The Aesthetics of Country Music

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Abstract. Country music hasn't gotten much attention in philosophy. I introduce two philosophical issues that country music presents. First, country music is simple. Some people might think that this simplicity makes country aesthetically deficient; I argue that simplicity can be aesthetically valuable. The second issue is country's ideal of authenticity; fans and performers think that country should be 'real'. But country music scholars have debunked this ideal of authenticity; widespread ideas about country authenticity are rooted in a racist and fabricated picture of country music. In discussing these two issues, I highlight the importance of community in country music.

Philosophers have not had much to say about country music. But it is a good time to take up country music. Traditionally focused on high art, philosophers have more recently started to pay attention to low-brow artforms like punk, heavy metal, and street art (Gracyk 2016, Prinz 2014, Riggle 2010, Wiltshire 2016a 2016b).

Why has country evaded philosophical attention? First: Philosophers are often drawn to art that is subtle and complex (though see Carroll 1998, Cohen 1993, Gracyk 1996)—or at least edgy, like punk and heavy metal. In general, country music doesn't tend to be complex or edgy. It tends to be low class and simple (Ching 2003). Think of Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." Second: Some might argue that country music doesn't engage our aesthetic faculties. Philosophers have claimed that aesthetic attention requires that we divorce it from practical concerns (Levinson 2012). But country often appeals to its listeners' *practical identities*—the ways they see themselves. Think of Gretchen Wilson's "Redneck Woman." People like this song because it expresses who they are. Third: There is almost no tradition of country music criticism. Is country worth thinking about? Maybe it's just trashy music for trashy people. Think of Toby Keith's "Red Solo Cup."

I want to show that country music is worth thinking about. I'll focus on two issues. The first concerns the aesthetic value of *simplicity*. I will suggest that simplicity is a core value of country music. Philosophers of art have not said much about simplicity. In fact, it might seem that simplicity is aesthetically bad. I'll try to show what is valuable about simple art. The second issue I'll discuss is the country ideal of *authenticity*. Authenticity is a standard for judging "real" country songs and artists. Since the beginning of country music, people have complained that contemporary country is "selling out" because it sounds like pop music. Philosophers have had plenty to say about authenticity in general (Taylor 2016 e.g.), but country authenticity raises original issues. It involves racial ideals, since authentic country is often coded as white. So it raises a moral question: Is country music racist? Authenticity also presents an artistic question

for country music. Scholars have shown that ideals of country authenticity were fabricated by the country music industry, driven by an attempt to make money. So the way we think about authenticity itself is fake. If country music cannot live up to its own values, is it a failed genre?

A third issue will bubble up throughout this essay: sociability. Country music plays an important role in creating and sustaining communities, real and imagined. Both simplicity and authenticity help to build these communities. But the issue of community raises aesthetic and moral questions. Country music communities have excluded people, especially on the basis of race.

In exploring country music, I will draw upon studies of country from history, sociology, and anthropology. One goal is to introduce this fascinating literature to philosophers; on the other hand, my goal is also to shed light on the philosophical dimension of these questions.

We can get clear on understanding what country music is, or what it attempts to be, by understanding both its history and its values. I will begin with the history.

1. History and Values of Country Music

History

Country music scholars commonly identify one essential property of country music: it is a commercial artform. Country music as a genre is built on mass communication formats.[1] It's commonly acknowledged that country music began in 1923. A producer, Ralph Peer, recorded a popular barn dance fiddler; when released, the recording immediately sold out. Peer hated country music, but he became a key figure in its development. He scouted and recorded foundational country artists, including Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family in 1927.

At its beginning, the borders of country were not well-defined. Country music melded with pop and jazz. Jimmie Rodgers recorded with Louis Armstrong; Bing Crosby and Dean Martin recorded country songs in the 1940s. In fact, the term 'country music' did not exist until the 1960s. Early country was recognized in terms of its subgenres such as hillbilly and old time music. (Hillbilly was influenced by the blues and Anglo folk traditions; old time was influenced by hymnody and Black spiritual music). In the 1930s and 40s, more subgenres developed: bluegrass, western (cowboy) music, and hot Texas swing.

Early on, country music was associated with the American frontier. Despite its frontier image, country became a heavily institutionalized artform, based in Nashville. Its institutionalization was cemented by a massive growth in popularity in postwar America (Malone and Neal 2010). The Grand Ole Opry appeared nationally on NBC radio, and country music was heavily featured on jukeboxes. A country style became institutionalized; the classic honky-tonk style was developed by Ernest Tubb, Hank Williams, and Lefty Frizell by the 1950s.

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[1] See for example Neal 2010, and the essays in Stimeling 2017.

