

Sing Me Back Home

Country Music and Radical Community Organizing in Uptown Chicago

ABSTRACT This paper examines the role of country music in the political life of the Young Patriots, a radical leftist group composed of white southern migrants to Chicago that allied with the Black Panther Party during the 1960s and 1970s. It begins by taking up scholarly accounts of the Republican Party's strategic embrace of country music during the era before examining the ways in which the Young Patriots used country music as a tool to organize in their local community. It argues that by grounding their analysis of country in the political economy of their neighborhood of Uptown Chicago, and institutions particular to migrant enclaves—especially the urban “hillbilly bar”—the Young Patriots offered an interpretation of country's politics that runs counter to the racialized business logic that governed Music Row and White House as well as more contemporary narratives about country music's essential political intransigence. Finally, it offers provisional thoughts on how this case study illustrates a fundamental challenge for political progressives invested in country music: how to organize the complexity of a genre whose politics were—like the politics of the working-class—often divided against itself and expressed in deeply contradictory ways with regards to central political issues like race, gender, and the nation, and what it means to put those organized politics to work. **KEYWORDS** popular music, country music, new left

Hegemonizing is hard work
Stuart Hall

It's a big job just gettin' by with nine kids and a wife
But I've been a workin' man dang near all of my life
And I'll keep on workin' long as my two hands are fit to use
I'll drink a little beer in a tavern
and sing a little bit of these workin' man blues
Merle Haggard

If 20 casual visitors had to nominate a Chicago neighborhood for oblivion, the Uptown community near the Wilson Avenue L station might get 20 votes. It is seedy, dreary, congested, despairing—a multiracial poor people's patch, Appalachia in Chicago. Crumby taverns, shabby resale shops, broken glass and broken hopes are its trademarks.

Chicago Daily News
27 September 1969

On 13 October 1968 Gurney Norman, a writer from Eastern Kentucky living in California, went to see George Wallace speak at San Francisco's Cow Palace. All across the country that campaign season, the American Independent Party's candidate for president had preached his gospel of the blue-collar American little man, fulminating against the bureaucrats, pointy-headed professors, hippies and freaks, and here he was, bringing his staging of this conflict squarely to the doorstep of the counterculture. The atmosphere was tense. Eleven thousand people had materialized, and fights were breaking out as Sam Smith and His American Independent Party Band—Wallace's house hillbilly act band—warmed up the crowd.¹ Norman had come, equipped with a knowing sense of irony, to gawk at the spectacle and had little expectation he would be moved by Wallace's backwoods charade, but when he finally saw "the reality of [Wallace's] following. . . . Heard the reality of his musical band," it produced "a sadness so large that my sudden boredom with it [was] transcended."² The phony hillbilly band was what really did it. Advance publicity of the rally had advertised "country music," but the music Sam Smith's ensemble played was not, to Norman's ear, country at all. "A combo in which the predominant instruments are a trumpet and a drum, playing *hillbilly*" he wrote, "is about as arousing, as funky, as down-home as a convention of Jaycees at a Holiday Inn." And yet, the assembled crowd loved it. "Sam Smith played "Hello, Dolly!," and everybody applauded like it was Hank Williams they were hearing. Sam Smith would invoke the names of people like Hank Thompson and Merle Haggard, and the folks would nod and smile and then *go right on nodding* when Smith turned around and offered us "Ode to Billy Joe". . . played as an *instrumental* on a *trumpet!*"³

What upset Norman was not the inauthenticity of the music, per se, but the psychic contortion implied in its sincere celebration by "all the lonesome, uprooted, transplanted and therefore homeless country boys and hillbillies" who Wallace had come to address. In the combative atmosphere of the rally, conflict bred belonging, and "the shouting match with the beards," as Norman put it, engendered a sense of identification which in turn "allowed George Wallace to once again get away with his claim that he's an honest-to-god country boy with red-clay dirt under his fingernails and chicken gravy on his tie."⁴ Meanwhile, he continued, the same vengeful politics allowed "Sam Smith . . . to get away with *his* claim that his music is country music, music from the soil, music made by the oppressed, and not the oppressor." Standing among people he imagined as his "kin," workers who had arrived in California from their homes in places like Kentucky and Alabama and Oklahoma, Norman was overcome by despair at the warped sense of identity Wallace offered these people. They "really believed that image of themselves," he wrote, "And that is why it's all so sad."⁵

Norman's rebuttal to Wallace and Sam Smith and his brothers and sisters who had forgotten themselves was twofold: that country music was the music of the oppressed,

1. Peter La Chapelle, *I'd Fight the World: A Political History of Old-Time, Hillbilly, and Country Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 216.

2. Gurney Norman, "A Kentuckian at the Wallace Rally," in *One Lord, One Faith, One Cornbread*, ed. Fred Nelson and Ed McClanahan (Garden City; New York: Anchor Press, 1973).

3. Norman, xxii-xxiii.

4. *Ibid.*, xxii.

