
The Racial Limitations of Country-Soul Crossover in Bobby Womack's *BW Goes C&W*, 1976

ABSTRACT Bobby Womack's *BW Goes C&W* (1976) presents a case study in country's long entanglement with race and genre boundaries. Though Womack incorporated country references on other albums, this was his only country album. It is sonically proximal to pop country of the 1970s, while including elements of soul and R&B. Womack aimed to make not just any country recording, but one that would address a black audience and highlight—visually and aurally—a black identity. This article provides close readings to show how Womack's album engaged with country music while actively confronting racial exclusion in the genre.

Today's discourse about race and genre provide opportunities to reconsider these issues in country music's history—a history that continues to ramify. For comparison, I address parallels in recent country music, demonstrating that the genre-color line that hemmed in Womack is under scrutiny. But this scrutiny is a far cry from change. Womack explicitly confronted racial issues in *BW Goes C&W*, yet these remain just as troubling in 2020 as they were in 1976. **KEYWORDS** country, R&B, crossover, race, Bobby Womack, Lil Nas X, Beyoncé, Yola, Jimmie Allen, Kane Brown, Darius Rucker, Blanco Brown, Kacey Musgraves

Note: this article contains racially charged language, which is included because it is critical to the specific history of this album.

Following his 1976 album *BW Goes C&W*, Bobby Womack was dropped by his label, United Artists.¹ The album, whose title was short for “Bobby Womack Goes Country and Western,” was a flop. Unlike Womack's preceding R&B and soul albums, his country effort failed to chart at all. According to Womack, United made plain that it did not want him to make a country album, and it is unclear what promotion, if any, the label may have done for it. Womack described the conflict with United in racialized terms, with representatives from the company asserting, “You can't write that,” and, “The market won't go for it.”²

At first glance, it would seem that today's country scene is different—more inclusive. Black and multiracial artists such as Kane Brown and Jimmie Allen have done well in pop country charts in recent years. However, this increased recognition and success belies continued racial tension in the genre, tension that these artists have at times been explicit in confronting. This article addresses Womack's experiences in this vein with *BW Goes C&W*.

1. The cover spells out the album title as *B. W. Goes C. and W.*, but Womack's autobiography as well as Charles Hughes's monograph, *Country Soul*, refer to the title as *BW Goes C&W*. I use the same format as Womack and Hughes.

2. Bobby Womack and Robert Ashton, *Midnight Mover: My Autobiography. The True Story of the Greatest Soul Singer in the World* (London: John Blake, 2006), 208.

Through close readings, I will discuss how *BW Goes C&W* engaged with country music, how it fits within a broader trajectory of Womack's work, and how it specifically related to issues of race and genre boundaries. I interweave this discussion with accounts of today's country music, noting persistent threads of racial tokenism and exclusion as well as some shifts in the conversation. In exploring the details of this album, I consider how the history of race and genre continues to affect today's country music scene.

As a brief comparison to Womack's experience, I begin with Lil Nas X and his smash hit song "Old Town Road." The original version of the song, released in December 2018, was described variously in news outlets as "hip-hop-country crossover," "country-rap," and "country-trap"; it is clearly a track that blurs genre boundaries.³ Although the song debuted simultaneously on the Hot 100, Hot Country Songs, and Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs lists, Billboard removed it from the Hot Country list, prompting a flurry of think pieces on race and genre, with writers commenting on the ways that corporations police musical categories.⁴ Billboard wrote the following to *Rolling Stone*, suggesting it was musical qualities that led to the song's removal from the country list: "While 'Old Town Road' incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery, it does not embrace enough elements of today's country music to chart in its current version."⁵ Despite its ejection from the country chart, the popularity of the song continued unabated, and in 2019 "Old Town Road" broke the record for most weeks at #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 Chart.

I will return to Lil Nas X in greater detail, but it is critical to note that, among contemporary artists, he is not alone. When black artists make country music—or make music that lays some claim to inclusion in the genre—the reception is routinely ambivalent. Just a few years before the controversy surrounding "Old Town Road," Beyoncé's "Daddy Lessons" was omitted from the country category for a 2016 Grammy nomination, and a live performance of the song with the Dixie Chicks at the Country Music Association (CMA) awards garnered so much pushback that the CMA later scrubbed their social media accounts of links and clips related to Beyoncé's performance—a move for which the

3. Lil Nas X, "Lil Nas X – Old Town Road (I Got The Horses in the Back) [Visualizer]," Published 2 December 2018, <https://youtu.be/5ho88VXJTBg>. "Hip-hop-country crossover": Josh Eells, "Lil Nas X: Inside the Rise of a Hip-Hop Cowboy," *Rolling Stone* 20 May 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-interview-new-album-836393/>.

"country-rap": John Caramanica, "Lil Nas X's Smash Makes Country Wonder if Rap Is Friend or Foe. Again." *New York Times*, 11 April 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/11/arts/music/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-country-rap.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>

"country-trap": Ben Sisario, "Taylor Swift's 'Me!' Is Thwarted by a Fifth No. 1 for 'Old Town Road,'" *New York Times*, 7 May 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/07/arts/music/taylor-swift-lil-nas-x-billboard-chart.html>

4. Elias Leight, "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' Was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed Its Mind." *Rolling Stone*, 26 March 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/>; Caramanica, "Lil Nas X's Smash Makes Country Wonder"; Carrie Batten, "'Old Town Road' and the Overdue Death of Genre," *The New Yorker*, 8 April 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/old-town-road-and-the-overdue-death-of-genre?mbid=social_twitter&utm_social-type=owned&utm_source=twitter&utm_brand=tny&utm_medium=social; and Marissa M. Moss, "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' sounds like country's future. So why has Nashville snubbed it?" *Los Angeles Times*, 1 May 2019: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-lil-nas-x-old-town-road-nashville-country-20190501-story.html>.