But country music has always evolved. The Nashville sound, developed in the late 1950s, modernized and softened country sounds in the hope of reaching a broader audience. Producers such as Chet Atkins eliminated twangy banjos and fiddles, adding choruses, vibraphones, and pop instruments.[2] The zenith of the Nashville sound is arguably Ray Charles' 1963 album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, one of the best-selling country music records of all time. (Patsy Cline's music is more stereotypical of the Nashville sound.)

There was some reaction against the soft Nashville sound in burgeoning musical movements. The Bakersfield sound of the late 60s, epitomized by Buck Owens, put twang back at the forefront. In the late 60s and early 70s, outlaw country (Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, Tanya Tucker) emphasized rebellion and hard living. While drawing on the style of soul music, outlaw country embodied reactionary anti-feminist and anti-civil rights politics. A third style is what Amanda Marie Martinez (2020) calls "redneck chic." Artists such as Dolly Parton and Emmylou Harris infused country rock with nostalgic bluegrass and honky tonk influences.

Country music has continued to evolve both by reaching back to traditional country sounds and by absorbing sounds from other popular genres. This absorption occurs in neotraditional country in the 80s (Keith Whitley, George Strait), and pop country in the 90s (Garth Brooks, Shania Twain). Artists like Taylor Swift and Kellie Clarkson melded country with pop punk. It continues today from hip-hop influences that music critic Jody Rosen dubbed "bro-country," in artists like Sam Hunt and Florida Georgia Line.[3] (The merger between country and hip-hop reaches back to earlier in the 2000s, with tracks from Nelly and Bubba Sparxxx.)

Despite these influences from other genres, country hasn't assimilated. This is surprising when we consider how diverse its influences have been: soul, gospel, blues, pop, hip-hop, Tejano, German polka, and jazz.[4] Two of the most distinctive instruments in country music, the banjo and the steel guitar, have African and Hawaiian origins respectively. Somehow, country music retains its own unique identity. This is because of its values.

Values

What does it mean to speak about the values of a whole genre? I'm not referring to the qualities that every country song has, or even that every good country song has. I'm referring to values that are generally celebrated as what makes the genre great—what makes a country song good *as a country song*.

One key value of country is simplicity. Harlan Howard famously said, "Country music is three chords and the truth." What makes country music *country* is that it is direct and straightforward. It's *lyrically* simple. Country songs generally take simple themes—love, breakup, tragedy, and drinking—and they explore these themes in simple ways. Country music is *sonically* simple, too,

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[2] This can be heard in recordings of Glen Campbell, Lynn Anderson, and Conway Twitty.

[3] Bro-country seems to involve both 'softshell' and 'hard core' elements. On the one hand, it uses and draws on pop heavily. But it also codes as masculine in a way that's more typical of 'hard core' country.

[4] On the influence of Tejano music, see Lewis 2008.

in its melodies and chord progressions. It's not simple in the sleek way that minimalism is simple. Minimalism can be sophisticated and stylish; country music is usually neither. Country is simple in that it's direct and uncomplicated. It's accessible. It's easy to understand, to play, and to sing along with.

The value of simplicity has its cornerstone in country's association with rural life. (Country subgenres have rural associations, too: 'old time,' 'hillbilly,' and 'country and western.') Country music is generally built on the idea that the good life is the rural life, and the rural life is a simple life. As such, country inherits *moral* values of rural life: hard work, tough living, self-reliance, and traditionalism. Country also embodies *artistic* values of rural life; country songs are consciously simple and unpretentious in a stereotypically rural way. (This value of simplicity, and the association with rural life, are not unique to country music. In his *Preface,* Wordsworth also associates simple lyric poetry with rural values.)

These rural qualities are exactly what can make country music seem lame. Joli Jensen points out that the "defining dilemma of [country music's] identity, is this: *the markers certifying country music as real to fans are the same markers that seem corny and hillbilly to everyone else*." (Jensen 1998: 13) The rural element is off-putting to people with more urbane sensibilities. But this is just what country fans like about it. They want country to truly express country life—or at least to be accurate to their conceptions or experiences. Aaron Fox (2004) argues that country music expresses a "white trash alchemy of the abject sublime".

This connection to practical identities allows us to see another value, authenticity. Country music is *authentic* when it seems to genuinely express a rural element in words or music. Country listeners want the music to be *from* the country. The stakes on authenticity are raised in country music; since it plays an important role in the lives of its listeners, country music needs to be true to its ideals.

Country music doesn't just appeal to antecedent identities; it also helps create and sustain them. It gives people ideals. Country music helps people to see themselves in certain ways that are stereotypically associated with rural life. The music often appeals to people's ideal selves, not to their real selves. It allows people to see themselves as they'd like to be seen or as they see themselves, not as they actually are. As Bryson (1996) and Peterson and DiMaggio (1975) argue, country fans need not be from the country, and they need not be poor. The typical country music listener today may be a suburban mom (Fox 2005). People think of themselves as authentically country even if they lead affluent lives in the city. To paraphrase Nietzsche: Country music helps people become who they are, even when their location won't.