5. *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.

and that poor hillbillies should recognize that their oppressors were wealthy politician hustlers like Wallace and not hippies and people of color. And yet he had witnessed the rally and felt at a loss in terms of action. “The question,” he wrote at the end of his piece, “is how do you respond when a relative that you love goes for your throat?”⁶ This paper explores the same knot of questions and attempts an answer. It examines the case of the JOIN Community Union and the Young Patriots Organization, two white southern migrant activist groups from Chicago who used country music as a tool to build working-class, anti-racist class consciousness in the neighborhood of Uptown during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and worked alongside other radical groups, most notably with the Illinois Black Panther Party as members of the Rainbow Coalition. Their left interpretation and operationalization of country music cut against the contemporaneous right-wing embrace of the genre by George Wallace and Richard Nixon. Seeking the ear of Middle America, these politicians claimed country music for the right, and as the musical establishment of Nashville welcomed their overtures, the genre’s association with conservative politics was so thoroughly cemented that it endures to this day. During these same years, the activists who made up JOIN and the Young Patriots engaged in a counter-hegemonic struggle over country music, which they held to be both an important record of popular working-class thought and, as a musical form with interracial roots, evidence for solidarity with oppressed people of all races. These groups used country music as an adhesive element in their politics: they sang country songs at rallies, quoted Hank Williams in their newsletters, and mined its blue-collar aesthetic for useful and persuasive symbols of class identification, but they also used the spaces in which it circulated to articulate and organize an egalitarian left populism. As I will argue, by intervening at the level of the neighborhood at this particular historical conjuncture, a moment of great cultural change when the future was in contest and lines to a usable past were being contested, JOIN and the Young Patriots used country music to effectively express a political philosophy of working-class consciousness and radical interracial solidarity that has important implications for contemporary discussions of progressive politics, country music, and collective struggle.

As I will stress in this paper, the political program of JOIN and the Young Patriots was emphatically local, a grassroots experiment in radical organizing born out of material conditions specific to Uptown Chicago. At the same time, their politics developed within the much wider context of the protest movements of the late 1960s and the right-wing political reaction that ensued. Their approach to country music shared this dual outlook: it was, in a sense, an attempt to claim, or reclaim, country music from the forces of political reaction, but this struggle understood itself as counter-hegemonic and was interwoven with a participatory material politics carried out at the level (and within the possibilities) of the neighborhood. While most of my analysis will focus on JOIN and the YPO, it is important to briefly review the reactionary articulation of country music against which they carried out their work. As is now commonly acknowledged, country music became a question of some national political importance beginning in the

6. *Ibid.*, xxiv.

late 1960s.⁷ This phenomenon began with George Wallace, who, in his presidential bids in 1964 and 1968, transformed the common southern political practice of campaigning alongside country music acts into a national strategy for galvanizing white working-class voters.⁸ Wallace's strategy was then mainstreamed by Richard Nixon, who in a series of spectacles embraced country music from the White House in an effort to express his solidarity with the American working-class, effectively formalizing a political association with the Republican Party that endures to this day. Wallace's apprehension of country's political power was instinctive—he was raised on the music, observed its use by his political mentors, moved among its stars as a member of the southern political elite, and never forgot its ability to reach an audience and move a crowd.⁹ Nixon's approach was calculated and corporate. After narrowly defeating Hubert Humphrey and gaining the White House in 1968, the president and his advisers immediately set to work on reelection. The approach they devised came to be known as the "Southern Strategy," and was essentially an attempt to absorb the lesson of George Wallace, whose historic third-party run that same year had earned him 13.5% of the national vote, carried five southern states, and made surprisingly deep inroads with blue collar workers in the North. As Jefferson Cowie has argued, the new administration interpreted Wallace's success as clear evidence that "the white working-class vote was politically up for grabs and [that] Nixon could be the leader to knit them into a new political coalition," to break these stalwart voters away from the Democrats and absorb them into the Republican base.¹⁰

The approach they devised was to mount a cultural campaign. Rather than make commitments to the material betterment of the working-class, the administration would pursue a politics of recognition and celebrate the worker *as an ideal*. This appeal to the "allegedly superior moral backbone and patriotic rectitude" of the American worker, always defined against the non-productive protesters and freeloaders stereotypical of the left, led Nixon, as it had Wallace, to country music.¹¹ He brought country stars such as Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, and the Osborne Brothers to perform at the White House, declared October "Country Music Month" in 1970, '71, '72, and '73, and famously appeared as the guest of honor as the Grand Ole Opry christened its new "mod tile and plate-glass" performance center where, standing on stage next to Roy Acuff, he solemnly proclaimed to the assembled thousands: "country music is America. It started here. It's ours. It isn't something that we learned from some other nation, it isn't something that we inherited . . . It's as native as

7. Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Charles L. Hughes, "Pride and Prejudice: Race and Country Music in the Era of Backlash," in *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); La Chapelle, *I'd Fight the World*; Bill C. Malone, *Country Music USA: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018).

8. Parker Ramsay, "Politics and Country Music in the Political Campaigns of George Wallace, 1958–1972" (BA diss., University of Cambridge, 2013).

9. *Ibid.*, 7, 12.

10. Jefferson Cowie, "Nixon's Class Struggle: Romancing the New Right Worker, 1969–1973," *Labor History*: Vol 43, No 3, *Labor History* 43, no. 3 (2002), 269.

11. *Ibid.*, 258.

anything American we could find.”¹² As Diane Pecknold has argued, this was in many ways an experiment in co-branding between Nashville and the White House, whereby the industry could improve its cultural standing and the president might transform “an established marketing demographic into a political one.”¹³ But for the president and his men, who believed the nation was “in motion between a Democratic past and Republican future” but needed a push in the right direction, country music did deeper ideological work.¹⁴ It provided a blueprint for recomposing the Republican base, a “New Right” composed of working-class whites alienated from their traditional home in the Democratic Party.

