, Colt Ford & Ludacris, "Dirt Road Anthem (Remix)," Broken Bow, Jason Aldean feat. Ludacris, 2011.

masculinity.<sup>201</sup> “Both of Us,” despite its anti-racist messaging and imagery of interracial groups, couples, and families, creates a racial hierarchy through its depiction of Taylor Swift as an angelic white woman, who lyrically is presented as a savior of sorts.<sup>202</sup> What all of these songs do is privilege a discourse of white openness, colorblindness, and tolerance, a narrative that disenfranchises black musicians and any potential grievances they may have with the racialized politics of modern country’s Southern identity. Black musicians who participate in this music are characterized as ‘good’ blacks, facilitating racial reconciliation on white terms, a stark parallel to the ‘Uncle Tom’ stereotypes common in Tin Pan Alley and underground segregationist country songs. Their elevation means that all black critics of such music’s racial undertones are labeled disrupters of a positive process of interracial dialogue, when in reality the dialogue is one-sided and frames white country artists as benevolent constructors of racial justice. It is notable that genre names such as ‘country-rap’ and ‘hick-hop’ consistently give ‘country’ first billing, and societal narratives surrounding these songs focus on the incredible outreach of country stars, even in songs that are primarily rap or hip-hop based (e.g. “Over and Over,” “Both of Us,” and “Superman”).

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<sup>201</sup> Brian Kelley, Tyler Hubbard, Joey Moi, Chase Rice, Jesse Rice, & Nelly, “Cruise (Remix),” Universal Republic Nashville Records, Florida Georgia Line feat. Nelly, 2013. “Florida Georgia Line-Cruise (Remix) ft. Nelly,” YouTube video, 3:36, posted by “FlaGeorgiaLineVEVO,” May 13, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmZ9xR07M9M>.

<sup>202</sup> Ammar Malik, Bobby Ray Simmons, Jr., Clarence Montgomery III, Henry Walter, Jamieson Xavier Jones, Lukasz Gottwald, & Stephen Joshua Hill, “Both of Us,” Atlantic/Grand Hustle Records, B.o.B feat. Taylor Swift, 2012. “B.o.B-Both of Us ft. Taylor Swift (Official Video),” YouTube video, 3:39, posted by “B.o.B,” June 27, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sa9qeV6T0o>.

“Accidental Racist” is perhaps the most discussed and controversial of all songs in this style and deserves special attention because it directly grapples with themes of Southern heritage. From the beginning the song locates blacks firmly in the inferior position. It makes sense to assume that the man Paisley’s halfheartedly apologizing to, “the man that waited on me at the Starbucks down on Main,” is black. Even if this is not the case, LL Cool J begins his section of the song saying, “Dear Mr. White Man.” Associating whites with the South and blacks with the North further ensures that black, Southern voices, those that would most challenge the discourse of Southern identity espoused in the song, are absent. Paisley presents himself as a victim “caught between southern pride and southern blame,” forced to explain his that he is “proud of where I’m from...but not everything we’ve done” because he has been ‘accidentally’ racist. LL Cool J is sympathetic to this self-professed “proud rebel son with an ‘ol can of worms,” acknowledging that he could be judging by appearances and the way the South was traumatized after the Civil War. This automatically minimizes expressions of Southern pride in country music and elsewhere as heritage, which precludes interrogation of the nature of these statements and those who repeat them under the guise of fandom. Indeed, symbols of hip-hop (read: black) culture are treated as cultural equivalents of the legacy of slavery and the Confederacy: the “do-rag” and the “red flag,” “gold chains” and “iron chains.” Ultimately, what this adds up to is an exhortation to forget about racial enmity and the past, to “let bygones be bygones” because “it ain’t like you and me can re-write history.” In this framework, sitting down and getting a beer will be sufficient to erase years of racial hostilities, prejudice, and discrimination. One of the

final lines after this offensive conclusion is “RIP Robert E. Lee, but I’ve gotta thank Abraham Lincoln for freeing me,” which emphasizes that blacks should respect Robert E. Lee and propagates a narrative of black passivity and white liberators. Within the context of the song, African-American disagreement with either statement can be understood as offensive and possibly even racist, marginalizing their ongoing struggle against systemic, institutionalized racism.<sup>203</sup>

