

## Redneck Chic

*Race and the Country Music Industry in the 1970s*

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**ABSTRACT** This article analyzes the Nashville-based country music industry's marketing practices and targeted audience between 1969 and 1978, an exciting period of racial and political diversification among country listeners and artists. During this era, growing numbers of non-white fans appeared at country concerts (drawn in large part by a previously unprecedented number of non-white artists who had earned commercial success during this period), and musicians such as Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings—the “Outlaws”—attracted listeners who identified with the counterculture. These new fans differed from the white and conservative listeners that the country music industry had branded as the quintessential country music fan by the early 1970s. But despite the potential to target increasing numbers of non-white fans, by 1980 and the election of Ronald Reagan, the industry remained more committed than ever before to defining the music as a product for an affluent, white, and predominantly conservative audience only. The industry's efforts to target a large white and affluent audience came at the expense of not only non-white listeners, but also actual Southerners and low-income whites, who were harmed by the stereotypes and widespread appropriations perpetuated by the trend of “redneck chic.” **KEYWORDS** music history, reception/audience, race and ethnic studies

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In 1970, Paul Hemphill claimed “country music is still the white man’s world” in his popular book on country music, *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music*.<sup>1</sup> But despite common presumptions that country music was for whites only, reports from concerts and record sales throughout the 1970s suggested the genre’s audience was much more diverse than Hemphill indicated. By 1977, descriptions from a concert by the Mexican American country music star Freddy Fender spoke to the exciting trends occurring in country music at the time. A reviewer described the crowd, saying it was “made up of Chicanos, Anglos, many blacks and other races,” leading the writer to conclude: “Country music’s new spirit of ecumenism is a hit.”<sup>2</sup> During the first half of the 1970s, the country music audience visibly diversified beyond its typically presumed listeners—white and conservative—not only in terms of its cultural and political affiliations, but also with regard to its racial definitions. But despite the potential to target increasing numbers of non-white fans, the country music industry instead leaned in to the genre’s associations with whiteness, and by 1980

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1. Paul Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 162.

2. Bettye L. Frye, “Tex-Mex Freddie [sic] Wows ‘Em Again,” *Country Music Fan Club*, Fall Journal, 1977, 33.

and the election of Ronald Reagan, remained more committed than ever before to defining the music as Hemphill had, by branding country music as a product for a white, affluent, and predominantly conservative audience only.

At the dawn of the 1970s, country music's popularity skyrocketed. In 1970, singer-songwriter Tom T. Hall described the music's ubiquity, saying, "Country music is the hula hoop of today. It is the big thing. It's all over the networks. It is in all the magazines, in all the commercials."<sup>3</sup> The country music boom occurred during a tumultuous period of transition for Americans. After decades of overall prosperity following World War II, the United States entered a new era defined by intense social, economic, and political uncertainty. Under the Nixon presidency, Americans remained divided over polarizing issues like the Vietnam War, second-wave feminism, affirmative action, and busing. Months after an oil embargo shocked the globe in late 1973, the U.S. economy was in recession, and political anxiety also abounded surrounding the Watergate scandal.<sup>4</sup> At a time of such unease, white, urban Americans with middle incomes found refuge in the Southern imaginary and the signifiers of white rusticity, most notably found in a celebration of the white male Southern figure, the "redneck," and his musical counterpart, country music. As the bicentennial lingered and Americans of all backgrounds showed interest in reclaiming ethnic identities, country music and the trend of "redneck chic" were celebrated as symbols of whiteness and invoked as mythic but accepted evidence of a purely white American heritage. The country music industry capitalized on these circumstances, and, after decades of persuading outsiders of country music's solidly middle-class status, paradoxically leaned in to the lowbrow whiteness of "redneck chic," and sold country music fans on the optics of white rusticity. The industry's efforts to target a large white and affluent audience came at the expense of not only non-white listeners, but also actual Southerners and low-income whites, who were harmed by the stereotypes and widespread appropriations perpetuated by "redneck chic."

The growing, mainstream interest in country music came after decades of derision directed at the music and its listeners. The genre was invented as a marketing category in the 1920s, when record executives sought out new markets for the increasingly accessible technology of recorded music. First called "hillbilly" or "old time" music, what is now collectively referred to as country music was consciously created for and marketed to white and rural Southerners.<sup>5</sup> Because of its racial and regional affiliations, the music became a frequent target of ridicule (and remains so to a certain extent), including one instance in 1926 when a

3. Interview with Tom T. Hall, *Country Song Roundup Annual*, 1970, 17.

4. Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012); Matthew Delmont, *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016).

5. For a thorough explanation of this process, see Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), and Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

front-page *Variety* article described the music's listeners as "illiterate and ignorant, with the intelligence of morons."<sup>6</sup> By the 1970s, however, the music's connections to rural whiteness increasingly evolved into a marketing *asset*. Though country's rusticity had always accounted for at least a portion of its appeal to some listeners, more and more, it became fashionable for growing numbers of Americans to embrace country music and the signifiers of rural fashion and culture.

