

## Country Music as a Dual Character Concept

Evan Malone:

The University at Albany, SUNY

## **1. Introduction**

While philosophers have so far not paid much attention to country music, there is now a small but growing body of work dealing with the unique aesthetic features of the genre (Shusterman 1999; Dyck 2018; Bernhardt 2018; Dyck 2021). Surveying this literature, the question of how we ought to understand the genre's notion of authenticity has emerged as one of the central questions. Here, theorists are substantially divided. Some argue that authentic country music is a matter of the artist having a biography that supports the rural and working-class identity of country protagonists (Bernhardt 2018), some argue that authenticity in country music is merely a matter of the music manifesting a rural American mythology that carries a certain emotional resonance (Shusterman 1999), and others, still, argue that discussions of authenticity in country music should be put to rest (Dyck 2021). Indeed, questions about the legitimacy of certain country artists and kinds of country music mark a dividing line in an evergreen debate within the community between progressives and traditionalists. Given the way in which some country audiences and artists use the distinction between mere country music and so-called 'real' or 'authentic' country music, we might worry that the notion of authenticity employed in discussions of the genre is nothing but a cudgel used for a problematic kind of gatekeeping. However, even if we think that authenticity is merely a coded term that some in the community use to police the boundaries of the genre, we might still ask what conditions must be met for an artist or a song to survive this gatekeeping.

In this paper, I will argue that we should take claims about the relative authenticity of country music to be evidence of ‘country’ being a dual character concept in the same way that it has been suggested of punk rock and hip-hop (Liao, Meskin, Knobe 2020). That is, we should read someone saying that a given song is ‘authentic country music’ as equivalent to them saying that, beyond realizing the “set of concrete features” which make a work a work of country music, the song or artist also realizes “the abstract values that these features serve to realize.” (Knobe, Prasada, Newman 2013). This model has been argued to make sense of the distinction between ‘punk’ and ‘real punk’ in that the conditions to qualify as punk tend to be descriptive, but an artist and their work must embody the values of punk to qualify as ‘real punk’ (Liao, Meskin, Knobe 2020). If country music is a dual-character concept, then we could understand the distinction between ‘country’ and ‘authentic country’ in the same way. Authentic country music is country music that demonstrates the core value commitments of the genre. Just as punk might be thought to value irreverence, nihilism, and amateurism (Prinz 2014), I argue that country music is committed to romanticism about the past (whether that is the environment of one’s upbringing, the love one used to have, the way society used to be, or the way music used to sound), to concern for agency and autonomy, and to anti-pretension. These values form the basis of country artists’ and audiences’ practical identities. Part of country music’s aesthetic practice is that audiences reconnect with and reify this common practical identity through identification with artists and works that manifest these values. The degree to which listeners can discern their own practical identity by listening to country music is the degree to which it strikes them as authentic.

If this is right, then we may have a more sympathetic account of the traditionalist position in country music discourse that explains what work the notion of authenticity does for country music practices despite its varied misuses.

In the first section of this paper, I will survey the existing accounts of authenticity and their various deficiencies. In the second section I will discuss the literature on dual character concepts and explain how thinking of country music as a dual character concept can make sense of a notion of ‘authentic country’. Finally, in the third section, I will defend an account of what values I take to be central to the genre.

## **2. Accounts of Authenticity:**

In his discussion of authenticity, John Dyck draws on and (helpfully) expands on the common kinds of musical authenticity employed in the broader philosophy of music literature. Following Dyck, country music might have a kind of sourced-focused authenticity, folkloric authenticity, or music-focused authenticity. Here, source-focused authenticity might be best understood as something like standing. That is, the question of whether a given track is authentic country music (if country authenticity is source-focused) is a question of to what extent the artist has the standing to perform country music. Meanwhile, folkloric authenticity is a matter of the artist’s intention. In this case, an attribution of authenticity should be understood as a recognition that the music does (or at least seems to) issue from a place of pure self-expression rather than from commercial interests. Finally, if country music has a kind of music-focused authenticity, then a work or artist being called ‘authentic country’ is a matter of the degree to which it

manifests the musical features typical of the genre. I will now briefly survey a variety of ways in which each of these could explain the notion of authenticity at work in country music discourse and also argue that each is, in its own way, deficient.