5. Leight, "Lil Nas X's Smash Makes Country Wonder."

organization was further taken to task.⁶ Country radio programmers—genre-makers, to be sure—self-consciously avoided “Daddy Lessons,” as they later would “Old Town Road.”⁷ In the final week of April 2019, “Old Town Road,” saw 58 plays on country stations nationwide, in contrast to nearly 10,000 plays on top 40 stations.⁸

In the cases of both Lil Nas X and Beyoncé, corporations played a large role in gestures of inclusion and exclusion. But while these two recent situations received significant press attention, many decisions like these take place without commentary, preemptively: record companies choose how to market songs, radio programmers and playlist creators group tracks by genre, agencies choose where to book musicians for live performance, and so on. If “Old Town Road” and “Daddy Lessons” register as missed opportunities for a broader and more inclusive country music marketplace, they are part of a longstanding pattern in which black artists are excluded from the genre.

Womack was one of these artists, in 1976. Even as social contexts and media technologies have shifted in the decades since, his experience shares much with those of today’s black musicians who venture into country territory. Womack was known as an R&B artist, so *BW Goes C&W* presented an obvious change to music consumers, even before they heard the first note. Womack was unambiguous in marking the album visually as “country”: on the original LP, the album title appears scrawled into a piece of rough-cut wood that is nailed to the cover image of Womack and a handful of his family members riding horses and dressed as cowboys, as shown in Figure 1.

However, in these visuals, Womack’s sincerity is ambiguous. The rusticity of the wooden sign, Womack smiling in leather chaps from atop his horse, and the hilly scrubland setting all feel like they could be meant as a joke.⁹ Indeed, Womack wrote of how alien the scene was for him:

The cover shoot took a Western theme. All us brothers dolled up in cowboy outfits. Guns, holsters, spurs, boots, the whole bit, but C&W meant nothing without horses and that meant us sitting on the damn things. None of us had been around horses, let alone ridden one, and every time one of us got saddled up, the horse would take off, buck until we fell off and head back to the stable.¹⁰

Moreover, the seeming out-of-place-ness of a black cowboy in imagery of the American West—despite a clear history to the contrary—conjured up a comedic presence like that of

6. Randall Roberts, “Conservative country music fans lash out at CMA performance by Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 November 2016: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-conservative-cma-beyonce-dixie-chicks-20161103-htmstory.html>.

7. Associated Press and Billboard staff. “Beyoncé’s ‘Daddy Lessons’ Finding Support from the Country Music Community.” *Billboard* Hip-Hop page, 20 May 2016: <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7378225/beyonce-daddy-issues-country-music>. Alison Bonaguro, “What’s So Country about Beyoncé? And How Is ‘Daddy Lessons’ a Country Tune?,” *CMT News*, 25 April 2016. <http://www.cmt.com/news/1765408/whats-so-country-about-beyonce/>.

8. Moss, “Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ sounds like country’s future.”

9. Womack is not alone in this ambiguous territory. For comparison, one might look at the cover of Glenn Campbell’s *Rhinestone Cowboy*, released in 1975, or the preponderance of Nudie suits in this period. Much of the imagery of 1970s country involves a knowing wink blending fantasy with rugged environs.