Around the country, major news outlets reported on the music's rising appeal. In 1971 a *Look* magazine cover story read: "Hillbilly No More: Country Music Sweeps the U.S.A.," while a 1973 *Newsweek* cover reported on "The Country Music Craze."<sup>7</sup> The growing presence of country music on radio also spoke to the genre's growing appeal. By 1970, Americans enjoyed 750 full-time country music radio stations, up from just 81 in 1961.<sup>8</sup> Miraculously, the genre suddenly appeared free of the discriminations it had endured for decades. A 1970 study on the music concluded: "Much of the stigma associated with country music as its being back country or hillbilly music has been lost," and country music artist George Hamilton IV echoed this sentiment, saying: "'Country' had a bad connotation when I was a kid. It's a good word now."<sup>9</sup> A growing number of corporate sponsorships also spoke to country's rising appeal and acceptance. In the early seventies, Coca-Cola ran a successful marketing campaign featuring the Dottie West song, "Country Sunshine," while other high-profile advertisements brought together Johnny Cash as the voice of American Oil, and Tom T. Hall for Chevy trucks.

What was perplexing about country music's ascendance during this period was the fact that it corresponded with the rising social mobility and urbanization of the bulk of the country music audience. Far from generally being the poor and rural whites who had been the music's initial targets, most country listeners by the 1970s instead represented many of the financially stable white Americans who had most benefited from the post-World War II economy. "The typical country-and-western fan nowadays is not precisely the poor hayseed he used to be, but he is a lineal descendant," explained one article. "The children of the Depression have grown up to grab a fair share of the nation's affluence."<sup>10</sup> A poll conducted at the Grand Ole Opry concluded that among its audience, "Affluence was very much in evidence," and elsewhere research showed that "more country listeners are found in the high income bracket (\$50,000 plus per year) than average radio listeners . . . [and] a greater percentage of country listeners own their own homes rather than rent."<sup>11</sup> By 1979, studies

6. No author, "Hill-Billy Music," *Variety*, 29 December 1926, 1. For more on the past and present class-based discriminations aimed at country music, see Jeffrey J. Lange, *Smile When You Call Me Hillbilly: Country's Struggle for Respectability, 1939-1954* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), and Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2014).

7. *Look*, Volume 35, no. 14, 13, July 1971; *Newsweek*, 18 June 1973.

8. No author, "Country Radio Spells National Success Story," *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, 1971-72, 30.

9. E. J. W. McIntire, "Country Music: Its Character, Audience and Change," *The Country Music Foundation News Letter*, vol. 1, no. 2, April 1970, 11; Christopher S. Wren, "Country Music," *Look*, 13 July 1971, vol. 35, no. 14, 11.

10. Saul Braun, "Good Ole Boy," *Playboy*, November 1970, 140.

11. No author, "Grand Ole Opry: More Country Fans Like Classical Than R&B," *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, 20 October 1973, 25; No author, "CMA Arbitron Study Now in Mail," *CMA Close-Up*, vol. XIX, no. 4, August 1977, 5.

confirmed two-thirds of country music listeners resided in urban and suburban areas and a similar number earned either middle or high incomes. And though the music still stood as a symbol of the South, just a third of country music listeners lived in the region.<sup>12</sup>

The impressive socio-economic demographics of the country music audience was not coincidental. Since the 1950s especially, the country music industry had made conscious efforts to broaden the music's appeal as much as possible to create the highest profit. This was accomplished by homing in on a white, adult audience—the primary beneficiaries of the nation's post-World War II affluence. This segment not only included formerly rural migrants from the South and Midwest, but also new listeners without rural or Southern connections.<sup>13</sup> No force was more influential in legitimizing the success and acceptance of country music than the Country Music Association. Formed in 1958, the CMA is a trade organization for members of the country music industry and was created “for the purpose of fostering, publicizing and promoting the growth of and interest in country music.” As a large part of this venture, the CMA vowed to “promote Country Music in its entirety,” and “ensure that Country Music retains its individuality.”<sup>14</sup> By the 1970s, the industry's marketing efforts, in conjunction with larger historical forces, catapulted country music to wider popularity than ever before.

In no place was country music's popularity more surprising than in New York City. “The Country is in the city,” reported one *New York* magazine article in 1973. “The ads proclaim it, but you don't even need the ads; just open your ears. Country & Western music resounds from every radio and hi-fi, packing audiences into the same halls where Toscanini once reigned, sweeping its cornball into the urban way of life.”<sup>15</sup> The article appeared months after the city adopted its first ever all-country radio station, WHN, which gained the nation's largest country radio audience by the end of the decade. Local record stores also benefited from the station's success, as one record store manager noted, “Two years ago there was little demand for country records. Since WHN made its switch to country our sales have increased 75 percent and they're still climbing.”<sup>16</sup> Around town, bars featured live country music. As one article reported: “There are now genuine country music clubs in New York—(O'Lunney's and Hilly's in Manhattan, Henry's in Brooklyn, and three or four others). What's more, they are usually crowded and—get *this*—they usually feature *local* bands.”<sup>17</sup> Outside of the city, membership in the Eastern States Country Music Inc. and the Long Island Country Music Association grew.