First, one might be tempted to explain authenticity in terms of source-focused considerations because we already have reason to think that some musical genres might require that artists have a kind of standing in order to participate in a non-defective way. For instance, a similar debate occurs in philosophical discussions of hip-hop (Taylor 2005) and blues (Young 1994; Langston & Langston 2012). Often, however, these discussions revolve around appropriation in the context of race and the traditional practices of a marginalized culture. As such, our first worry might be that there is no deep and proprietary connection between any given culture and country music because country music's establishment as a genre distinct from folk music was merely an artifact of Billboard charting decisions. If country music is, at bottom, a commercial artifact designed to partition the music market, then we might be skeptical that there is a sufficiently substantive connection between any particular cultural and the music to justify concerns about standing. Nevertheless, country music commentators and artists do appear to articulate concerns about standing. For instance, Richard A. Peterson quotes Hank Williams as saying that "you have to plow a lot of ground and look at the back side of a mule for a lot of years to sing a country song." (Peterson 1997, 217) Similarly, in his song "Some Days", Sturgill Simpson bemoans artists "playing dress up and trying to sing them old country songs". Something like this is echoed by Bernhardt, who argues that authenticity is about singing from a "rural and working-class" identity rather than merely

about it (Bernhardt 2018). However, actually making sense of the kind of authentic standing that Williams, Simpson, and Bernhardt are talking about may prove tricky.

For one, gaining the standing to perform country music is not obviously a matter of socioeconomics. While it would hurt one's credibility as a rapper or punk artist if they were the offspring of a rich and famous rapper or punk rocker, it does the opposite for country musicians. If country music authenticity is a matter of the degree to which the performer hails from a working-class background, then we should expect to find that the sons and daughter of famous country artists are treated with the same skepticism that Jay-Z's daughter might face if she pursued a gangster rap career, or that the son of Minor Threat's Ian MacKaye might face from the punk community. Instead, Hank Williams Jr. and Hank Williams III have heightened credibility in virtue of their being the son and grandson of a rich and successful country artist (that is, Hank Williams). The same could be said for Justin Townes Earle, the son of country star Steve Earle.

With regards to the idea that country artists should hail from, and live in, rural areas, few would argue that Steve Goodman and John Prine lack credibility as country artists in virtue of their being from Chicago. There also doesn't seem to be a principled reason for requiring a rural biography. Bill Malone's expansive history of country music, *Country Music USA*, argues that "the farther Americans became removed from the cowboy past, the more intense their interest in cowboy songs and lore." (Malone 2018, 163) On this account, country music rose to popularity in post-war America because it served to reconnect increasingly urbanized Americans with their rural roots. If this is

right, then who would be better positioned to understand this predicament than a fellow city-dweller. Indeed, many iconic and representative country songs gesture at this story implicitly. After all, in “Luckenbach Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)”, Waylon Jennings tells us that we should “go to Luckenbach, Texas” (that is, not stay in Luckenbach, Texas). Likewise, Merle Haggard asks for the bright lights of his ‘dirty old city’ to “turn [him] loose and set [him] free.” Finally, in “Country Is”, Tom T. Hall tells us that “country is living in the city... country is all in your mind”. If an artist has an entirely rural autobiography, it is hard to see how they would be well-positioned to connect with the target audience of country music and their experience as nostalgic city-dwellers. If authenticity in country music is about having standing in a shared community with country listeners, then an entirely rural autobiography might hurt one’s credibility.

Another alternative source-focused account of authenticity might argue that country music is the music reflective of the culture of Scotch-Irish settlers to the American south, and the relevant standing is that which comes with membership in this community. This story, of country music’s origins in the American south, is often attributed to Bill Malone’s *Country Music, USA* and is the subject of significant historical controversy (Malone 2018; Cohen 2014; Mather 2017; Peterson 1997). First, as we have already seen, John Prine and Steve Goodman both had considerable standing in the country music community while also hailing from Chicago, and Jerry Jeff Walker did not face controversy on the basis of his being from Oneonta, New York. It is not just that these are or were successful country artists, but that they would be widely recognized as falling on the authentic side of the genre by those in the community. Further, beyond