Since country music ties into practical identities, it creates communities of taste. People build country communities based on their identities. Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee," for example, helped people to embrace their identities as redneck or hillbilly—not just individually, but together. When people connect to these songs, they see themselves as part of a broader community—of hillbillies, of people with integrity, as country (Cohen 1999 explores a similar theme in the context of jokes). This is created both by the simplicity of these songs (the direct, straightforward nature of these songs is a typical rural value) and by the fact that they seem

authentic (they seem true to a rural ideal). I'll delve more into these two aspects in the remainder of this essay.

2. Like a Prayer: The aesthetic value of simplicity

Part of the aesthetic value of country lies in its simplicity. Let's define simple art by referring to its profile of cognitive access. Simple art is *easy to grasp*. In this sense, country music is simple not just in its content—the things it is about—but also in its form—its melodies and patterns are easy to identify. Carroll (1998:196) defines mass art in this way: it is "intentionally designed… towards those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort."

But what's valuable about simple art in general? I'll begin by considering some arguments that simple art is deficient. I'll then argue that there are aesthetic values of simple art.

Some people have said that simple art is *morally deficient*. To see this, consider an argument about the value of sophisticated art. Marcia Muelder Eaton (1997) argues that sophisticated artworks help us become morally better (see also Nussbaum 1992). Sophisticated art is not easy to grasp; it involves nuance and detail. It therefore cultivates perceptual skills; we learn to perceive with careful attention. Sophisticated art contrasts against simple art. Simple art is straightforward and blunt; it doesn't cultivate perceptual skill. So, Eaton claims, simple art trains us to make quick and easy judgments. But this makes us morally deficient; a morally good person, Eaton claims, is attentive to details and does not make quick judgments. Eaton targets country music explicitly: "Most Bach fugues offer more toward becoming a reflective, mature agent than do most country-western hits." (1997: 363).

Eaton claims that moral action arises from finely detailed perception. But this seems false. When I think of people who are good because of how they see others, I think of people who see others in *generous and loving ways* (Murdoch 1970; Lugones 1987). Generous perception involves a generally charitable orientation to the world rather than an obsession over details. Generous perception isn't at odds with simplicity. In fact, the most generous people I know are not very sophisticated. (These are the kinds of people that country music celebrates.) So we might wonder about the connection between detailed perception and moral action.

We might also be skeptical about Eaton's claim that a moral life requires complicated moral principles. But whether or not there are clear moral principles, it seems clear that generic moral advice is important: love your friends and family; be loyal; enjoy the little things. It may be trite advice, but it's true nevertheless. This simple moral advice can be found in country. Perhaps these simple truths have to do with the maturity that Bruce Springsteen found. "Country asked all the right questions… It was concerned with how you go on living after you reach adulthood" (Dawidoff 1998: 311). It's just not clear that simplicity makes a work morally deficient.

A second challenge to simple music comes from the idea that simple music—simple art in general—is *aesthetically deficient*. This challenge starts with a different question: What makes *subtle* art valuable? Alex King provides a compelling answer. Subtle art, King says, is "epistemically demanding" (2017: 120). Subtle art demands attention and focus. Because it is

nuanced and complicated, we must make connections for ourselves. King persuasively argues that artistic subtlety is valuable because it affords an opportunity for *active engagement*. Unsubtle art, says King, does not allow for such an experience of agency:

> When we are forced to a certain interpretation… we cease to experience our agency as interpreters. When we are told what to think we no longer need to be receptive or attentive, nor do we need to draw connections and think through implications of the work ourselves. (King 2017: 126-127)

King doesn't criticize simple art. But the argument naturally suggests a criticism. Simple art is deficient to the extent that it doesn't allow for active engagement. Since simple art is easy to grasp, it does not require attention or focus. This calls to mind Adorno's (1941) complaint that popular music "divests the listener of his spontaneity." The common structures in popular music, says Adorno, give rise to simple conditioned reflexes. When you listen to a pop song, you are carried along by the familiar flow. There's no active engagement.

How to respond? One response is to accept the terms of this argument and deny that country music is simple (or deny that *good* country music is simple). We might try to gussy up country music, arguing that it is sophisticated.[5] But this just isn't plausible. Country songs tend to be good as country songs when they are repetitive, simple, and easy to understand. "He Stopped Loving Her Today," famously sung by George Jones, is often said to be the greatest country song of all time. We don't have to draw connections; the lyrics are utterly clear. This is true of contemporary classics like Shania Twain's "You're Still the One" or Randy Travis's "Forever and Ever Amen"; it's true of Charley Pride's "Kiss an Angel Good Morning" and Jimmie Davis's "You Are My Sunshine."