10. Bobby Womack and Robert Ashton, *Midnight Mover*, 2006.

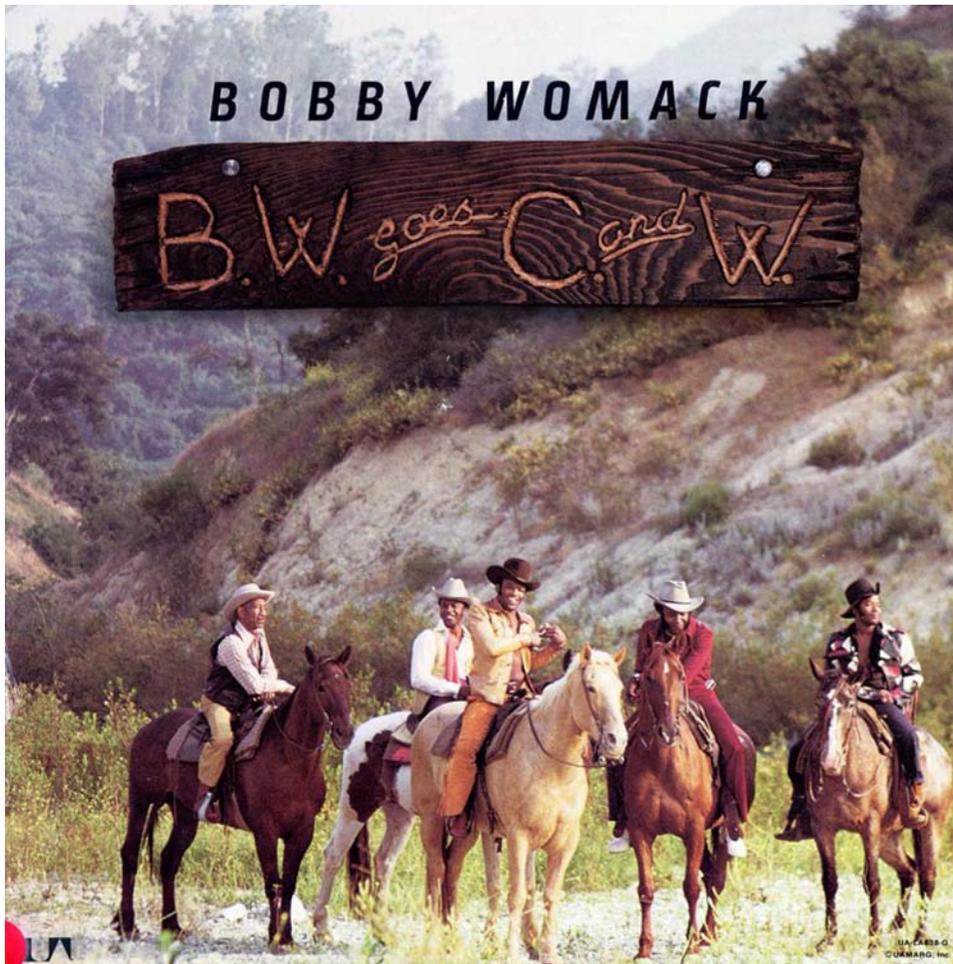


FIGURE 1. Bobby Womack, *BW Goes C&W*, cover

Cleavon Little's Sheriff Bart in *Blazing Saddles*, a movie that had been released just two years earlier.¹¹

Indeed, questions of sincerity commonly arise when black artists make country recordings. Thus did Nashville standard-bearers largely dismiss the seriousness of Lil Nas X's engagement with the genre of country. For example, songwriter Abe Stoklasa, whose credits include tracks recorded by Blake Shelton, Lady Antebellum, Martina McBride, and many others, described "Old Town Road" as "a novelty song," noting, "It's not going to change the way we work."¹² Similar questions of authenticity and sincerity appeared across social media. A post by National Public Radio's Sam Sanders on the continued popularity of "Old Town Road," which he characterized as a country track, elicited responses such as the

11. It is estimated that one in four cowboys in the US West in the nineteenth century was black. William Loren Katz, *The Black West* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) and Monroe Lee Billington and Roger D. Hardaway, eds., *African Americans on the Western Frontier* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2001).

12. As quoted in Moss, "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' sounds like country's future."

following from @Jacks93tom: “Hey Sam, genuine question. Do people really think ‘old town road’ is country or is it a big ironic troll? I seriously can’t tell.” Or @TheTroyer-Troyer, who responded to the same post, “Who’s a Country fan not on board with this? ME!”¹³

On *BW Goes C&W*, Womack takes pains to avoid a quagmire of authenticity by demonstrating his deep familiarity with country music. The first track opens with a series of cues positioning Womack with respect to the genre. He begins by speaking over a pedal-steel guitar introduction: “Yo, my mind¹⁴ started talking to me, and said, ‘Bobby, if I go country, would you go country with me?’ And I said, ‘yep.’” Here he suggests that he is entering what for him is new musical territory. But this easy, informal statement belies a deep engagement with the genre, one that is perceptible to knowledgeable country music listeners from the very start of the album.

The opening song is titled “Don’t Make This the Last Date for You and Me,” and while it is credited to Womack’s brother Curtis, the song functions as a continuation of two preceding country hits. The first is Floyd Cramer’s most famous recording, the 1960 instrumental track “Last Date.” Bobby Womack was a self-described fan of Cramer, particularly his “slip style” on the piano, which Womack said he consciously imitated on the guitar.¹⁵ About a decade after Cramer put out “Last Date,” Conway Twitty wrote words to it, recording the song under the title “(Lost Her Love) on Our Last Date.” Twitty’s version of the song, recorded in 1972, was hugely popular, hitting #1 on the Billboard country chart and spending sixteen weeks in the country top 40.

The connection between these three recordings goes further than harmonic and melodic structures, though these are replicated. Rather, the same musical gestures are used at critical points. For example, the openings of all three tracks are virtually identical in rhythm and specific lines. These openings are provided in Examples 1a, 1b, and 1c (note: all audio examples are provided in the online version of this article).

Since there are no lyrics in the original, Twitty and Curtis Womack are both free to imagine the circumstances of the titular “last date.” Twitty’s narrator sings of leaving a romantic partner and then realizing that he loved and now misses her. For their version, Curtis and Bobby Womack take the opposite tack—the protagonist’s partner is leaving, and he is begging them not to go, using the title as a refrain: “Don’t make this the last date for you and me.” Twitty and the Womacks also handle the musical materials of Cramer’s original somewhat differently. In Cramer’s recording, the descending melodic gesture given in the second half of Example 1a is taken to be the main melody of the A section, a melody that Twitty approximates in the verse vocals. For Womack, however, the melody of the verse takes a different shape, and Cramer’s opening lick becomes instead a repeating secondary line underneath the vocals. In the second half of the verse/refrain, all three recordings use roughly the same melodic contour. Womack’s version, like Twitty’s, takes its own title while maintaining

13. Sanders’s original post reads, “*COUNTRY* music won.” Sam Sanders, @samsanders, Twitter post and responses, 7 May 2019, <https://twitter.com/samsanders/status/1125877008926269440>.