erasing the contributions of black southerners (Miller 2010) and Tejano artists (Lewis 2008), grounding country music in the culture of Scotch-Irish settlers to the American south also ignores the significant country music traditions in Canada, Australia, and Africa. Likewise, the notion of a common culture across the American south pays insufficient attention to the differences in experience, settlement patterns, environment, and economics between places like Texas, Louisiana, and Kentucky. Indeed, country music practices reflect this diversity of settlement patterns. For instance, Texas country musicians often write polkas and incorporate accordions to reflect the influence of central European settlers to the region. The abundance of waltz and polka country standards (along with the ubiquity of the African-derived banjo) suggests that the genre is not merely reflective of Scotch-Irish identity.

The last form of source-focused authenticity that we will discuss is one grounded in biographical fidelity. On this account, an authentic country artist would be singing from their own experience. However, this does not square well with standard country music practices. Historically, the norm of country music recording has been one of distinct singers and songwriters. No one would deny that Buck Owens and Dwight Yoakam have the standing to sing country music (both fall on the more ‘authentic’ traditionalist side of the genre), and they don’t seem to be violating any norms by singing “Streets of Bakersfield” despite it focusing on events and sentiments from the life of the songwriter, Homer Joy. Likewise, country music is no stranger to murder ballads (Marty Robbin’s “El Paso”, Colter Wall’s “Kate McCannon”, Chris Knight’s “Down the River”) and no one’s enjoyment of these is contingent on thinking that the artist is the narrator (or



did the things that the narrator did). For the same reason, the standing that allows Steve Earle to perform as a country artist licenses him to write songs like “The Mountain”, in which he describes (from the first-person perspective) the life an Appalachian coal miner, even though Earle is from Houston, Texas (notoriously devoid of mountains and Appalachian coal miners).

This brings us to folkloric authenticity. Remember that, on this account, authenticity is a matter of an artist writing from a place of pure self-expression and divorced from commercial considerations. However, country musicians (even those held up as the paradigm of authenticity) often do let commercial interests influence their creative process (Peterson 1997). Country music is (and always has been) full of pageantry and pandering, and attributions of authenticity do no track distinction in the degree of these things. Considerations like these have led to John Dyck arguing that “country music scholars have debunked the idea that country authenticity gets at anything real.” (Dyck 2021, 1). Setting aside the question of whether country music authenticity might be music-focused (a possibility that I will return to), I will now argue that country music’s notion of authenticity is intelligible and substantive when we consider country music as a dual character concept.

### **3. ‘Real Country’ & ‘Real Punk’:**

The view that I am defending is that the modifier ‘authentic’ functions in the same way for country music that ‘real’ does for punk rock or hip-hop. This is to say that country music is a dual character concept. These are concepts like ‘friend’ where one

could reasonably say something like ‘x is a friend, but they’re not a *true* friend’ (Knobe, Prasada & Newman 2013). When people distinguish friends from real friends, they distinguish those who merely satisfy the descriptive conditions necessary for being a friend from those who also embody the values of friendship. As mentioned, some have already suggested that musical genres could be dual character concepts, as people might question whether a given band is *really* punk or whether an artist’s work is *really* hip-hop (Liao, Meskin & Knobe 2020). Indeed, the phrase ‘real country’ is not absent from country music discourse (there is even a country movie musical titled *Real Country*), and there is no substantive reason, looking at country artist’s and fan’s attributions of authenticity, to think that ‘authentic country’ and ‘real country’ pick out different things. This equivocation is not lost on Dyck, who tells us that “authenticity is a standard for judging ‘real’ country songs and artists.” (Dyck 2021, 1) Thus, when country artists and audiences say that a song is authentic or real, they are telling us that they think that the song should be considered as part of the canon of songs which make up the community’s statement of values. When country fans say that an artist does real country, they are saying that that artist’s work embodies country music’s values. By debating whether a work is or isn’t authentic (or real country), the community refines, revises, or preserves the character of their shared practical identity (and the values which embody it). This is to say that that we can distinguish the problematic gatekeeping around what is or isn’t country music (that authenticity skeptics worry about) from the legitimate aesthetic practice of maintaining that authentic country music is that which satisfies the values and practical identity which characterize it as a dual-character concept.

