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## Book Review: *Queer Country*

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Shana Goldin-Perschbacher. *Queer Country*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2022. 288 pages.

I grew up in Jasper, Georgia, a tiny town nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. As a child, I heard bluegrass, country, folk, and white southern gospel on the local radio and TV channels and at church and community events. This music was also part of my family life. My grandfather adored Bill Monroe and played mandolin and sang in a style influenced by his idol. Meanwhile, my older brother was initially drawn to bluegrass and later to the outlaw country of Willie, Waylon, and especially Hank, Jr. Both my maternal grandmother and mother played church hymns, popular songs, and light classical music on the piano. Holidays were musical occasions. After we'd stuffed ourselves full as ticks on chicken and dressing, ham, sweet potato soufflé, and more cakes and pies than we knew what to do with, someone would pull out an instrument, and the music would begin.

I hated it. Bluegrass, gospel, and country were the sounds of where I came from, and all I wanted was to get as far away from it as possible. Growing up gay in the rural South left me feeling like an outsider in many respects, and I couldn't hear a place for me in the music of that region. When I was about eight years old, I first heard a recording of my voice—twangy, high-pitched, country—and immediately set to iron out those wrinkles, to eradicate and erase that hillbilly patois. To this day, there are certain words I have trained myself to avoid saying (no, I won't tell you which ones) because I couldn't quite get my accent out of them.

When I started to study music—first trombone, then piano—I was drawn to classical music. Mozart, Chopin, Debussy, and Rachmaninoff sounded like distinction, like a world of raised pinkies, sparkling chandeliers, skyscrapers, and nights at Atlanta Symphony Hall. In my mind, classical music separated me from the herd, made me special or different. Though I didn't realize it at the time, I was using classical music to explore my own sense of otherness in relation to home. In college, as a first-generation student, I majored in piano. By day, I buried my head in the scores of "Great Composers." But I also had a secret.

I also kind of hated classical music. So, late at night, when no one was around, I snuck into practice rooms, opened my backpack, and played the songs of home, everything from the oldies my dad listened to on Atlanta's Fox 97, church hymns in a style my fingers

never really mastered, bluegrass tunes, and country. In my daily life, I listened exclusively to pop music, especially artists of the '70s such as Linda Ronstadt, Elton John, James Taylor, Carole King, and Joni Mitchell. It wasn't until many years later that I realized that all these artists were connected by country music. Of course, I also loved Dolly, Loretta, Reba, and Tammy, but the subtle influence of country music in those SoCal singer-songwriters drew me in: melodic singing, acoustic accompaniments in an apparently simple style, austere arrangements that emphasized storytelling in the lyrics, and a sense of honesty that is not quite the same as "confessionalism" but nevertheless conveyed something authentic and real. All my life, I'd been trying to get away from my upbringing, running away from the sounds of home, only to find that they'd followed me everywhere I traveled.

Like most queer folks, I was totally ignorant of my own cultural history. I had no idea that LGBTQ+ artists, performers, songwriters, and composers had shaped the history of music, and it would have blown my mind to learn that there was a queer history of *country music*. So, with great enthusiasm, I picked up Shana Goldin-Perschbacher's excellent new book, *Queer Country*.

*Queer Country* builds on the pioneering work of Nadine Hubbs, whose *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* threw open the closet door on LGBTQ+ contributions to the genre. Whereas Hubbs offers a series of historical case studies and sociological musings on the complex relationship between taste and class, Goldin-Perschbacher gives the reader a glimpse of the long history of queer country, from "I Love My Fruit" (1939) by the Sweet Violet Boys (later revealed to be the Prairie Ramblers in disguise) and Wilma Burgess (1939-2003), whom Goldin-Perschbacher identifies as the first out lesbian country singer, to *Lavender Country* (1973), the first gay country album. *Lavender Country* and its creator, Patrick Haggerty (1944-2022), serve as touchstones throughout *Queer Country*. After toiling in relative obscurity for most of his career, Haggerty was recognized as the gay grandfather of country music after the publication of an article on LGBTQ+ country music in the now defunct *Journal of Country Music*.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, Goldin-Perschbacher brings queer country into the present moment through in-depth interviews with a range of artists including Rae Spoon, My Gay Banjo, Joe Stevens, and others. In this way, Goldin-Perschbacher fills in many more details of the ideological, musical, and political map whose rough contours were initially sketched by *Lavender Country*.

Perceptions of country music, especially to outsiders, are often exaggerated to the point of farce, parody, or even camp. The personae of figures such as Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, and Reba McEntire (to name just three country divas) can be seen as a type of drag, a caricature of femininity, and therefore, nothing to take seriously. But behind the opulence, rhinestones, and big hair is a deep love of the genre and of the people whose lives country music touches. Parton, for example, is famous for saying things like "[I]t takes a lot of money to look this cheap," while she has spearheaded economic revitalization efforts in her Tennessee mountain home and created a successful

1. Chris Dickinson, "Country Undetectable: Gay Artists in Country Music," *Journal of Country Music* 21 no. 1 (2009): 28-39.

nationwide child literacy program with Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Her over-the-top public persona, then, is a kind of drag and a tool with which she does good works. Goldin-Perschbacher's analysis of the balancing act between camp and sincerity in country music more broadly, and queer country, in particular, is one of the book's greatest contributions. After all, as Christopher Isherwood wrote in 1954, "You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. . . . You're not making fun of it, you're making *fun out of it*."<sup>2</sup> Queer artists certainly understand the power of masking and adopting larger-than-life personae, but to do so requires a subtle understanding of the necessity of donning a mask in the first place. For many of the artists represented in *Queer Country*, the point isn't to parody country music but, as masked singer Orville Peck says, "Be as sincere as possible" (184). LGBTQ+ country musicians understand that country music has a sense of humor about itself and about the sometimes stark realities of rural life, but humor becomes a point of access through which serious topics (such as homophobia, anti-trans legislation, attacks on LGBTQ+ civil rights, as well as the erosion of the rights and potential of the working class) can be discussed.

And this is why Haggerty's work with *Lavender Country* becomes a through line in *Queer Country*. Haggerty was a political radical. His songs articulate a version of LGBTQ+ politics that flourished in the years just before and after Stonewall in 1969 and that were pushed to the margins in the wake of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. After AIDS, American LGBTQ+ politics increasingly focused on assimilationist goals such as military service, marriage, and family rights. In this normative bargain, LGBTQ+ politics lost its radical edge, and in recent years, efforts to reverse queer rights, especially those of transgender people, have been frighteningly successful. *Queer Country* reminds us of the need for a visionary LGBTQ+ politics that can see beyond assimilation into a heteronormative mainstream, one that will fundamentally transform social, political, educational, faith, and even musical systems through intersectional activism and art.

Heeding Haggerty's twangy call, I think back to my own relationship to country music—a genre that signaled a world in which I felt alienated and uncomfortable, waiting for my moment to escape into a rainbow-colored future. Over the course of my life, I've made a slow westward drift and now live in Oklahoma—a place that may be seen as politically retrograde. But it's also the home of many country artists and a place where the playful sincerity of the genre can still be seen on display at queer karaoke bars and honky tonks every night of the week. Goldin-Perschbacher has given us a gift with this book, a way of thinking about queerness and country music, sincerity and camp, genre and gender. A gift and a tool. Her work invites us to refashion ourselves, our art, and our culture to make queer country a reality, and maybe have a little fun in the process.

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2. Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 10.