14. This word could be “man”; the recording is ambiguous.

15. Womack and Ashton, *Midnight Mover*.

reference to Cramer's original "Last Date." And Womack's simultaneously serves as a narrative-shifting commentary on Twitty's tale of love and loss. Womack also updates the instrumentation and accompaniment style somewhat: while Cramer's original is a piano recording, Womack uses a Wurlitzer 200A, and the arrangement features a heavier drum beat as well as an active bass line. These musical features give Womack's version a hint of R&B flavor, even as it straightforwardly embraces longstanding country repertory.¹⁶

The various songs of the album cover diverse musical territory associated with distinct parts of the broader country music genre, each showing close attention to country music practices writ large and more specifically to the details of iconic recordings. For example, "Big Bayou" is a swamp-rock number that includes prominent Cajun-style fiddling. Penned by Floyd August "Gib" Gilbeau of Swampwater and originally recorded by that group in 1970, the song was a popular cover track at the time of Womack's album, having been recorded by at least a half dozen artists in the intervening years. In 1975, Womack's writing partner Jim Ford recorded it as well, and in June 1976 alone, three groups released albums with the song on it: in addition to *BW Goes C&W*, the Flying Burrito Brothers' *Airborne* and Rod Stewart's *A Night on the Town* include "Big Bayou." The version recorded by the Flying Burrito Brothers, Gilbeau's ensemble at the time, shares an especially close relationship to Womack's recording. The general style and sound match tightly between the two, and the uncredited fiddle player on *BW Goes C&W* copies Gilbeau's solo from the 1970 Swampwater recording nearly exactly.

On another track of *BW Goes C&W*, Womack provides a fresh take on a classic crooner song, "Bouquet of Roses." The song had already been recorded by several well-known artists, including Eddy Arnold, Dean Martin, Marty Robbins, Bill Haley & His Comets, and Les Paul with Mary Ford. Womack's version follows in the crooner tradition while shifting and modernizing certain elements. Following the (approximately) standard introductory guitar lick, Womack turns away from the long, smooth melodic lines of prior vocalists, instead opting for a more broken execution that incorporates rests as well as words that get delayed or repeated, introducing sometimes-surprising moments into the otherwise-straightforward song of a romantic partner who has been unfaithful. Instead of simply "sending you a big bouquet of roses, one for every time you broke my heart," Womack is "sending . . . you-a-big bouquet of roses, one for every-every-every-every time you broke my heart." This shift in performance leaves room for Womack to add Sam Cooke-style pickups at the front of each section of the verse, and he subtly shifts the timing of chord changes to give some variety to this classic country song.¹⁷ Examples 2a and 2b provide the opening of two recordings as a demonstration of these differences—Marty Robbins's 1957 recording and Bobby Womack's version from *BW Goes C&W*.

16. None of these elements are specifically non-country on their own. For example, Tim McGraw refers nostalgically to the sound of the Wurlitzer in country music on "Back When" (2004). But in the 1970s it was also tightly linked to Muscle Shoals recordings. One might hear it differently, of course, but to my ear the switch from the acoustic piano in Cramer's version to the plugged-in, edgier sound of the Wurlitzer provides a notable shift in tone, one that carries R&B resonances with it, particularly in combination with the gospel-inflected voicings and a heavier style of drums and bass.

17. Womack toured with Sam Cooke a considerable amount in his early career, and then married Cooke's widow Barbara after Sam's death.

Most of the tracks on *BW Goes C&W* are built in roughly standard country arrangements, though as mentioned, there are a few alterations in instrumentation and performance style. In addition to sweetening with strings, which was very common in country music at the time, the tracks include idiomatic introductory gestures recorded on largely normative country instruments (pedal steel, fiddle, twangy Telecaster, etc.). There are also standard fill licks between lines of text. On the tracks with instrumental solos, the soloists use common country or country-rock shapes. In part, these licks and solos sound normative because the chord progressions are also idiomatic to the genre at the time, often involving a limited vocabulary of three or four chords, with stock phrase shapes that standardly end on I or occasionally V.¹⁸ This setup allows for an easy insertion of session musicians without significant practice and negotiation of shared lines.¹⁹ The opening of “I’d Be Ahead If I Could Quit while I’m Behind,” provided in Example 3, is a good demonstration of this slotting-in of ready-to-go parts: the guitar, fiddle, and pedal steel all play fills between the vocal phrases, and while they each play idiomatic lines, these lines are not always directly coordinated with one another, resulting at times in multiple instruments playing fills simultaneously. These instruments all fit into a whole, but not in an intricately arranged way—for example, they aren’t all playing together in parallel motion or unison lines. Instead, the absence of complex arrangement shows familiarity with normative practices in country music. As the album’s producer, Womack surely had a hand in choosing this idiomatic approach.

That Womack is self-consciously embracing the country idiom is obvious when one compares *BW Goes C&W* to his other albums, which generally appeared on R&B charts or the Billboard Hot 100. Consider the song “Daylight,” which charted in 1976 and was the single on Womack’s preceding album, *Safety Zone*. Example 4 provides the opening of “Daylight.” This track, written by Womack with Harold Payne, has different lyrical cues, narrative, harmonic shape, and instrumentation from the tracks on *BW Goes C&W*. In this song, Womack sings of a house party that doesn’t get started until most people are asleep and continues until neighbors are waking up to start their day. Here, as in many country songs, the social situation is domestic—but “Daylight” embraces an urban or suburban lifestyle. This marks an important difference from country tropes. Where country songs at times do feature urban settings, this is often in service of idealizing a rural existence or mourning the loss of a pastoral life. Nor do Womack and Payne indulge in nostalgia or emphasize the past, both of which are common in country music: the text of “Daylight” is all about current practice. It is a song that embraces the here and now.