This theory, laid out in a 1971 *Washington Post* editorial by Kevin Phillips, one of Nixon’s aides and the author of the 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority*, saw great potential in the lesson of hillbilly music. In the piece, titled “Revolutionary Music,” Phillips argued that country music made sensible the sort of white solidarity that could anchor a new politics. Describing it as “basically the folk music of English-Irish-Scotch rural and small-town America,” Phillips advanced the familiar argument that country was the “folk music” of the contemporary working-class, but then he made an interesting leap. “There is another sort of American folk music too,” he wrote “the ‘ethnic hours’ of Italian, Polish, Greek, Czech . . . [and] Hungarian] . . . that fill a large slice of radio programming from New England to the Middle West.” Phillips concluded, “Conceivably, the next American social era could be dominated by these forgotten whites . . . [who] are tired of hearing about equal justice for blacks.”¹⁵ In this right-wing theoretical articulation, country music became a way for conservative operatives to imagine what a pan-ethnic—but always white—working-class coalition might look and feel like. Nixon’s political appeal to the white working-class was by design more mannered than Wallace’s, but both envisioned the same base galvanized against a similar set of enemies on the left. In effect, they both heard in country what Noel Ignatiev would later describe as “whiteness,” an ideology that “provides the illusion of common interests between the exploited white masses and the white ruling class.”¹⁶ The Uptown activists would turn this formulation on its head.

While Cowie argues that Nixon’s quest to build an enduring Republican base atop blue-collar resentment ultimately failed, the notional association achieved between stolid conservatism and country music did not. This relationship, although forged in an era of remarkable upheaval, proved incredibly durable, so much so that it has taken on an aura of eternal validity—a sense that country music is and has always been essentially, inescapably conservative at its core. In recent years, a great deal of scholarship has worked to critique the ease, if not always the validity of this association. In his essay

12. B. Drummond Ayres Jr., “Nixon Plays Piano on Wife’s Birthday At Grand Ole Opry,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1974; Richard M. Nixon, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon, 1974* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 1975), 280.

13. Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 219.

14. Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1969), 463, quoted in Cowie, “Nixon’s Class Struggle,” 260.

15. Kevin Phillips, “Revolutionary Music,” *Washington Post*, May 6, 1971, A19.

16. Noel Ignatiev, “Black Worker, White Worker,” *The Workplace Papers* (Chicago: Sojourner Truth Organization), 22.

“Richard Nixon, Johnny Cash, and the Political Soul of Country Music,” an introduction to a collection titled *The Honky Tonk on the Left*, Mark Allan Jackson captures the thrust of this position. “For too long,” he writes, “the conservative end of country music’s political spectrum has gotten the lion’s share of the ink, leaving the progressive spirit in country underrepresented in general or ignored completely in some cases.”¹⁷ Jackson’s essay and those that accompany it make crucial interventions into a dominant political narrative by describing and pushing back against what Nadine Hubbs has called “the overwriting of working-class realities by middle-class narratives” which have produced unnuanced, simplistic accounts of country’s politics.¹⁸

These critical engagements with the genre and its middle-class overwriters often point to the diverse, conflictual variety of political thought, identity expressions, and counterintuitive solidarities that often exceed narrow estimations of country’s political horizons. But while attention to progressive flashes in country history is essential to an evolving critical view of the genre, less attention has been paid to how country progressivism directly confronted and struggled against reactionary expressions of the genre. As Nick Murray writes in a review of the collection in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, “Isolating “progressive” moments in country history does provide for an interesting counter-narrative, but it can also lead to simplifications, particularly when writers value the integrity of the category over the complexities—or messy contradictions—of the music and its history.”¹⁹ So how might we analyze overlooked and surprising expressions of left country without undervaluing the powerful, dominant narratives created by country’s embrace by the conservative establishment? How do we assess left country without erasing the knot of political contradictions that sit at the music’s center? One strategy is to avoid approaching country music as a thing with a settled politics, and instead as a cultural form overflowing with contradictory political positions and possibilities that must be actively negotiated by people. Put differently, country music as a genre is ideologically complex and often divided against itself, expressing deeply contradictory positions on central political issues such as race, gender and the nation. The same of course is true of the American working-class from which the music emerged. To speak of left country music then requires attention to how these deep-seated contradictions might be resolved in order to form a more coherent politics. The case of Uptown’s activist groups is useful for scholars of left country music not only because it provides an example of a materialist interpretation of the genre, but because that interpretation was incorporated into work at a grassroots level to combat the politics of men like George Wallace and Richard Nixon through the political recomposition of their community.

17. Mark Allan Jackson, “Richard Nixon, Johnny Cash, and the Political Soul of Country Music,” in *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*, ed. Mark Allan Jackson (Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 20.

18. Nadine Hubbs, “‘Them’s My Kind of People’: Cross-Marginal Solidarity in Country Music of the Long Seventies,” in *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*, ed. Mark Allan Jackson (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 170.

19. Nick Murray, “The Other Country,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, accessed 20 November 2019, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-other-country/>.