If we accept that country music is characterized by simplicity, we are confronted with two challenges. First, we need to explain what is valuable about simplicity. If subtlety is good because it promotes agency, what makes simplicity good, if anything does? To answer this challenge, we can point out some benefits of simplicity. Simple art can play a greater practical role. Because it is easy to grasp, country music can seep into our daily lives. We can make it a part of everyday driving, drinking, and dancing. For many folks, there's no time to experience art apart from everyday life—and there's no mental space for art that requires mental acrobatics. If art is to knit into the weave of our everyday lives, then it often needs to be sonically and lyrically simple.[6] Furthermore, if it is simple, country music can be enjoyed as an activity—as something that we dress up for, sing along with, and engage (Small 1998).[7] Crispin Sartwell, noting how

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[5] See for example Cecelia M. Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). Carroll (1998) takes this strategy in defending the value of mass art, arguing that mass art often does require attention. The strategy is more plausible for mass art in general than it is for country music.

[6] For a similar point see Shusterman 1999: 226-7. Of course, working class people don't always opt for simple music.

[7] Yuriko Saito, in her excellent discussion of everyday aesthetics, considers "art of the everyday" (2007: 32-33): "objects and performances that simulate or are situated in our everyday life" (32). Some of Saito's examples are of

country music emphasizes rituals both in its presentation and its content, suggests that it demonstrates how Confucian rites exist in a contemporary American context: "country music… emerges out of and enhances the ritual and institutional context in which both the artist and the listener are embedded" (1993: 250) If art is good for its practical uses, we must reject the view that art requires a disinterested attitude—but there was already plenty of reason to reject that view (Riggle 2016, Wolterstorff 2015).[8]

There is a second challenge to simple art: Is simple art still worse than subtle art? Even if there are benefits to simplicity, we have seen a potential downside: Simple art just doesn't allow for interpretive agency, as subtle art does. But now we can answer this challenge, making room for agency: Simple art offers a distinct kind of agency. We can exercise choices about how we make simple songs part of our lives. We choose which song is "our song" for a marriage or a mood or a celebration. I will call this *agency of use*. The simplicity of country music allows for greater agency of use. Recall that simplicity amounts, for our purposes, to being easy to grasp. When songs are easier to grasp, we can do more things with them. Simple meanings typically, though not necessarily, have broader applications. And since they have broader applications, it is up to us to decide how we use them in our own lives.

Think of the simple beauty of spiritual exercises like prayer or blessing—say, the Lord's Prayer or the Barakah or the 23rd Psalm. These prayers and blessings are beautiful because they are simple. Part of their simplicity lies in their broad applications; since they do not require nuance, we can apply them more easily across a broad range of situations. And therefore it is up to use how we use them.

We tend to adopt simple songs as personal songs. This happens in relationships, when you and your partner adopt a song as your wedding song, or as your song for the summer. In these cases, direct and simple is better than complicated. No one is playing Mahler's 9th at their wedding—nor should they, no matter how much they love it.[9]

There is one final virtue of simple art: it allows for greater sociability. Many country fans say that they became fans because of a profound experience of sharing music with others. Brandon Polite (2019) has recently argued that aesthetic experience can be shared; aesthetic properties are not just experienced privately. Polite points out that it's easier to share a musical experience when it is simple. Some musical experiences, such as those found on a Thelonius Monk record or a Bach *ricercare*, will be difficult to share because they require sophisticated knowledge about

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performance art—artistic practices involve everyday art. If we're generous about what counts as art, low art is everyday art as well.

[8] Jeanette Bicknell (2015: 28-29) gives a functional taxonomy of song. Some songs are for performance, some are for communal singing, and some songs serve "practical or cultural functions" (28). Country songs can play all of these roles.

[9] The point here isn't that the meanings of country songs can never shift, for example depending on performer. The point is just that the meanings of country songs tend to be more stable rather than less, so that their meanings are plain rather than obscure. The lyrics of a typical country song are more plain than the lyrics of say, a Talking Heads song. Thanks for Aaron Meskin and Nick Riggle for extensive comments in this section.

music theory. Country songs, like Dolly Parton's "Jolene," are easier to share, because they don't rely on complicated knowledge.

As a result, simple art is good for building community. Simple melodies are easy to learn, so they can spread faster. (This doesn't necessarily mean that simplicity is easy to attain. Songwriters often admire a simple country song, acknowledging that it takes a lot of work to make something simple in the right way.) Despite its value, subtle music is not shareable in the same way. Since it requires more background, it is often shared only in specialized communities, some of which may be built around the musical knowledge itself. Since the barrier for entry is higher, fewer people can share the experience. Simple art, including country music, has the potential to bring people together along broad lines.