At this point, the defenders of a music-focused account of authenticity might ask why we should think that ‘real’ is tracking a difference in values rather than merely tracking the degree to which a song participates in the cluster of descriptive features which pick out the genre. Here, the more features typical of the genre that a song employs, the ‘more real’ it is. However, we do have some reason to think that this story isn’t quite right. For instance, while attributions of authenticity in country music tend to track the traditionalist/progressive divide, this divide is not always musical. Country artist Sturgill Simpson is commonly regarded as authentic and, as we have already seen, has positioned himself in contrast to those he perceives as inauthentic. This is despite his incorporating horns (which were banned from the Grand Ole Opry for much of country music history), drawing on influences in hip-hop and psychedelic rock, and covering Nirvana’s “In Bloom”. This seems to depart significantly from the traditional cluster of musical features associated with country as a genre. Likewise, a cluster account is a characterization of what is typical of things of that kind. However, it is precisely what is typical and popular that is commonly denied authenticity. A music-focused account of authenticity can’t make sense of why the authentic country music is the unpopular kind, but the values of country music might be unpopular even among those who are fans of the descriptive features of the genre.

If this discussion has left us inclined to abandon the project of providing an account of authenticity altogether, we might be tempted to follow Dyck in thinking that attributions of it are merely a matter of problematic gatekeeping. However, we might still want to know what conditions must be met in order for an artist or song to survive this

gatekeeping. Dyck's worry about authenticity is that concerns about country music's commercialization are often interpretable as coded concerns about country music's whiteness. That is, inauthentic country music is country music that is the product of commercial interests, and country music that is the product of commercial interests tends to be that which adopts the musical stylings of the predominantly black genres of music that dominate popular music charts, and thus, debates about authenticity become a kind of cudgel with which reactionary elements in country music can gatekeep the genre's racial identity. On this picture, when purists deny authenticity to mainstream country music, they are reacting against the association of musical elements from black-coded genres and black culture with their own country identity. I do not deny that this kind of gatekeeping exists or that it is a problem. Dyck follows Mather in pointing out that while Brooks & Dunn's "Play Something Country" could be read as but one recent entry in the tradition that includes "Murder on Music Row" and "Between Jennings and Jones", it also positions itself in opposition to rap in a way that uses problematic racial coding to dismiss the music 'thumping from the city'. However, the primary contemporary target of most of these commercialization laments is so-called 'bro-country', which is heavily influenced by rock music at a time that the genre is white-dominated.

One other thing that is worth pointing out is that the gatekeeping in question often doesn't revolve around whether a given song is real country, but whether it is country at all. It's not clear what work the notion of authenticity is doing if those using it distinguish their preferred form of country music from the bad kind and then turn around and deny the bad kind's status as country music all together. Why even bother having a notion of

real country music if the bad kind can't be country music in the first place. This is not to say that any given gatekeeper might ultimately relent and be satisfied with calling a song that they disapprove of mere 'country', but that it doesn't seem like the discourse around authenticity is reducible to the problematic kind of gatekeeping that is generally focused on whether a song is country at all.

Besides mapping onto country music discourse, thinking about country music as a dual character concept can also accommodate the intuitions of those who were sympathetic to various accounts of source-focused authenticity. It is not that the artist must satisfy some specific biographical conditions in order to be accepted as authentic but, rather, that these biographical markers can provide audiences with evidence that artists might share their values. For instance, we feel safe in assuming that a person who chooses to continue living the life of rodeo champion (in the case of Chris LeDoux) or who continues to live on a ranch in Pearsall, Texas despite their enormous wealth and fame (in the case of George Strait) really endorses the lifestyle of rodeo champions and ranchers that they manifest in their songs. It is the responsibility of the country artist to communicate this practical identity to us in whatever way they can, whether by playing music that directly embodies country music's values, or by having a biography or lifestyle that lends credibility to their endorsing those values.

If, however, country music is a dual character concept, and authentic country music is that which embodies the genre's values, then we might wonder what those values are. After all, we can articulate the values of other dual character genres like punk

(Prinz 2014). My position is that country music embodies a concern for agency, romanticism about the past (in various forms), and anti-pretension. I will now try to defend each of these claims.