JOIN, the Young Patriots, their politics and their country music culture were all products of the South in Chicago. Now largely erased from public memory, white southern enclaves in the urban North were the product of the largest internal migration in the nation's history. Between 1900 and 1980 more than one million Latinos, seven million African Americans, and twenty-six million whites left the region of their birth and settled elsewhere, reshaping the demographics of American cities and the character of national politics.²⁰ During the 1940s and 1950s, all of the cities that received white migrants in great numbers developed southern neighborhoods, often colloquially known as "hillbilly heavens" or "Little Appalachias" due to the concentration of migrants from the mountain South, and while the majority of these people would successfully mount the class ladder and transition to better neighborhoods and stable work in time, communities formed in areas like Cincinnati's Lower Price Hill, Detroit's Cass Corridor or Taylortucky, and Baltimore's Dundalk, Hampden, and Highlandtown. These neighborhoods provided what little sense of community existed in the cities but quickly developed reputations as dangerous, vice-ridden threats to public health and moral stability. The northern press fanned these anxieties, running lurid profiles of the slums with headlines like, "The Hillbillies Invade Chicago," and "Girl Reporter Visits Jungles of Hillbillies," and no doubt contributing to an anti-migrant hostility reminiscent of the kind levied against earlier white ethnic groups.²¹ One poll of Detroiters in 1953 "asked residents to identify "undesirable" groups they wanted to see leave the city. "Poor southern whites" and "hillbillies" polled at 21 percent, second only to "criminals and gangsters" but well ahead of "drifters," "Negroes," and "foreigners."²²

Chicago had been a popular destination for these migrants since the Great Depression, when southerners by the thousands began to settle on the city's West Side on streets some locals would refer to as "Tennessee Valleys."²³ But after World War II, as deep mining jobs in the coal fields of the Upland South were more than halved as a result of automation, migration to the city from the affected areas of the South accelerated dramatically.²⁴ Most of these new arrivals settled in Uptown, a north side neighborhood that occupied one square mile just west of Lake Michigan. Known during the 1920s as a vibrant shopping and entertainment district, Uptown began to change during the war years as military jobs drew workers to the area and, in an effort to meet the demand for housing, the owners of the neighborhood's numerous large apartment hotels began to subdivide units into ever smaller rental properties. This trend continued after the war, but now met new tenants as white southern migrants, drawn to the area on account of its abundant, substandard housing,

20. James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Chad Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

21. Albert N. Votaw, "The Hillbillies Invade Chicago," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1958; Norma Lee Browning, "Girl Reporter Visits Jungles of Hillbillies," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 3 March 1957.

22. Devin Hunter, "Growing Diversity: Urban Renewal, Community Activism, and the Politics of Cultural Diversity in Uptown Chicago, 1940–1970" (Ph.D. diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2015), 122.

23. Lewis M. Killian, "Southern White Laborers in Chicago's West Side" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1949), 72.

24. Ronald D. Eller, *Uneven Ground: Appalachia since 1945* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 20.

poured into Uptown in search of work.²⁵ Estimates during the postwar period put the southern population at half of the neighborhood's 50,000–60,000 residents, although the same abundant housing also attracted many American Indian, Japanese American, and Puerto Rican migrants.²⁶ The neighborhood was cramped, dirty, and poor. In 1960, “over half the housing units were one or two rooms. Thirty-eight percent of all units were deteriorated in some respect; 27 percent lacked what the census called “adequate plumbing facilities,” and in 1961 “11 percent of store spaces were vacant, 21 percent in ‘marginal uses’ (pawn and second-hand shops, missionary churches and fly-by-night businesses), and 17 percent in taverns.”²⁷ It had become, in the words of Michael Harrington, “one of those “miserable country neighborhoods springing up in the cities of the other America”—a white southern slum.”²⁸

In 1964, Uptown received a new set of transplants, organizers from Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) who had come as part of a project to build radical political power among poor white communities in the urban North. Alarmed by the appearance of Wallace on the national scene during that year's presidential election and convinced the country was headed toward a period of traumatic mass unemployment that could trigger a reactionary revolt of a suddenly remaindered white working-class, the students saw themselves as intervening in order to sway poor whites toward an alternative proposal: an interracial mass movement of the poor.²⁹ What they encountered both exceeded and confounded their assumptions about the political malleability of the poor, and a contingent of community members from Uptown quickly took ownership of the project. This partnership—often tense and always fraught with the contradictions inherent in an alliance among classes—produced the JOIN Community Union, an interracial but largely southern working-class group that raised class consciousness in Uptown and built political power among the neighborhood's poor.³⁰ In the next four years JOIN orchestrated rent strikes against slum landlords and marches against police brutality, organized the city's largest welfare union, developed legal and medical aid networks, and at every turn worked to elaborate the inter-related nature of the indignities faced by poor and working-class people of all races.

Throughout this work, the “southernness” of this largely white working-class group was always at the fore: they identified as poor whites, drew on southern musical and culinary traditions to build a sense of community, and embraced the idiomatic rhetorical power of southern speech in their writings. As a practice of self-definition, this regionalism helped organizers describe the different positions occupied by poor white people in Uptown and

25. Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 7.

26. Whet Moser, “Hank Williams Village: Chicago's Best Urban Plan That Never Happened,” *Chicago Magazine*, accessed 2 September 2017, <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/The-312/June-2013/Hank-Williams-Village-Chicagos-Best-Urban-Planning-Idea-that-Never-Happened/>.

27. Todd Gitlin and Nanci Hollander, *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1950), xix.

28. Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 101.

29. Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

30. For the most comprehensive current account of both groups, see Amy Sonnie and James Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists, Urban Race Rebels, and Black Power: Community Organizing in Radical Times* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2011).

the white landlords, politicians, policemen and social workers who oversaw their lives. “We say there’s two kinds of white people,” one of the activists later declared in a speech, “There are honkeys and there are hillbillies. And hillbillies are not the people who own Remington Arms or DuPont, and they’re not the Kennedys, the Rockefellers, they’re the oppressed people.”³¹ This populist call, however, was always the opening of a double move, always articulated alongside an insistence on interracial solidarity that could prevent this class critique from being resolved in an alliance of white workers against people of color. Instead, the Young Patriots argued that it was only through an interracial coalition of the working-class that the exploitation of any constituent fraction could be ended. As JOIN member Mike James put it in an article explaining the importance of building interracial solidarity among the white working poor: “The movement will only be real when poor and working white people are involved in the struggle along with blacks, Chicanos, students, and anti-war forces . . . so “LET’S GET IT ON.”³²

This sense of hillbilly particularism and interracial solidarity was pushed even further in the creation of the Young Patriots, who took JOIN’s philosophy and recast it in the language of revolutionary nationalism. In the winter of 1968, as Nixon took the White House and several of the young men in JOIN formed a group called the Young Patriots Organization, a new wing of migrant activism in Uptown intent on pursuing a more militant political line. Shortly after their founding, the Young Patriots joined the Black Panthers and the Young Lords to form the Rainbow Coalition and as a group announced their intention to unite in “class struggle against America’s and Chicago’s ruling class”: “Black, brown, and white . . . working in a coalition to educate the people in their respective communities . . . educate them to fight racism in the system and in themselves.”³¹ As members of this coalition, the Young Patriots saw themselves as part of the “vanguard of the dispossessed,” modeling revolutionary solidarity in their cooperation with the Panthers and the Young Lords.³³ In Uptown, they functioned as a more militant adjunct to JOIN: part street gang, part consciousness-raising political cadre, they modeled their work after the Panthers, establishing “survival programs” for the neighborhood that included a community pantry, a short-lived medical clinic, and a free breakfast program which at its peak served more than four hundred families a week.³⁴ Outside the neighborhood, they worked alongside the Panthers and the Lords to model solidarity and challenge the radicals on the left to work with the nation’s poor. The Black Panthers’ political philosophy was essential to these efforts and to the development of the Young Patriots, especially in regard to the ways in which it explained how alliances might be rooted in a common revolutionary culture. It expanded the conceptual horizon of the southern migrant political project in Uptown, and it challenged the activists to articulate how they might use the resources of urban hillbilly culture to fit into a racially diverse radical political movement.

31. “Counterorientation Week UNC, Chapel Hill, N.C.” SAC, Charlotte to FBI Director, 17 August 1968, “Black Panther Party, North Carolina, 4 of 15.” Available online at <https://vault.fbi.gov/Black%20Panther%20Party%20>

32. Mike James, “Getting off the Interstate: Or, Back Home in Heartbreak, USA,” *The Movement*, September 1968, 15.

33. Sonnie and Tracy, *Hillbilly Nationalists*, 2.

34. *Ibid.*, 81, 83.

For these groups, country music was a crucial expression of that radical hillbilly culture. Both JOIN and the Young Patriots embraced it as an organizing tool as well as a resource for pushing back against the cultural chauvinism prevalent in quarters of the radical left. JOIN used local bands made up of amateur musicians to draw people to parties in the hope of enlisting them as organizers, included record reviews in their mimeographed newsletter, *The Firing Line*, and sang songs at rallies and marches and victory celebrations. Later, the Young Patriots would weave country music into their Pantheresque messaging, adopt a uniform of redneck chic (denim jackets, the occasional cowboy hat), and even host music nights in the bars where they emphasized the interracial roots of country and the blues. Country music served an instrumental, propagandistic purpose in the service of populist egalitarianism, but it was not simply a tool. These groups also used it as an intellectual resource, a way of thinking through the question of how working-class culture might be harnessed for progressive ends. As Mike James wrote: “Country and Western music is American; it reflects the good and the bad . . . It’s been around a long time and been listened to by millions, yet most radicals—“who seek to change America”—have listened only cynically, BECAUSE THEY ARE CYNICAL ABOUT THE PEOPLE.” But, he argued, while it had been dismissed by many on the left as a crude and maudlin vehicle for false consciousness:

The conditions, grievances and demands—telling of the potential for radical organization—are conveyed in the music. Listen to Merle Haggard’s jail songs (“Branded Man”—I paid the debt I owed, but they won’t let my story go untold . . .); Waylon Jennings’ “Living in the Love of the Common People”; Johnny Cash’s “All God’s Children Aren’t Free” and Roll Call”; . . . Dolly Parton’s “My mistakes are no worse than yours ‘ Just Because I’m a Woman”; . . . Bobby Bare’s “Detroit City”. . . Openings on race, the war, the job, male chauvinism, economic exploitation, and cultural and political alienation are there . . . Americans, ARE WAITING ON THE MOVEMENT.³⁵

In another piece, a column from *The Firing Line*, titled “Country Soul,” Doug Youngblood described country’s deep relationship to black popular music like soul and the blues. In an interesting restatement of the Rainbow Coalition’s logic, he argued that the “soul” of these various working-class expressive forms, separated by racialized marketing categories, issued from the same wellspring: that “awareness of all the dirt poor people have to put up with.”³⁶ Contra the theories of Wallace and Nixon, country music here was a way of thinking solidarity across racial divisions—sonic and affective proof of some shared social position. For JOIN and the Young Patriots, then, country music was full of potential, of openings, of complexity constantly overwritten or ignored by the middle-class narratives Hubbs describes. It was the music of everyday life and, as such, opened onto the politics of everyday life. But these openings and potentials were starting points, opportunities to “articulate a thrust” as James put it.³⁷ The possibility for a progressive politics was present in the migrant