3. Authenticity: Regulating Country Music

Musical practices have *regulative concepts* (Goehr 1992)—concepts or ideals that govern production and performance in a musical practice. For example, the ideal of *compliance with the score* is a regulative concept of Western Classical art music. Authenticity is a regulative concept of country music; it guides the way fans and critics listen and evaluate, and it guides the way performers perform. When Lil Nas X's track "Old Town Road" was released, many people (including many country artists) complained that it wasn't "real" country.

There are two familiar ways that people talk about musical authenticity—familiar beyond country (Gracyk 2020). Sometimes they're talking about a performer's individual history; this is *source-focused* authenticity. When we learn that Luke Bryan grew up on a farm, we may think his music is more authentic. Peterson says that country music is authentic when it is sincere and credible (Peterson 1997: 208-9; cf Bicknell 2015: 57). Hank Williams reportedly said, "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." (quoted in Peterson 1997: 217).[10]

But sometimes country authenticity just refers to sonic elements—as when people objected to the Nashville *sound*. This is *music-focused authenticity*. Twang is essential to an authentic country music sound. The problem country fans had with Nashville sound was that it lacked twang. People object to contemporary country because it sounds too much like hip hop—and again, lacks twang. Geoff Mann (2008) defines twang as "the short sustain and dynamic resonance of instruments like banjo, mandolin, or dobro".[11]

I will focus on a third kind of authenticity, *folkloric authenticity*, discussed by the historian Karl Hagstrom Miller in his book *Segregating Sound*. Folkloric authenticity, borne in the early

[10] Jensen identifies five markers of country authenticity: "rural origins, stylized sets, seemingly spontaneous performance, accessible performers, and heartfelt songs." (Jensen 1998: 13).

[11] These sounds, Mann says, are "distinguished by an abrupt, relatively sharp initiation when plucked, which is followed by a quick, usually slightly ascending, muting." (Mann 2008: 79)

twentieth century, has played an important role in shaping common conceptions of country and folk music. Here's what Miller says:

> "Folkloric authenticity maintained that truthful music came from outside the marketplace. Music primarily was a form of expression, not only of individual feelings or collective culture but also of essential racial characteristics, capacities, and stages of evolution." (2010: 5-6)

There are two assumptions in folkloric authenticity. The first is a *motivational assumption about authentic country*: authentic country comes from pure self-expression, not commercial interests. Commercial motivation makes country calculated and thus inauthentic. This assumption is exactly what has always driven complaints about mainstream "pop" country, from the Nashville Sound to Luke Bryan. As Joli Jensen says, "Whenever country music has a 'boom,' whenever it becomes more widely popular and financially successful, the same question arises: Is country music losing its soul?" (Jensen 1998: 3).[12] Folkloric authenticity also includes a *racial assumption about authentic country:* authentic country is the expression of a white culture—in particular, immigrant Anglo-Celtic culture.

Both assumptions of folkloric authenticity cross-cut the distinction between music-focused and source-focused authenticity. The racial assumption means that authentic country comes from the right kind of people—but that also involves the right sound. The motivational assumption could refer to self-expression being an element of people or an element of the sound.

Scholars, including Miller, have given *debunking arguments* against these assumptions. Debunking arguments "seek to undermine a belief or doctrine by exposing its causal origins" (Konigs 2018: 383). We have a common conception of country music as involving folkloric authenticity; according to this conception, it seems natural or inevitable that real country involves pure self-expression and comes from certain races. Debunking arguments show that the common conception is false by exposing its origins; it is a myth that has been constructed about country music. I'll show how the historical sources of why both assumptions are false.

3.1 Debunking Authentic Motivation

According to Miller's notion of folkloric authenticity country music ought to be free from commercialism. In his landmark study of country music, sociologist Richard Peterson explains that country authenticity was, ironically, a fabrication by the industry itself in country's early years (1923-1953). Market forces shaped the idea that true country music is non-commercial.

First, country authenticity is fabricated through images and marketing; the music industry created an impression that country music came from a longstanding musical rural tradition. As we have seen, country music was born out of popular music in the south; but it was marketed as having a pure rural origin. As Peterson says, "a more or less invented tradition can be naturalized

[12] Jensen 1998 tries to reconcile authenticity with commercialism in the history of country music.

into custom" (1997: 217). Peterson shows how the music industry tested out various conceptions of rural authenticity, finally settling on a "western" notion of authenticity by the 1950s. So the image of country authenticity is itself calculated with market considerations in mind.

Second, country authenticity is ginned up through a dialectic between two country styles, a mainstreaming "soft shell" style and a reactive "hard core" style. There is no essential 'hard core' sound; it merely contrasts against mainstream "soft shell" pop trends, which change in each decade. But hard core country music is read as more authentic. In fact, hard core country often adapts elements of contemporary music.