#### **4. The Values of Country Music:**

Questions of agency are the bread and butter of country music. Country music narrators seek freedom and autonomy, and all that comes with it. They want the freedom of the road (Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again", Roger Miller's "King of the Road", Charley Pride's "Is Anybody Goin' to San Antone"), the freedom of the range (Jerry Jeff Walker's "Night Rider's Lament", Colter Wall's "Plain to See Plainsman", George Strait's "I Can Still Make Cheyenne"), and the freedom to make mistakes (George Jones' "Choices", The Dixie Chicks' "Wide Open Spaces"). This last point demonstrates that, perhaps more than any other genre, country music reflects on the consequences of our choices. Protagonists in country songs are frequently being punished for their drinking (George Jones' "Choices" and Jerry Lee Lewis' "What's Made Milwaukee Famous (Has Made a Loser Out of Me)"), punished for leaving their lovers (George Strait's "You Look So Good in Love"), punished for cheating on their lovers (George Jones' "Still Doing Time" and Lefty Frizzell's "Long Black Veil"), or punished for their crimes (Hank Williams' "(I Heard That) Lonesome Whistle", Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried", Townes van Zandt's "Waitin' Around to Die"). Feelings of guilt and shame abound in country. As important as it is that these characters are punished for their choices, it is just as important that these characters think that they deserve the punishment that they are given

and that they are trying to take responsibility for their choices. Even in cases where they aren't being punished, they are often still reflective or remorseful about the consequences of their decisions. For instance, David Allan Coe's "Another Pretty Country Song", John Anderson's "I Wish I Could Have Been There", and Hank Williams Jr.'s "The Blues Man" all focus on the priorities that the artists have pursued and the consequences of a life on the road for their family and health.

In the same way, country music often explores the ways in which the circumstances of one's life push them down a certain path and how this process (the process of living in light of the conditions of one's life) start to close off other paths as well. Hayes Carll's "KMAG YOYO" and Steve Earle's "Rich Man's War" both look at the ways that socioeconomic factors push young men into war, and Carll's "Easy Come Easy Go" is the story of two lonely people driven towards each other by factors in their lives and the way that those same factors fail to deliver the destined lovers completely into the other's arms. Similarly, Chris Knight's "Enough Rope" is the story of a protagonist whose life is entirely dictated to him by circumstance and his struggle to find meaning and happiness in it (that is, take ownership of it) as a result of this. Issues of agency (the consequences of and limitations placed on one's choices in life) are, again, central to the genre.

As mentioned above, the emergence of country music as a commercial genre, distinct from folk and traditional music, historically follows the movement of Americans from rural to city living in post-war America. Country music served a functional role of

connecting people to the traditional way of life, the family, and the places that they left behind. In this way, the romanticization of the past (personal or historical), of traditional values, and of rural life runs fairly deep. In terms of reflecting on an idyllic childhood in a pristine rural environment, we find songs like Sturgill Simpson's "Pan Bowl", John Prine's "Paradise", and Steve Earle's "The Mountain". Likewise, these rose-colored reflections on the past can also extend to one's love life. George Jones' "If Drinking Don't Kill Me (Her Memory Will)", "The Grand Tour", and "He Stopped Loving Her Today" are all entries into a longstanding tradition of songs featuring a protagonist who can't stop dwelling on a relationship that has long since come to pass. Also included in this tradition are also songs like George Strait's "Fool Hearted Memory" and "You Look So Good in Love", and Bobby Helms' "Fraulein". Importantly, country music breakup songs often go out of their way to signal that the breakup is not a fresh wound, but something that has been dwelled on for years.

Finally, this importance of connecting to the past also includes the self-referential value that country artists and listeners place on the country music tradition. This is to say that the idyllic rural childhood of the archetypal country song also includes the time one spent listening to traditional country music. In this way, country artists can serve the reconnecting function of country music by referencing country music history in the same way that they can by referencing the rural environment. Songs like Dillon Carmichael's "Old Songs Like That", George Jones' "Who's Gonna Fill Their Shoes", and Randy Travis' "A Few Ole Country Boys" all feature the artists' attempts to appreciate or situate themselves within the musical tradition that has served them



throughout their lives. What is interesting about this phenomenon is that it can make sense of why traditionalists ultimately relent to the influence of outside musical influences in the end. The Bakersfield scene can reject Chet Atkins' 'countrypolitan' sound for being inauthentic because it wasn't the music of *their* past, but (decades later) Sturgill Simpson can name his authentic country album *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music* as an homage to Ray Charles' countrypolitan classic *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* because it was the country of *his* past.