35. Mike James, “Getting off the Interstate,” 5.

36. Doug Youngblood, “Country Soul,” *The Firing Line*, 8 February 1968. For an excellent analysis of the role racialization played in the creation of distinct genres like “country” and “the blues,” see Karl Hagstrom Miller’s *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

37. James, “Getting off the Interstate,” 5.

culture of Uptown, but it was the task of the organizers to reframe its social world as political—to show their neighbors that the deprivations they suffered, and which structured their lives, could be changed through political action, and that their own culture held the tools for doing this work.

The history of country music in Chicago is especially revealing when it comes to the ways the genre's class politics evolved as its commercial potential and cultural status grew after the Second World War. For the first half of the twentieth century it was one of the busiest recording centers in the country, third only to New York and Hollywood (it was overtaken by Nashville in the mid-1950s), and it was the birthplace, in 1924, of *The National Barn Dance*, a hillbilly variety show broadcast from WLS. At the same time the *National Barn Dance* was blanketing the Midwest with the voices of hillbilly performers such as Gene Autry, Red Foley, Lulu Belle and Scotty, the city developed a separate country music scene in working-class bars and taverns.³⁸ In the 1950s, a reporter profiling the *National Barn Dance* drew a distinction between the style of country music performed on the radio, which he described as “uptown hillbilly,” and the music in the bars, which was “nasal and twangy,” “less slicked up” and “more sincere” than the stuff on WLS; this music he wrote, was “hungry hillbilly.”³⁹ The country activism of the Uptown radicals was grounded in these neighborhood hillbilly bars. Essentially the urban cousin of the honky tonk, hillbilly bars were southern drinking and entertainment establishments that emerged in cities with notable migrant populations in order to cater to a southern clientele—but they were also key social spaces that both anchored communities and made their problems visible. As the sociologist Lewis Killian, author of perhaps the lone scholarly treatment of the hillbilly bar, explained in his dissertation on southern migrants to West Chicago, these establishments were essentially “immigrant institutions,” “not a reproduction of a familiar and established feature of the ‘native’ culture of the migrants,” but instead substitutes “in a new milieu for other features not so easily reproduced: the country store or filling-station where the men gathered for ‘bull sessions’ and horseplay, dances at the school house, and the roadhouse, with its illicit but fairly well hidden activities.”⁴⁰ At night, these bars featured live music and dancing, the entertainment provided by local or touring country acts that ranged in size and style, from small outfits playing guitar and fiddle to electrified rockabilly bands.⁴¹ In the 1950s and 60s, the live music in these bars would have been rough, relative to the country music heard on a show like the *Opry*. During the daytime, before the music started, the bars served as community spaces. Patrons drank and played the jukebox but also swapped tips on work, talked politics, and collectively processed day-to-day life in places like Uptown or Akron or suburban Detroit.

Despite their light imprint on the historical imagination, hillbilly bars were one of the quintessential country music institutions of the postwar period. During the postwar era of

38. Paul L. Tyler, “Hillbilly Music Re-Imagined: Folk and Country Music in the Midwest,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 127, no. 504 (2014), 179.

39. Bernard Asbel, “National Barn Dance,” *Chicago*, October 1954, 23.

40. Killian, “Southern White Laborers in Chicago’s West Side,” 308.

41. *Ibid.*, 299. Killian described the hillbilly bars of the 1940s as featuring bands that “ranged in size from one guitar player, dressed in a ‘cowboy outfit,’ to orchestras including two or three Spanish guitars, a steel guitar, and a ‘fiddle.’ One tavern featured two such bands, which take turns playing from 7:30 p.m. until 5:00 a.m.”

southern slums, Uptown was home to more than 150 bars, dozens of which booked nightly live country music in order to attract southern migrants. These venues effectively sustained a country scene in Chicago. It was unpolished and gritty, and it was deeply meaningful for these southerners who could claim little of city life their own.⁴² But despite their counterintuitive presence in major metropolitan areas across the country, and despite their appearance in song after song about urban malaise and rural folk far from home, the hillbilly bars became a footnote in the story of country music. In part, this was due to their literal disappearance. As the postwar white migrant cohort assimilated and moved toward the suburbs, many closed or simply rebranded to attract new patrons. At the same time, the obsolescence of the hillbilly bar can also be read in light of one of the most significant shifts in the country music industry. In a way, these establishments were holdovers from the post-Depression adolescence of country music, when the hillbilly business was beginning its boom but had yet to be consolidated and shaped into a coherent industry. During the 1930s and 40s, the country trade was regional, built around a loose network of radio stations and live performance spaces. It was a riot of entertainment ventures designed to capitalize on enthusiasm for modernized rural music, and these gambles were undertaken all across the country, from Maine to Los Angeles to Texas to Baltimore.⁴³

When, in the late 1950s, the production of what had once been hillbilly music was finally consolidated in Nashville, an organizational achievement best symbolized by the creation of the Country Music Association in 1958, the music was given what boosters had long sought: a center. This corporate victory marked a transformation in what Diane Pecknold has described as the “intractable struggle to locate and control the image of a nationalized country music,” for once the music had a center, everything outside of it was reorganized as its periphery.⁴⁴ The creation of a country music periphery had both literal and symbolic effects. In terms of the geography of the trade, once Nashville became the unquestioned seat of the