A paradigm of soft shell country is the soft "Nashville sound" that was discussed earlier. "Hard core" reactions—in the Bakersfield sound, Outlaw Country, and Redneck Chic, all drew on contemporary and recent influences from soul, pop, and rock music. These styles were perceived as authentic simply because of its harder rock-influenced sound rather than because of any sonic or lyrical similarity to the past. Even redneck chic only reached back 15 years to country sounds of the 1950s; but this gave the music an authentic feel against the 'soft' sounds of Nashville country. Likewise, neotraditional country sounds 'country' because it has fiddles—but it also incorporates rock percussion and guitar work. Hard core country has an aura of authenticity. But in fact, Peterson argues, it is a sustainable resource that can be updated and modernized in every new generation (1997: 230).[13] No actual traditional continuity is required.

The third way that country music fabricates authenticity is endemic to its early mode of production. Early country music created a market for *new songs that sounded old*. Record producers like Peer traveled the south looking for groups that performed old songs. But there were only so many old songs. Country music executives soon realized that, to be perceived as authentic, country music didn't have to *be* old—it just had to *sound* old. In particular, as Miller shows, executives wanted songs that sounded old in a way that fit their stereotypes about what old (or southern) music should sound like.

For these three reasons, the concept of country music authenticity has been constructed from commercial interests. This means that this ideal authenticity itself has been fabricated and does not meet its own standards of success. But it also means that the music was motivated by commercial interests, even though it was constructed to seem otherwise. This is at odds with the very ideal of country authenticity, which rejects commercial motivation as acceptable.

This leads to a deep artistic problem for country music. It suggests that country music is failed, as a whole *genre*, since it can't make good on its own ideal of authenticity. Let's say that a genre is failed when it cannot meet its own criteria for artistic success. Regulative ideals are criteria for artistic success if anything is—and one of these ideals, for country, is non-commercial authenticity. But this ideal itself is the product of commercial interests, so the ideal is self-defeating. Country music has failed on its own terms. I'll return to consider this problem. But before doing so, I present another problem for country authenticity.

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[13] This also creates a common idea that older country music is more hardcore, purely because it is old. George Strait and Shania Twain are now celebrated as traditional country music artists, though they were originally firebrands.

3.2 Debunking Authentic Whiteness

There's a common impression that country music is historically white music—at its core, it is a tradition of European folksong.[14] This is wrong.[15] It's true that country music was partly born out of old time and hillbilly music in the southern US in the early twentieth century. But for one thing, country is *only partly* an outgrowth of old time and hillbilly traditions. Country also grew substantially from popular music in the Southern United States. This popular music was thoroughly racially integrated (Miller); it had dominant roots in genres of Black music, such as jazz and the blues. Second, old-time and hillbilly genres themselves are not purely—or even primarily—a European tradition. These genres were strongly influenced by many music traditions, especially Black music practices (Huber; Hammond 2001). Later, we will see that the idea that country music had a 'pure' expression in Anglo songwriting was explicitly constructed for marketing the music. Finally: While country music has roots in all of these traditions, it is at its heart a popular, commercial artform; its history begins with the advent of mass media, including records and radio (Malone; Mather; Neal; Peterson).

If country music isn't really a white genre, why do so many people believe it is? In his discussion of folkloric authenticity, Miller records stories of record executives and folklorists who travelled to the south. These folklorists were disappointed that music was integrated—they were sad to see rural folks were singing pop songs, and they were sad to see white and Black Americans singing the same songs. Record executives and folklorists wanted to believe that rural folks—in particular, white rural folks—sang songs orally handed down from Anglo-Celtic immigrant ancestors. Along with many white Americans in general, they wanted these racial preconceptions confirmed. So they curated and marketed the music to fit their preconceptions rather than the facts about how music worked in the South.

There are a variety of avenues through which country music became racially curated and marketed as white music. One was through the influence of ethnomusicologists or folklorists. Folklorists tended to record songs by white performers that sounded "white," and songs by Black performers that sounded "Black". Furthermore, record companies, most notably Okeh records, marketed their records into two streams throughout the 1920s and 1930s: "old-time records," sold to and made by white Americans, and "race records," sold to and made by African Americans. Old time records sounded more like country, and race records sounded more like blues. Miller shows how black musicians who played old-time or hillbilly music were rarely recorded as old-time artists; they were pressured into recording "race" music that fit the racial preconceptions of the white executives. In other words, the music industry—in particular, marketers, distributors, and executives—segregated and racialized music. Their commitment to a racialized model of authenticity, intentional or not, shaped what country music became.

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[14] Bill Malone's influential history *Country Music USA* (1968) is often blamed for this narrative.

[15] See for example Peterson 1997, Mather 2017, Thomas 2013.