This brings us to the last of the three values that I argue are characteristic of country music (here, 'characteristic' should not be understood to mean 'proprietary'). In this case, country music shares with punk, an aversion to pretension in all of its forms (Prinz 2014). Country music extolls the virtues of a rural life, lived without pretension, whether it is with respect to material possessions (Elton Britt & The Skytoppers' "Cowpoke", John Denver's "Thank God I'm a Country Boy", John Anderson's "Black Sheep"), high society (Waylon Jennings' "Luckenbach Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)" and Garth Brooks' "Friends in Low Places"), or the rat race of white-collar work (Jerry Jeff Walker's "Night Rider's Lament"). This aversion to consumerism and commercialization, importantly, extends to the music business as well. David Allan Coe laments his having to live a life of rhinestones, jewelry, and limousines on tour rather than a more authentic life at his "piece of heaven in the country" in "Another Pretty Country Song" (A sentiment echoed in Tom T. Hall's "Homecoming"). Likewise, George Strait's "Murder on Music Row", Jamey Johnson's "Between Jennings and Jones", and Sturgill Simpson's "Some Days" all decry the over-commercialization of

country music by the music industry in Nashville. These songs serve a dual function of capturing country music's sense of anti-pretension and anti-consumerism while also connecting the artists to the authentic country music tradition at the same time.

On one interpretation, these musical laments are simply wrong. As mentioned above, the country music establishment has always been driven by commercial interests, so we might wonder why we should decry it now. However, the country music industry made its money by providing a product that served the functional role of reconnecting people to the practical identity that embodied these values. My contention is that concerns about authenticity and over-commercialization amount to concerns that the country music establishment has drifted from fulfilling this functional role. It is perfectly fine (to country listeners) that artists aim at (and succeed at) making money, so long as they make it selling the product that does the work it was intended to. Importantly, this work often relies on a common practical identity between the artist and the audience.

Indeed, commercialization can serve this function quite well itself. The rhinestone covered and elaborately embroidered Nudie suit gives credibility to the nouveau riche hero's journey at the heart of much of country music. The country protagonist is often a person who thought that they knew better, who left the farm (or family or relationship) in search of drugs, alcohol, easy money, crime, fame, material possessions, or life in the big city, but now speaks with some authority about the ways in which this lifestyle has revealed their true desire for an honest rural life of hard work, sobriety, and monogamy. This narrative is spelled out relatively explicitly in songs like Hank Williams' "Honky

Tonk Blues” where the protagonist leaves their home “down on the rural route” and finds that their new “city life has really got [them] down” until they decide to ‘scat right back to [their] pappy’s farm”. Importantly, this paradigmatic narrative captures all three of the values that country music holds dear: agency, romanticism about the past, and anti-pretension. It is the story of a character who chooses to leave behind tradition, finds the lower pleasures and pretensions of modern city life unsatisfying, struggles with the consequences of the life that they chose, and ultimately embraces a return to the idyllic past that they left behind.

By engaging with some degree of pageantry (and donning the Nudie suit), the country singer allows us to recognize their experience with the subject matter of this story and the authority that goes with it. The old money and high society crowd of the cities would opt for more refined attire and the rural working-class could either not afford it or would have no occasion for it. Only those who have undertaken such a journey, and who have the experience of inhabiting both worlds, would find themselves in the position of donning the rhinestone suit. In this way, the same manufactured commercial components that cause skeptics to deny the notion of authenticity all together seems to be testament to it. So long as country artists use their industry connections and the commercialization that comes with them to tell a cautionary tale extolling the romanticized vision of the freedom of rural life, then they are liable to be recognized as authentic country music. In this way, authenticity itself isn’t manufactured, but the conditions of popular music production require (and, to some degree, enable) that artists manufacture signifiers to communicate

their authentic values. This is the tension which country music's authenticity discourse aims to negotiate the limits of.

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