
Country Canon

The Bloomsbury 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ series of album monographs encompasses both canonical rockism and canonical popmism. Rockism: defined often in a backwards sense—the authenticity of music, and technical skill, over the artifice of pop. Popmism: defined by Jody Rosen as setting “the old assumptions on their ear: Pop (and, especially, hip-hop) producers are as important as rock auteurs, Beyoncé is as worthy of serious consideration as Bruce Springsteen, and ascribing shame to pop pleasure is itself a shameful act.”¹ Notably, the two books that early on sold best for 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ were Carl Wilson’s polemic about populist taste via Celine Dion’s “Let’s Talk about Love”² and Kim Cooper’s volume on indie rock heroes Neutral Milk Hotel’s “In an Aeroplane over the Sea.”³ The critical conversation in the 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ books is not pop against rock, or commercial against indie, but commercial and indie working together to limn a post-rock crisis of taste.

Surveying the series volumes, most of the albums are North American and follow either prescribed indie taste or an allowable popmism one. What is not even considered pop, however, the but in the “everything but” (as Wilson noted in a taut discussion of the issue), is country. Excluding the Japanese and Brazilian series, there are 154 album monographs to date. Depending on how loosely one defines country, there are between three (Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee,” by Rachel Rubin; Bobbie Gentry’s “Ballad of Billie Joe”, by Tara Murtha; and Johnny Cash’s *American Recordings*, by Tony Tost⁴) and seven (if you consider Grateful Dead, Drive-By Truckers, The Byrds, or Nick Cave country or country-adjacent). What is missing? Only the most important artists in country music history: Dolly Parton, Willie Nelson, George Jones, Freddy

1. Douglas Wolk, “Thinking About Rockism,” in *Seattle Weekly*, 4 May 2005. Archived from the original on 4 June 2005.

2. Carl Wilson, *Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017): 15–19.

3. Kim Cooper, *Neutral Milk Hotel’s In the Aeroplane over the Sea* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2014)

4. Rachel Rubin, *Merle Haggard’s Okie from Muskogee* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018); Tara Murtha, *Bobbie Gentry’s Ode to Billie Joe* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Tony Tost, *Johnny Cash’s American Recordings* (Bloomsbury, 2011). A volume about John Prine by Erin Osmon is forthcoming.

Fender, Shania Twain, Garth Brooks, Barbara Mandrell, Jimmie Rodgers, and Charley Pride, among dozens of others.

Five main reasons explain this gap: even popoptimist pop has its own shibboleths; country music operates under a different ecosystem; singles structure genres differently than albums do; efforts at diversity notwithstanding, music criticism is not a working-class playground; and canonizers guided by fashion retain a desire to be cool, or at least current. I'll briefly examine each of these:

- a) Popoptimism has overcorrected from rockism: its preferences tend toward a group of artists—Carly Rae Jepsen is a perfect example—who conceptually sound like they sell, but don't really.⁵ In country music, by contrast, because of the legendary nature of producers such as Billy Sherrill or studio musicians like those at Studio A, its elements of backstage construction are rarely ignored. Country has functioned in the larger pop culture as a Brigadoon, disappearing constantly from mainstream discourse only to emerge every few decades to a wider audience. (Robert Christgau, known as dean of American rock critics, comes closest to understanding this in his blurb on Garth Brooks's album *Ropin' the Wind*: "As El Lay song doctors process NutraSweet, textured cellulose, and natural fruit flavors through a web of synthbites, a Nashville neo traditionalist thrice-removed wins a nation's heart standing up for the studio-pop verities. After scoring one of those songfests Nashville sneaks past us urbanites in 1989, he bet the farm on the follow-up and won over a country audience in the market for their own style of schlock."⁶) Nashville popoptimism is different from pop popoptimism. Notably, the three 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ volumes that focus on canonical country are about non-country ideas—the reclaimed diva in Bobbie Gentry, the cult of authenticity in Merle Haggard, and the Rick Rubin connection in Johnny Cash.
- b) Country speaks to itself. It doesn't really care much about other forms of popular music, which return the favor. *Rolling Stone* has only had eleven country music stars on its cover, if you include Doug Sahm.⁷ Country had and has its own venues, museums, critics, and conversations, even its own reissuing companies—the German label Bear Records doing the work that Rhino did for rock 'n' roll. This has changed somewhat—current *New York Times* pop critic Jon Caramanica is an adroit listener to country, *Rolling Stone* has added a vertical online, and NPR regularly commissions writers, albeit about critically approved country that is either tasteful or has broken mainstream. Younger performers and critics push against the monolith of producers, label heads, radio connectors and performers, so the silo might break sooner rather than later, perhaps across race lines via Rissi Palmer with Apple Music,⁸ or sexuality with Justin Hiltner's work with Bluegrass Pride.