Several black musicians were prominent in early country. This includes a harmonica player for the Grand Ole Opry, Deford Bailey, who was fired from the show once it was televised. While never explicit, the Opry's reasoning was clear: It wanted to present country music as a product of white people. DeFord Bailey was not an anomaly as a Black country musicians; many early white country stars, such as Jimmie Rodgers, famously learned music from black musicians. But the focus on individual musicians obscures the larger importance of Miller's point: Early country music was thoroughly multiracial until the model of folkloric authenticity took hold. Old-time music had a huge influence from Black music. Some streams of old-time music originate as, for example, Scottish folk ballads. But other streams of old-time music share sources with Black music, especially blues-influenced old-time music—for example, the music of Etta Baker.

Olivia Carter Mather summarizes the racial debunking argument as follows:

> Since its commercial beginnings in the 1920s, the country music industry has presented the genre as primarily white by marketing to whites, promoting white artists, and linking traditional instruments to white rustic stereotypes. Record companies defined country as a white product when they created separate catalogs for 'race' and 'hillbilly.' This segregation masked hillbilly music's reliance on black traditions and institutionalized the idea that southerners of different races produced different kinds of music.

In his book *Country Soul* (2015), Charles Hughes shows how this musical segregation continued into the late twentieth century. African American songwriters and singers were routinely prevented from making country records. Jerry Williams (Swamp Dogg), for example, wrote songs that became hits by white performers; record executives refused to promote him as an artist. The Nashville sound involved "the use of musical textures from black-identified genres like jazz and R&B" (Hughes 2015: 25). Hughes shows that country and soul records were made by many of the same musicians, in many of the same rooms, but marketed differently.

All this suggests that country was not white at its birth. The idea that authentic country music is white has been constructed throughout its history. But of course, due to this fabrication, country music today is thoroughly white. Because of this false narrative, country music has appealed to white people as *music for white people*. There are several explanations for why this is. Tony Thomas argues that Black artists and audiences rejected country music because of its nostalgia. African Americans did not share white affection for the good old days, especially the good old days of the South. Furthermore, country music directly represented anti-black racist politics. Pointing to Merle Haggard's song "I'm a White Boy," Charles Hughes argues that "By 1970 country music was firmly associated with the politics of white backlash that crystallized around opposition to the civil rights movement and catapulted Richard Nixon to the White House in 1968." (2015: 128; see also La Chapelle 2019).

Yet it is not quite right to say that country music was being made only by white artists or that it appealed only to white audiences. Martinez (2020) shows that in the 1970s, country attracted new urban and nonwhite listeners. Dedicated country radio stations appeared in large city markets and country gained a more diverse listenership. Nonwhite artists such as Charley Pride,

Linda Martell, and Freddy Fender gained some traction. But at this moment when country music enjoyed newfound commercial success, Nashville institutions and radio stations doubled down on country's whiteness. (Recent reporting by Andrea Williams (2020) and Jonathan Bernstein (2020) explores more recently the Black Country Music Association in the 1990s, another attempt by Black artists to diversify Nashville institutions.)

The popular conception that country music is white music has been reaffirmed and promoted by Nashville institutions. This is reaffirmed when country music is white in virtue of its content—when, for example, Black existence is often rendered invisible (see Taylor 2016 for more on Black invisibility in general). Or consider Toni Morrison's (1992) sense of 'whiteness' as involving a relationship of anxiety and fear to blackness. Olivia Carter Mather (2017) shows how country music is seen to be in opposition to stereotypical blackness in Brooks & Dunn's 2005 hit "Play Something Country". In that song, country music is coded as an ideal against urban music, where urban music is coded as Black music.[16] (Mather points out a delicious irony: the song is essentially a blues song.)

This reveals a moral problem with country music—again, as a whole genre. Country music is strongly associated with whiteness as a racial ideal. Country has been presented as a white genre despite its nonwhite roots; nonwhite musicians have systematically been excluded from the genre; the content of country music itself promotes racist ideas about whiteness. If the virtue of country music's simplicity is that it can build community, the problem is that this community has promoted antiblack racism. Not all community is good community.

4. Saving country music

I've raised two problems for the whole genre of country music, an artistic problem and a moral problem. I will close by briefly suggesting how we might address these problems, beginning with the moral problem.

If we claim that country music is irreversibly racist, we ignore its history. Artists such as the Carolina Chocolate Drops and Rhiannon Giddens have sought to recover the tradition of Black hillbilly music. It also ignores the powerful potential for country music to reject the racism of its past. Nonwhite and mixed-race performers are finally gaining acceptance in Nashville institutions. In November 2018, Jimmie Allen was the first African American artist to reach #1 on the Billboard Hot Country charts.[17] In September 2020, Mickey Guyton was the first Black woman to sing on the Country Music Association awards. With success by Blanco Brown, Kane Brown, Breland, Gabe Lee, William Prince, and Reyna Roberts, it looks like we may finally be entering a time when nonwhite musicians are recognized in mainstream country music, and promoted by Nashville institutions. This means that country may also be acknowledging its nonwhite audience.