42. Hunter, “Growing Diversity,” 92.

43. In recent years, academic and popular writing on early country music culture has complicated what has come to be known as the “southern thesis,” the notion that, as Clifford R. Murphy explains in *Yankee Twang*, “country music is inherently southern” and that all non-southern expressions are fundamentally derivative (22). In particular, a number of explorations of country’s development in, or on the outskirts of, northern cities have expanded our sense of who made and enjoyed this music. These books often dovetail with the story of southern outmigration, but some detail pre-migration, or “native” non-southern country musics. For the history of New England country and the “hillbilly orchestras” of Maine and Massachusetts, see Clifford R. Murphy, *Yankee Twang: Country and Western Music in New England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014). For information about the “folk music parks” of border states like Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the bluegrass festival scene in Ohio, Indiana, and Maryland, see Henry Koretzky, “Night Falls on Sunset Park,” *Bluegrass Unlimited* (January 2013); Thomas A. Adler, *Bean Blossom: The Brown County Jamboree and Bill Monroe’s Bluegrass Festivals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); and Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass Generation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018). Paul L. Tyler’s article “Hillbilly Music Re-imagined: Folk and Country Music in the Midwest,” *Journal of American Folklore* (Spring 2014), reconstitutes the significant contribution of rural mid-western musicians during the spread of and early enthusiasm for country music, persuasively arguing for a level of autonomy long denied them. In addition, see the following three strong monographs on country and bluegrass scenes in northern industrial centers: Tim Newby, *Bluegrass in Baltimore* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2015); Craig Maki and Keith Cady, *Detroit Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); and Jon Hartley Fox, *King of the Queen City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

44. Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*, 80.

genre those sites of country production outside of it became less autonomous.⁴⁵ Some, like the New England country described by Clifford R. Murphy in *Yankee Twang*, faded away under the homogenizing pressure of Music City, but most underwent a form of passive reorganization, becoming increasingly important as spaces of professionalization for musicians looking to make their way toward the center or as stops on the touring circuit of national acts.⁴⁶ But the dialectics of centralization also created the possibility of alternatives as the nascent industry exercised its newfound control over the genre and the “intractable struggle,” once a vying for dominance was displaced and reframed in terms of challenges to the newfound institutional spirit of Music Row.

Though not framed in these terms, JOIN and the Young Patriots presented an insurgent alternative to institutional country music at a moment when the good business sense of Nashville was leading the industry to align with the politics of the American right wing. Their vision of country music and its politics was local to Uptown and uninterested in the authority of official and totalizing formulations, whether from George Wallace, Richard Nixon, or Roy Acuff. In fact, their great discovery was partisan in nature. Instead of intervening at the center of country’s power, the strategy of traditional electoral politicians, they embraced the conditions of the periphery and held them up to critique the center. With regard to the possibility of progressive country, the great intellectual discovery of JOIN and the Young Patriots was that their marginal social position was not only reflected in the aesthetics and philosophy of country music, but in its political economy: in the way it circulated in working-class spaces like the hillbilly bars and how the character of that circulation elaborated class distinctions in and between Nashville and places like Uptown. And because their political theory of country music was rooted in the world around them it was the kind of theory that could be put into practice.

They realized that the bars, places with names like the Dew Drop Inn, Ted’s 10-High, and the Wagon Wheel Lounge, were a strategic space to “recognize and cultivate all the positive content hidden and mystified within the various so-called processes of alienation” in order to focus a general discontent toward specific political ends.⁴⁷ This was pragmatic in the sense that the bars were one of the few places poor people could and did gather in Uptown, a crowded neighborhood of renters with little public space. They used the bars as sites for cultural programming: they held “From Blues to Bluegrass” jam sessions intended to highlight interconnections between black and white southern music; collected poetry and songs for their chapbook series, *The Time of the Phoenix*; and as an opportune space for the footwork of community organizing, for turning neighbors out to meetings, raising money for survival programs, recruiting marchers for a protest or rally, or just getting a rap going, applying and reapplying the activist pressure to Uptown’s everyday problems.⁴⁸ Here, country music

45. By the mid-1960s, Nashville had overtaken Chicago to become the third-largest recording center in the country and was home to ten recording studios, more than 25 record companies, offices for the nation’s leading performing rights organizations, and hundreds upon hundreds of studio musicians, producers, songwriters, and publishers.

46. Clifford R. Murphy, *Yankee Twang: Country and Western Music in New England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

47. Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, trans. David Broder (London; New York: Verso, 2019), 58.

48. “Blues to Bluegrass,” *Keep Strong*, February 1976, 40–41.

became an emotionally resonant entry point—an “opening” as Mike James put it—into the various indignities suffered by working people; whether as a literal starting point for a conversation intended to move someone to participate in a protest action, for example, or as a more ambient cultural expression of social reality that kept people primed for certain political appeals. Broadly speaking, the country music that would have filled these bars was built out of “images of class difference and exploitation”—bad bosses, lost farms, migration, social exclusion, and so on. More often than not, these themes resolved themselves, whether tragically or, as the “Workingman’s Blues” epigraph suggests, in a sense of individual pride in the inherent dignity of labor and hard-won gains, however meager. These themes were central to country music, and yet, as Richard A. Peterson argues, they often produced identification with dominant systems of economic, racial, and gendered oppression rather than coalescing into anything like a class, or anti-racist critique.⁴⁹ The Young Patriots understood country music as indicative of populist beliefs shaped by objective conditions of exploitation that could be polarized along a number of political lines, and their response was to tighten the dialectical screws by both explaining how the music’s individual expressions of class were general ones and associating the music with a liberatory grassroots political movement.