5. Carly Rae Jepsen appeared on thirteen best-of-the-year lists but sold only 13,000 units.

6. Robert Christgau: "Album: Garth Brooks: Ropin' the Wind," https://www.robertchristgau.com/get_album.php?id=1338. Accessed 25 April 2021.

7. Cover Browser, "Rolling Stone Covers," <https://www.coverbrowser.com/covers/rolling-stone>.

8. Rissi Palmer, Apple Music, <https://www.colormecountry.com>. Accessed 25 April 2021

- c) With very few exceptions—Willie in the 1970s, Garth in the 1990s—country music’s canon-making process tends more toward songwriting than album creation. The most significant construction of a country canon in the last few decades has not been an album guide, like *Spin Alternative*⁹ or *Trouser Press*,¹⁰ but David Cantwell and Bill Friskics Warren’s *Heartaches by the Number: The 500 Best Country Singles*.¹¹ When we think about great country work, we tend to think of Dolly Parton singing “Jolene,” or Tammy Wynette with “Apartment No. 9,” or even Sam Hunt’s “Body Like a Back Road.” The music has always been conceived through sides, not whole albums, to court what has been predominantly a radio genre. Cash gets a 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ volume because of his connections to Dylan, for the older sort, and Rick Rubin for the younger set—he is translatable to the critical canon of 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ writers. Someone like George Strait can sell millions of records, pack arenas, and have sixty no. 1 country hits, and not be worthy of considering. His Texas waltzes—paean to domesticity, and softness—will never be cool, their ardor having their own biography and their own subculture, which isolates critics who do not value the kinds of desire Strait longs for.
- d) Traditional country had solid working-class elements, but its values, such as monogamy and economic stability, are rarely written about among the critical classes. Critics who want to argue about what breaks ground are less likely to laud that which seeks to preserve or restore order. There is space to treat this preservation as exotica (hagiography around Dolly settles on this point), or a moral rigor almost outside of human experience (Cash in his most Jeremiah mode), or songwriters who play at being outside tradition (Kristofferson, Willie—though this forgets how close these performers were to the Nashville establishment), or who were thought to be secretly progressive (Loretta, in her 1970s “The Pill,” “Fist City” way). Since the 1980s, country music has been played for the suburbs, emerging money coming out of the Sunbelt. Stories of the technocrats of the middle classes are not taken seriously, not considered worth noting—again, think of Strait, comparable to Balzac in the granular detail of small stories of the petite bourgeoisie, but greeted with relative silence.¹²
- e) Even populist anti-taste makes an argument based on connoisseurship. Wilson’s discussion of Celine Dion required a discussion of Elliott Smith. Country’s values are square values, and trendy country music stars never quite encompass the entire discourse of country music proper. Put it this way: Hipsters value the underappreciated. Country nostalgia identifies with the taken for granted.

9. *Spin Alternative Record Guide*, ed. Eric Weisbard and Craig Marks (Vintage Books: New York, 1995).

10. Ira A. Robbins, *The Trouser Press Guide to New Wave Records* (Charles Scribner’s Sons: New York, 1983), *The Trouser Press Guide to ’90s Rock* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 1997).

11. Bill Friskics-Warren and David Cantwell, *Heartaches by the Number: Country Music’s 500 Greatest Singles* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

12. Kelefa Sanneh, “George Strait’s Long Ride,” in *The New Yorker*, 17 July 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/24/george-straits-long-ride>. Sanneh is a notable anti-rock critic.

There are many country artists, though, whose work is overdue for the 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ treatment. The recent books and podcasts on Dolly Parton and her decades-long performance of Appalachian authenticity misreads her complex understandings of camp and of performative gender—but she is beloved by everyone, including indie critics.¹³ And the 1970s albums of Willie Nelson are as conceptually whole, as built around deeply personal views of personal and relational failings, as *Shoot Out The Lights* (which has a 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ volume).

There is a currently missed opportunity for conversations about country, its gnarled aesthetics and politics, to be part of the conversation about popular music in general. Poptimism, and the 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ series, should recognize that though country music is said to rest on tradition, a swirling maelstrom of innovation exists within it. ■

13. Jad Abumrad, podcast, *Dolly Parton's America*, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/dolly-partons-america>; Sarah Smarsh, *She Come By It Natural* (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2020)