[16] "The DJ played P Diddy / She said 'I didn't come here to hear / Something thumping from the city'."

[17] Another Black country artist, Charley Pride, had several singles that charted to #1 on another chart, the US Country Hit Parade, in 1969-1971.

Country music fans are a more diverse group than you might think. Country plays an important role in many indigenous communities throughout North America—after all, First Nations reservation life is often rural (Witmer 1973, Whidden 1984, Dueck 2013, Jacobsen 2017). Many African Americans are also country music listeners (Foster 1998). Ray Charles recounts that, growing up in the country, country was always on the radio. The white-presenting nature of country music—including the actions of Nashville institutions—obscures its often more diverse audiences. This all suggests that the proper response to this moral problem is change, not rejection. Indeed, as Martinez has pointed out, country has a unique potential to reject its white image (2021). Think of its diverse collection of trademark instruments. In an article "Why Does Country Music Sound White?" Goeff Mann argues that country music's whiteness isn't natural to country music—instead, it is read onto country music and reproduced in country music.

One might wonder: If racially marginalized communities can find ways to embrace country music despite its racist past, doesn't this mean that country music lacks the simple meanings that I have claimed? Is the racism part of the plain meaning of these songs? My claim here is not that the content of country music songs always explicitly encode racist meanings, only that the genre's context gives it strong racist associations. While the association is sometimes strong, it is just an association rather than an essential part of the genre. This should give us hope.

Turn next to the artistic issue, the issue about commercialization. On the folkloric conception of country authenticity, country music should be non-commercial. But much country music has been motivated by commercial interests. Does this mean that country is a failed genre?

One response is to deny the folkloric notion of authenticity. Some writers, seeing this tension, argue that authenticity is consistent with commercialism: Diane Pecknold (2007) has argued that audiences have recognized the artifice and commercial nature of country music all along. Joli Jensen (1998) has argued that the institutional trends reflect demand; country music trends are authentic inasmuch as they respond to realities of what people want to hear. Finally, Shusterman (1999) argues that country authenticity is rooted in emotional resonance; it need not be rooted in the truth of the historical narrative.

A lot of people like to think that acoustic country is authentic—this drove the success of the soundtrack of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, an important moment in country music. But acoustic country isn't authentic in a music-focused way; country music in any subgenre has always sounded drastically different from decade to decade. And acoustic country isn't authentic in a source-focused way; as Nadine Hubbs (2015: 52) points out, many features of acoustic country music that is commonly thought of as "authentic" involve living a rustic life that performers don't live by—herding cattle, for example. David Berman suggested that what he called "Walmart Country"—commercial country music—does a better job of tracking listener experiences than acoustic country.[18] Berman calls it "a fetishization of Depression-era country life".[19]

[18] Quoted in Hubbs 2015: 52.

[19] Quoted in Hubbs, op cit.

Authenticity often becomes a flag for more general issues about where one's personal ideals lie. As Jeanette Bicknell offers an account of authenticity as boundary policing: "Debates about authenticity are important to fans when music (this music, but not that music) is constitutive of personal or social identity. Boundary-policing conversations about music are a way of staking out one's identity and drawing boundaries around one's culture or sub-culture." (2015: 63) This is why so many country music fans are so reluctant to allow that nonwhite country artists are really making country music, or that hip hop can be effectively mixed with country. This explains why so many country music fans obsess about "saving" country music: Saving country music means saving a racial ideal of whiteness. If this is how authenticity really functions in country music, then it's clear that we need to get rid of authentic country music in this sense. Anxieties about authentic country music often just reflective of racial anxieties—though of course they might be anxieties about rural ideals.

I suspect that a case could be made that hip hop influence is in fact the most authentically country element one could add, but I won't make that case here. I'll merely mention that hip hop influences continue the tradition of country adapting to new influences at every decade in its history. The prominence of Lil Nas X's 2019 hit "Old Town Road" brings many of these issues into sharp focus. While the track was stylized with many country tropes (lyrically and sonically), it also featured a trap beat. As music critic Jon Caramanica said, it represents the fruition of a 20-year long conversation between rap and country (2019). The track revealed some racial anxieties in country music; it was removed from the Billboard Hot Country chart after the first week. (Of course, it went on to be the longest #1 hit in history, with a record-setting 19 weeks at the Billboard Hot 100.) Many pointed to the antagonism of institutional country music either to black artists, or to overt forms of hip-hop, or both. Yet as country continues to adopt more influences of hip hop, we ought to hope that it will promote nonwhite listeners and artists.

This is just an introduction. There are many other important issues that need more attention, for example gender and race. And furthermore, the issues I have explored here have importance beyond country music. Simplicity and authenticity take a unique form in the country context; but they deserve philosophical consideration in other forms of music, too.[20]

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