Womack’s execution of melody and harmony also differs between “Daylight” and the tracks on *BW Goes C&W*. In “Daylight,” he often holds a single word across several

18. Of course, not all country music of this period fits this description. For example, Glenn Campbell’s “Rhinstone Cowboy” (1975) and Dolly Parton’s “Here You Come Again” (1977) both feature more extensive orchestration, and the bass lines and harmonic changes are more elaborate. But a large portion of the number-one country songs from the period still feature these stock phrase shapes and instrumental ensembles. For Womack, it may have been especially important to demonstrate competency with these longstanding paradigms, while established country artists may have been granted more freedom.

19. This economy of instrumental arrangement—quick managing of parts among a limited set of possibilities—has been discussed in relation to other country musicians around this time, such as Buck Owens. See Mark Fenster, “Buck Owens, Country Music, and the Struggle for Discursive Control,” *Popular Music* 9(3), October 1990, 275–90.

notes—particularly at the ends of lines in the lyrics—in a style reminiscent of gospel vocal runs.²⁰ As for the harmonic vocabulary, even when the same root relationships are used, the chords take different shapes: in “Daylight,” harmonies built on the second scale degree are darker, smoother minor-9th chords, in contrast to the bright secondary-dominant flavor that is used on *BW Goes C&W*. With its longer harmonic trajectory, “Daylight” spends significant time on these minor-9th chords, rather than quickly resolving to V or I. When the first dominant harmony arrives at 1:16, it is a straight V triad, no seventh. By contrast, V7 harmonies appear frequently in *BW Goes C&W*.²¹

Further, the instrumentation and arrangement of parts in “Daylight” are unlike those of *BW Goes C&W*. The “Daylight” recording includes prominent brass presence, and there are frequently coordinated lines played in unison across instruments, suggesting a written-out or practiced arrangement of parts. Moreover, each individual instrument makes idiomatic gestures associated with R&B at the time: the bass includes more chromaticism, and the keyboard shifts the metric placement of repeated gestures, giving rhythmic liveliness and syncopation to the static harmony of the opening vamp. These cues—urban narrative; darker, smoother harmonic flavor; complex arrangement; and R&B vocal gestures—work together to create a clear genre distinction between “Daylight” and the material on *BW Goes C&W*.

At every turn on *BW Goes C&W*, Womack demonstrates a deep understanding of the country genre and its distinctions from the R&B music he otherwise recorded—a much greater awareness than would be implied by a simple dalliance with the twang of the pedal steel or a fantasy of country living (though he also partakes of both of these at points in the album). Yet, while the songs on *BW Goes C&W* show that Womack was engaging with the country genre in multifarious ways, he nonetheless felt that he might be treated as lacking genuine appreciation for or understanding of the style, much as Lil Nas X was later treated. On this point, Womack wrote, “I always look at *BW Goes C&W* as a classic piece of work. I wasn’t trying to be funny . . . I wanted to explore that new territory.”²²

In addition, it is clear that Womack meant for this to be not just any country album, but one that addressed a black audience and also showed—visually and aurally—a black identity. While Womack noted that most of his album musicians were white, he did not put any of the white artists on the cover, instead opting for an all-black-cowboy family photo.²³ Moreover, he explained that, with this album, “I wanted to say what I found and say it the way my people would understand it.”²⁴ In so doing, Womack rejected the

20. Over time, country music has included more of this vocal style; for example, one might contrast Chris Stapleton’s version of “Tennessee Whiskey” (2015) with George Jones’s recording of the same song in 1983.

21. As Jocelyn Neal has noted, these harmonic vocabularies have shifted: V7 and even just V have become “too ‘buttoned-up’” for country music, and songwriters have largely jettisoned these harmonies in recent country hits, which employ harmonic language much closer to today’s soul-music practices. Jocelyn Neal, “Tennessee Whiskey” and the Politics of Harmony,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 32(2), June 2020, 222.

22. Womack and Ashton, *Midnight Mover*, 208.

23. Womack and Ashton, *Midnight Mover*. I should clarify here that Womack does not name any of the musicians on the album, and he was not referring specifically to this album in that comment. Rather, he notes that most of the musicians on his albums write large were white.

24. Womack and Ashton, *Midnight Mover*, 208.

approach of Charley Pride, whose racial identity was famously hidden until after his recordings were widely known and accepted in the country music scene.²⁵ As Bill Malone and Jocelyn Neal note, Pride's singing "contained almost none of the vocal inflection identified with black singers, and his stage presence conveyed few of the body movements and postures identified with soul or rhythm-and-blues musicians. . . . He was therefore basically unthreatening to white masculinity, civil order, or the identity of country music."²⁶ By contrast, Womack positioned race prominently in this album. He claimed that the album originally included a remake of Gene Autry's classic "Back in the Saddle Again," reworded as "Black in the Saddle Again," but the track was removed after Autry complained and threatened to file a lawsuit.²⁷ Womack also says he proposed an album title of *Step Aside, Charley Pride, and Give Another Nigger a Try*.²⁸ He wrote that the white executives at United Artists were particularly uncomfortable with this positioning—not just the word *nigger*, to which they explicitly objected, but also the way that the title placed race at the center of the album. Such a move would have aggressively confronted the tokenistic status of Charley Pride, who was the only black artist on country music charts in the 1970s. Womack's proposed title would therefore have undermined a message that labels wished to convey: that country music did not have a "race problem." In the end, Womack acceded to United Artists' demands for the more milquetoast *BW Goes C&W*.