By doing this conceptual work in these particular spaces, the organizers forged new accords between working-class culture and radical politics. They created what Nancy Fraser calls “subaltern counterpublics,” an alternative partisan public sphere “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”⁵⁰ Country music was a part of this larger discursive project. In the context of this effort it became both a propaganda material of sorts, a familiar thing recast in the light of class solidarity assuring the white southerners of Uptown that they were already in possession of something radical. Fraser’s concept is particularly useful here because it highlights the insurgent nature of the critique put forward by radical hillbilly groups. The program of working-class interracial solidarity exemplified by the JOIN Community Union and the Young Patriots and their Rainbow Coalition, was defined in opposition to the reactionary platforms of prominent politicians who hoped to gain the sympathy of white workers, but also to the much wider history of class domination and racism in America. It offered alternative interpretations of whiteness, solidarity, and country music, and perhaps most importantly, it offered alternative modes of participating in politics during a period of pitched political action and reaction. It was a radical, aspirational politics from the perspective of the periphery framed in the language of everyday life.

During the latter half of the 1960s, country music became a contested cultural property in the United States. It is no coincidence that the academic study of the music began in this era, first with the *Journal of American Folklore*’s 1965 “Hillbilly Issue” and then with Bill

49. Richard A. Peterson, “Class Unconsciousness in Country Music,” in *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, ed. Melton Alonza McLaurin and Richard A. Peterson (Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach, 1992), 47.

50. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67.

Malone's *Country Music USA*, nor that these explorations had explicit national overtones, as Malone's seminal monograph attests. During a period of revolutionary change in the country in which law and custom was being stood on its head, the historical role of country music seemed undecided, and interested parties, from academics to businessmen to politicians, intervened to try to answer the question: what is the relationship of country music to an America in flux? In a sense, these definitional battles over country music were simply an extension of Pecknold's "intractable struggle" from a commercial register to a historical political one that aimed to define a popular understanding of country music vis-à-vis the changing nation. Today, scholarship invested in retrieving progressive, counterintuitive moments in country music history is doing the valuable work of disrupting a monolithic understanding of the genre. What the case of Uptown's activists show us, however, is how this complex working-class reality could be organized to do political work. As Michael Denning explains: "*No* popular cultural practice is necessarily subversive or incorporated; it takes place in a situation, becomes articulated with a 'party' in Gramsci's sense: an organized way of life, an alliance of class fractions, a conception of the universe, a historical bloc which creates the conditions for a political use or reading."⁵¹ JOIN and the Young Patriots attempted to polarize country music, but they also created the conditions for its political reading through their work as organizers. In other words, they brought to country music a politics, within which the genre's often contradictory political possibilities might be organized conceptually and then realized through active participation. This was not a corporate or academic argument about the politics of country music, but an interpretation of it that affirmed people's understanding of how the world worked.

This of course was also true of the conservative politicians the activists defined themselves against. Gurney Norman described the ways in which country music at the Wallace rally became a method of uniting supporters against those hippies and freaks—a staged fight that must have felt meaningful enough that the working-class rallygoers tolerated, even applauded the phony hillbilly tunes. JOIN and the Young Patriots drew their water from the same well, and sometimes emphasized similar elements of country music as Wallace; both groups prized the genre for its directness, its southernness, and its workerist perspective, but the radicals used these things to ground an alternative, egalitarian populism deployed against capital and the wealthy and political elites. In this convergence, we can see the fraught but crucial relationship between political possibilities and political realities which Denning summarized earlier, and the historical and conceptual challenge which left country music presents. Like left populism, imagining left country music requires courting class anger among the white working-class without allowing that anger to tip toward reaction, most often figured as white solidarity against people of color and other marginalized populations. At the same time, a working-class expressive culture grounded in directness, sincerity, solidarity, and at times tradition is important, perhaps necessary, for an egalitarian populism that wants to unite and motivate. I will conclude, then, by suggesting that the example of JOIN, the Young Patriots, and their radical use of country music offers a useful model for thinking about the political possibilities and pitfalls of a left country music. It rests on three

51. Michael Denning, "The End of Mass Culture," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 37 (1990): 14.

interlocking ideas. The first is the notion of peripherality, the country music culture of Uptown was arrayed against dominant, conservative, corporate narratives of the music that were embraced by Nashville and by many stars. As a result, the subaltern country counterpublic of JOIN and the YPO was insurgent, less concerned with the boardrooms of Music Row than the mid-western hillbilly bar and the unofficial positions—on race, identity, and culture—which that peripheral space made possible. Second, their understanding of music was able to organize the complexity of a genre whose politics were often divided against itself and expressed in deeply contradictory ways with regard to central political issues such as race, gender, and the nation. Country music was not understood as a thing with a unified and useful left politics, but as a form that was riddled with openings that could be productive for a left politics, but only if they were embraced and articulated as part of a wider, clearer politics of class. And third, this analysis of country had to be enlisted in an organizing effort and put to work. ■

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