Collaborations do not constitute the totality of country’s connections to rap and hip-hop. Country-rap artists like Bubba Sparxxx, Jawga Boyz, Kid Rock, the Lacs, the LoCash Cowboys, Moccasin Creek, the Moonshine Bandits, and the Redneck Souljers represent attempts to maintain a Southern ‘country’ essence while tapping into the widespread popularity of hip-hop and rap. The incongruity of this pairing forces white country-rappers to constantly assert their Southernness through proud and overt “white trash” or “redneck” imagery and lyrics. More so than mainstream country artists, these individuals feel a need to prove their Southern credentials. Thus, they have more directly inherited the ‘outlaw’ and Southern rock conceptions of Southernness than other brands of contemporary country and rarely focus on ‘softer,’ traditional themes. Few black country-rap crossover artists exist, and those that do are primarily novelty groups catering to stereotypes. Cowboy Troy fits this mold, as does the group Nappy Roots with their debut album *Watermelon, Chicken & Gritz*. Instead of interracial conversation, these groups further separate and isolate racial categories.

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<sup>203</sup> Brad Paisley, LL Cool J, & Lee Thomas Miller, “Accidental Racist,” *Wheelhouse*, Arista Nashville, Brad Paisley feat. LL Cool J, 2013.

The final songs worth mentioning in this area are country songs that use rap or hip-hop as a vehicle for criticizing or judging African-American society. Eric Church's "Homeboy" describes a country, presumably white, boy, who embraces gangster culture. The degeneracy of hip-hop is constructed as the opposite of a white, Southern, and all-American fantasy of home.<sup>204</sup> Colt Ford's "Hip Hop in a Honky Tonk" ties hip-hop to "dancin' like strippers," and Blake Shelton's "Boys 'Round Here" promotes "keeping it country" in contrast to those who know how to "do the dougie."<sup>205</sup> Similarly, Confederate Railroad's "I Hate Rap" devalues the entire black community through its demeaning approach to black cultural products. A slightly different version of this comes out in "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk." By taking "badonkadonk," a usually complimentary descriptor applied to black women, and transplanting it into a honky tonk setting, Adkins divorces it from its black hip-hop culture and renders it ridiculous when applied to black women. Featuring only white women in the video, the song subverts a term that defies white standards of beauty by removing it from its African-American context and using it to uphold the physical superiority of white women.<sup>206</sup> These songs encode white Southernness through musical forms (or things associated with musical forms), further breaking down the notion that racial associations are merely incidental to the origins of

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<sup>204</sup> Eric Church & Casey Beathard, "Homeboy," *Chief*, EMI/Capitol Nashville, Eric Church, 2011.

<sup>205</sup> Thom Shepherd, "Hip Hop in a Honky Tonk," *Chicken & Biscuits*, Average Joe's Entertainment Group, Colt Ford feat. Kevin Fowler, 2010. Craig Wiseman, Rhett Akins, & Dallas Davidson, "Boys 'Round Here," *Based on a True Story...*, Warner Bros. Records, Blake Shelton feat. the Pistol Annies, 2013.

<sup>206</sup> Jamey Johnson & Randy Houser, "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk," *Songs About Me*, Capitol Nashville/EMI Records, Trace Adkins, 2005. "Trace Adkins-Honky Tonk Badonkadonk," YouTube video, 4:09, posted by "emimusic," February 25, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNVguvNE7qc>.



country and music tied to black culture (over the years, 'race,' soul, blues, jazz, rap, hip-hop, etc.), that they are indicative of white and black culture because of an accident of geography and population. In utilizing genre to vilify or stereotype, country artists recognize the power of music to enforce racial boundaries, something that goes unacknowledged by those that claim country's Southern pride has no racial or political overtones.

The evolution of country music as a distinctly pro-Southern genre destabilizes the predominant and simplistic narratives favored by those vilifying country. This is not, however, any kind of excuse for Confederate references in country music. By tracing country's Southern pride or lack thereof from commercialization onward, it becomes all too evident that such symbolism cannot be separated from its racial implications. While the music of Hank Williams, Jr. may be different in degree from that of Johnny Rebel, they are borne out of the same feelings and justified in the same way. Ultimately, the politicization of Southern nostalgia and memory substantiates that "heritage not hate" is little more than a mask for hatred in another form.

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