Even with this more neutral title, Womack's intervention in the musical politics of race is clear. Whether or not industry executives allowed themselves to acknowledge it, country music did—and does—have a race problem. As Diane Pecknold puts it, "Country was resoundingly white without being expressly anti-black."²⁹ The question of sounding race is front and center in her argument; for Pecknold, the very presence of artists such as Charley Pride and Linda Martell mandated that the genre as a whole preclude racial ambiguity by projecting an overtly white sound. The act of minimal visible inclusion required further gestures of sonic exclusion. Indeed, Pride's success hinged on his ability to "sing like a hillbilly," as an *Ebony* columnist put it.³⁰ While vocal "whiteness" has become naturalized as the sound of country singers, this sound is of course enculturated rather than biological. Nevertheless, as Nina Eidsheim notes,

25. Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

26. Bill Malone and Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd revised edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) and Charles Hughes, *Country Soul*, 314.

27. Womack writes about this in his autobiography, but I have not found any recordings of this song, documentation of Autry's complaint, or other evidence that this track existed.

28. Womack and Ashton, *Midnight Mover*, 207.

29. Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 226. I will not rehearse the long history of the division between race records and hillbilly music, or the shift to labels of country and R&B that parallel that division, except to say that this racial divide reaches back to early radio and record markets. See, for example, Pecknold, *The Selling Sound*; Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009); and Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

30. March 1967 column, as quoted in Hughes, *Country Soul*, 135.

audible “blackness” serves to limit agency and possibilities of belonging, read as inhering to an identity that is Other to country music.³¹

In addition to vocality that is perceived as black, the presence of a recognizably black central performer is clearly a problem for country music—hence the omission of Charley Pride’s photo from initial recordings, hence *BW Goes C&W*’s apparent rejection by United and country radio, and hence the peculiar treatment of Lil Nas X: Billboard changed its categorization of “Old Town Road” when country star Billy Ray Cyrus joined for the remix. The new version largely maintained the backing track from the original, with the simple insertion of Cyrus’s vocals on the recording, yet Billboard placed it on the Hot Country list.³² Moreover, this remix—and an extended music video released for it—won a series of awards: a CMA award for Musical Event of the Year as well as two Grammys (in the pop duo and video categories, not country). For “Old Town Road,” recognition of country status came with the addition of a white country star, at least from certain quarters.

Lil Nas X’s response to the racial limitations of country genre-making appears to have been subversion: by allying with a white musician and thereby winning the approval of country’s gatekeepers, he shone a glaring light on the race problem that music industry professionals prefer to ignore. Womack’s response was different. In *BW Goes C&W*, he made a visual and sonic assault on whiteness. He could, like Charley Pride, have chosen to efface his “outsider” identity. Instead, he placed his racial presence front and center. In doing so, he faced down the dilemma that all black country musicians do: they can either “sound white” or “sound Other.” There is no space in the country genre in which black artists are granted agency over their sound; they must choose between options that adhere to social expectations of whiteness and simultaneously naturalize racial vocal difference. Given the choice, Womack created an album that is unapologetically black and, at least partly as a result, not entirely “country.”

After United Artists dropped him, Womack moved to Columbia Records and almost immediately recorded a new album in Muscle Shoals and Los Angeles, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*. The album has more of a disco flavor, but its opening lines make poignantly clear that he did not just get over his treatment by United, nor did he come to realize that the market was right all along—that country was a whites-only music.

Home Is Where the Heart Is, like *BW Goes C&W*, begins with spoken words: “You know, there’s an old saying, it’s been around quite some time, in fact you know, it says ‘you can take the boy out of the country, but you sure can’t take the country out [of] the boy.’”³³ Womack continues—perhaps as a jab to his treatment by United—“Now, I might be broke. As a matter of fact, I am. Ain’t got a cryin’ dime to my name.”³⁴

31. Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*.

32. There are a few other small changes on the recording—for example, there is a different filter on the vocals of the chorus at 1:24. I would argue, however, that none of these rise to the level of being genre-defining in difference. Lil Nas X, “Lil Nas X – Old Town Road (feat. Billy Ray Cyrus) [Remix],” published 4 April 2019, <https://youtu.be/7ysFgElQjI>. Moss, “Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ sounds like country’s future.”

33. Bobby Womack, “Home Is Where the Heart Is,” *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, Columbia 34834, 1976.

34. *Ibid.*

With these issues in mind, there is much more that I would like to know about *BW Goes C&W*: where and when was it recorded, and who were the musicians on it? What specific communication did United Artists have with Womack about the album, and how aggressively did they market it? The cover of the album and the printed disc provide no information about the recording studio or date, and—aside from Womack’s father, Friendly Womack Sr., who sings with Bobby on the track “Tarnished Rings”—the names of supporting musicians are not listed. Nor are there liner notes for this LP. Today, Capitol Records holds the master recordings, but I have not been able to obtain any further materials connected to *BW Goes C&W*. There is good reason to suspect that Womack worked on the album with members of the Flying Burrito Brothers, specifically Sneaky Pete Kleinow and Gib Gilbeau, though others may have been involved as well.³⁵ It is also likely that Womack’s brothers, a group that performed under the name The Valentinos, sing backup on several tracks.³⁶ However, given the lack of contemporaneous documentation, it is difficult to ascertain the specifics of Womack’s experience making the album, leaving questions of negotiation, agency, and collaboration unresolved.

Even with these open questions, Womack’s frustration with United Artists and the process of getting the album made and released is palpable. He was not alone in his irritation with the country industry. As Charles Hughes has noted, a bevy of black artists in this period struggled to gain recognition by and inclusion in the Nashville country music scene. Hughes, along with Nadine Hubbs, points out that the space of mixture between R&B and country has always been characterized as one of exclusive white sonic freedoms: whites have the opportunity to operate in musical spaces that have been marked as black, but blacks rarely have the opportunity to operate in musical spaces understood as white.³⁷ As Hubbs writes, “The term *blue-eyed soul* designates R&B music made by white musicians, but there is no comparable term for country music by African American musicians.”³⁸ Moreover, despite the longstanding, widespread availability and popularity of country music on the radio, a technology that allows for listening publics across race and class divides, black country musicians have been accused of lacking exposure to the genre. As Angela Hammond writes, “All country artists are expected to be ‘raised’ on country music. But it is primarily non-whites, especially African Americans . . . who have been viewed with suspicion.

35. Only one previous recording of “Song of the Mockingbird” exists, by Sneaky Pete Kleinow in 1974. And the fiddle solo on “Big Bayou” nearly matches Gib Gilbeau’s original recording, while the general instrumentation and style of the rhythm section hew closely to the Burrito Brothers’ contemporaneous recording of the song. Gilbeau is also the likely fiddler on “I’d Be Ahead if I Could Quit While I’m Behind.” Pedal steel player John Macy also confirmed in personal communication that Kleinow played on the record. This exchange is recorded on the Steel Guitar Forum, <https://bb.steelguitarforum.com/viewtopic.php?p=2837187#2837187>, where Macy notes that he discussed the issue with fellow pedal steeler Dave Pearlman, who played some with Bobby Womack.

36. Womack mentions in his autobiography that he proposed the project with his brothers involved and singing. There is one track where I do not think that the Valentinos are the backing vocals: on “Big Bayou,” I believe that members of the Flying Burrito Brothers are singing instead.

37. Hughes takes as a specific example, Jerry “Swamp Dogg” Williams, contrasting his experiences with the greater success and ease of white counterpart Joe South. Hughes, *Country Soul*, and Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

38. Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, 70.

Country singers of other nationalities such as Shania Twain, Terri Clark, Emerson Drive, and Keith Urban, have endured far less scrutiny than black artists.³⁹

Womack and other black artists have used a variety of means to confront the racial rigidities of country music. While Womack used the visuals of the album cover and R&B-inflected vocal stylings to convey the racial implications of *BW Goes C&W*, today's black country and country-soul artists have multiple newer ways to communicate the racial tensions of their participation in the country music scene. In particular, black artists have made strong use of videos. Lil Nas X's extended video for "Old Town Road" with Billy Ray Cyrus makes plain his racial isolation in the genre. The video is full of tongue-in-cheek references to the incongruity of black cowboys in the American imaginary.⁴⁰ And this is merely the latest in a string of videos that touch on this topic. In late 2018, Yola released a music video for "Ride Out in the Country," a song from her second album, *Walk through Fire*. The video trades in standard country tropes: nostalgia, an old Chevy pickup truck, a rural idyll. Near the end of the song, however, the video takes a gothic turn as Yola digs a hole and buries a white body in it. It is not clear who this is, but the video hints that the deceased could be a murdered romantic partner.⁴¹

Gestures highlighting race are also found in more commercially mainstream country materials. The video for Darius Rucker's "Wagon Wheel," one of the top pop country hits of 2013, features several moments of racial tension. In one, Rucker practices in an abandoned storefront; white passersby press their faces against the glass to watch him play, as they might an animal in a zoo. In another, Rucker hitches a ride in a pickup truck but has to sit in the back of the truck rather than inside the cab. Near the end of the video, when Rucker arrives at a bar to play a gig, the white bouncer refuses to let him in. None of these moments is framed as explicit racial critique, but in aggregate it is difficult to ignore their implications, particularly given that Rucker is the only black person in the video.⁴²

Moreover, actions by the CMA emphasize the ongoing challenge of inclusion, even as the association tries to bury it. To advertise the fiftieth year of the CMA awards in 2016, the association created a commemorative video titled "Forever Country." The music video, comprising a mash-up of three well-known country songs, featured thirty country performers. Of those, the only non-white performers were Charley Pride and Darius Rucker. This paucity of representation is made all the starker by the fact that, given the CMA's criteria for inclusion in the video—all of the performers had to be CMA award winners—they included all of the eligible black performers in the history of the award.⁴³

39. Angela Denise Hammond, "Color Me Country: Commercial Country Music and Whiteness" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 2011), 130–31.

40. Lil Nas X. "Lil Nas X – Old Town Road (Official Movie) ft. Billy Ray Cyrus," published 17 May 2019. <https://youtu.be/w2Ov5jzm3j8>.

41. The video also contains some surrealism, as Yola buries not only her partner but also pulls a second body out of the pickup truck, a body that is revealed to be herself. She buries the two bodies together—Yola and the faceless white partner. <https://youtu.be/BI3lwv8qhx0>

42. Darius Rucker. "Darius Rucker – Wagon Wheel." Published 21 March 2013. <https://youtu.be/hvKyBcCDOB4>.

43. CMAVEVO. "Artists of Then, Now & Forever – Forever Country," published 20 September 2016. <https://youtu.be/s9gAXwYZtfk>.

Similar ironies are visible in the awards show performances, where the CMA often invites non-country artists of color to share the stage in a bid to broaden the appeal of the award program and demonstrate inclusion. In 2018, Mavis Staples joined Chris Stapleton, Maren Morris, and others on stage for a two-song set. The performance was thrilling, and the musicians took obvious pleasure in playing and singing together. But as the camera alternated between shots of the performers on stage and a nearly all-white audience, Staples's presence emphasized her isolation and the token status of non-white guest performers.⁴⁴

While Womack, Lil Nas X, and Beyoncé have faced explicit gestures of exclusion perpetrated by corporations and associations within the music industry, some artists preempt such gestures by avoiding the country label. Instead they choose the terminology of adjacent sub-genres, potentially skirting these questions of genre belonging. For example, Yola describes her own music as "country soul."⁴⁵ This despite her undeniable credentials as a country musician: she played the Ryman in 2019, was featured on the title track of that year's eponymous release by the country supergroup the Highwomen, and toured with Chris Stapleton in 2020. Similarly, Blanco Brown, who has done well on country charts with the song "The Git Up," describes his music not as country but as "Trailer Trap."⁴⁶

These delicate negotiations do not appear to be required of white artists whose work feels similarly genre-bending. Kacey Musgraves's 2018 album *Golden Hour* was described as stretching the boundaries of country music; critic Sam Sodomsky wrote that it "ventures beyond the front-porch hum of country music," noting that it has "strings, vocoders, and disco beats."⁴⁷ Yet Musgraves's album was played widely on country radio and won country album of the year from both the Grammys and the CMAs. Meanwhile, black artists making definitively mainstream country are still reckoning with their stranger status, as Darius Rucker did in his 2013 video. Jimmie Allen's "All Tractors Ain't Green" is a clear commentary on difference, with a message of unity and inclusion. But this song has not received the same airplay and attention as other songs on the album, which do not address questions of race in country. More sharply, Kane Brown has said publicly that "some people in Nashville who have pub[lication] deals won't write with me because I'm Black." He has also pointed out that at the CMA awards, he was "getting looked down on just because of [his] skin."⁴⁸

That black country artists experience these racial tensions is not incidental. As Olivia Carter Mather has argued, racial exclusion is central to country's history. Country music is not a "genre that is marked as white"; rather, its whiteness has been cultivated by music marketers,

44. Full video of the performance is visible on the CMA website, <https://cmaawards.com/video-gallery/>.

45. Spotify introduced her to me as simply "soul" in early 2019. Their genre label for Yola has since shifted; as of February 2020, she is tagged as "UK Americana," "indie folk," and "new Americana" in their artist data.

46. See, for example, www.blancobrown.com as of February 2020.

47. "Kacey Musgraves: *Golden Hour*" *Pitchfork*, 2 April 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/kacey-musgraves-golden-hour/> Accessed 15 February 2020.

48. Boone, Keyaira. 2018. "Two Black Country Singers Make History by Debuting at No. 1." *Essence*, 21 November. <https://www.essence.com/entertainment/jimmie-allen-kane-brown-debut-no-1/>.

critics, radio programmers, and others and is critical to the genre's history and trajectory. Mather writes,

The changing meanings of country's racialized musical elements manifest some of the most complex racial dynamics in all of American popular culture. Country presents an opportunity to do the kind of progressive work that not only illuminates racial formation, but the richness of the music as well. What do we make of country that reclaims black experience as central, like black banjo revival or the songs of Stoney Edwards?⁴⁹

BW Goes C&W does precisely this: it reclaims black experience as a resource for and subject of country music. Womack paid for his boldness in asserting blackness as essential to his musical identity regardless of genre. It is comforting to think that the outpouring of discussion over "Old Town Road" demonstrates a shift in attitude—that today Womack's album would find an enthusiastic audience of country fans. But the drama of Lil Nas X actually suggests the opposite. The hullabaloo notwithstanding, country radio still considers "Old Town Road" an alien work, and only the addition of a white star secured its place on the country charts.

And what about cases of seemingly straightforward inclusion? Jimmie Allen and Kane Brown both acknowledge that racial identity is a source of friction for them and call on the genre to address that friction, yet their hits ignore country's race problem. Their examples only reinforce the incisiveness of Womack's musical critique and accentuate the rarity of his art. Yola's case would seem somewhat different. When she played the Ryman, the most hallowed stage in country music, she wasn't channeling Charley Pride. Her music, like Womack's, communicates blackness. Yet it still would be too much to claim on this basis that the color line in country music is disappearing, or even blurring. Unlike Womack, Yola is not trying to make country music with a black identity. She is making country-soul music, a genre difference that leaves the whiteness of country music undisturbed.

If the genre-color line that hemmed in Bobby Womack remains, it is at least under scrutiny. That is why Lil Nas X became a *cause célèbre*. This is an important development and not to be discounted. It shows us that country music's racial identity is open to negotiation. ■

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