But, as the *Wall Street Journal* questioned: “Where does all of this love of rural music come from among people who have never lived in the country and whose fathers and

12. Maria Elizabeth Grabe, “Massification Revisited: Country Music and Demography,” *Popular Music and Society*, 21: 4 (1997), 73–4.

13. Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham and London: University of Duke University Press, 2007), 168.

14. Country Music Association, Inc. Membership Application. *Billboard*, 17 November 1962, 42.

15. John Seelye, “The Sound of the Cornball Invasion,” *New York* magazine, vol. 6, no. 14, 2 April 1973, 3.

16. Ellis Nassour, “Three Major Forces Cause Country Boom in New York,” *Music City News*, vol. XII, no. 4, October 1974, 4-C.

17. Patrick Carr, “Country in the City—New York Style,” *Country Music* magazine, November 1973, 21.

mothers were born in Brooklyn?”<sup>18</sup> To a growing number at the time, country music’s appeal in urban spaces didn’t appear to make much sense. To some, the music’s popularity even seemed threatening, the sign of a growing embrace of conservatism. *New York* magazine expressed such concern by asking: “What gives? Is this some kind of (ugh) *political* thing?”<sup>19</sup> Months later, an article by Richard Goldstein in *Mademoiselle* magazine went further, saying:

“There is something astounding about this—seeing the same kid who dotes on underground comics and progressive politics, dressed in a cowboy shirt and scruffy boots, emerging as a hidden audience for country music. I suspect there is something far more sinister to the current embrace of country music by the least likely people, and even a touch of desperation to their imitation of Southern style, as though they were admitting something far more threatening than mere nostalgia, which is the simple fact that the politics of this nation has changed drastically in the past four years, and that as deliberate consequence of administrative power, the values of Southern, Caucasian, Protestant, suburban, adult Americans have assumed supremacy.”<sup>20</sup>

As such concerns revealed, country music by the early 1970s did not only signify a type of music, but a type of politics as well. The link between country music and conservatism was not only made by the music’s outsiders, but also by the country industry. Diane Pecknold has described this alliance between conservatism (and the Republican Party) and country music by saying the music “did not so much shift to the right as the right shifted to country, consciously seeking to transform an established marketing demographic into a political one.”<sup>21</sup> But while the Nixon White House had recognized the value in targeting the country music audience as its “Silent Majority,” members of the country industry likewise found it appropriate to embrace conservative politics that pushed against the social movements of the 1960s. The genre’s relationship with conservatism had become particularly pronounced since the 1964 presidential election, when several high-profile country stars endorsed Republican nominee Barry Goldwater, including Eddy Arnold, Roy Acuff, Hank Snow, and Marty Robbins, who served as the senator’s “Stars for Barry” chairman.<sup>22</sup> Alabama Governor George Wallace also made multiple welcoming appearances on the Grand Ole Opry during this period. Popular songs like Merle Haggard’s “The Fightin’ Side of Me” provided further evidence of the industry’s commitment to branding country music as the soundtrack of conservatism. Though Haggard had wanted to release “Irma Jackson,” a song about interracial love, following the huge success of the notoriously conservative anthem “Okie From Muskogee” in 1969, his producer, Ken Nelson, instructed him to instead lean into the jingoism of “Okie,” resulting in the release of “The Fightin’ Side of Me.”<sup>23</sup>

18. Benjamin Stein, “Forget the Beatles, Here’s to Tom T. Hall,” *Wall Street Journal*, 24 December 1973, 4.

19. John Seelye, “The Sound of the Cornball Invasion,” *New York* magazine, vol. 6, no. 14, 2 April 1973, 32.

20. Richard Goldstein, “My Country Music Problem—and Yours,” *Mademoiselle*, June 1973, 114.

21. Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham and London: University of Duke University Press, 2007), 219.

22. Barry Goldwater advertisement, *Music City News*, October 1964, 16.

23. Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2014), 65.

By the early 1970s, though many country artists claimed to be apolitical, the industry's marketing practices had nevertheless branded the genre as a strong symbol of conservatism and antithetical to the progressive social movements of the period.<sup>24</sup> As popular artist Buck Owens explained in 1971, "Country music is seldom controversial. People are tired of 'crisis programming.'"<sup>25</sup> The same year, George Hamilton IV offered a similar statement, saying, "People are fed up with noise, with being preached to. They're longing for an escape."<sup>26</sup>

As these artists revealed, they identified their listeners as white, middle-class Americans who had become fed up with the social movements of the previous decade. This sentiment tapped into the discomfort many middle-class whites faced following the push for greater racial, gender, and sexual equality.<sup>27</sup> This summation was described by the general manager of a country radio station in Minneapolis who explained:

"I'm tired of it. I refuse to go to a movie and be moralized to. I know black folks and poor people have it bad. I don't need to be told that. But I made my own way through school and worked my way up. And I don't want to be made to feel guilty for it. That's why I can't listen to rock anymore. I don't need the guilt of not being liberal enough, or the guilt of having a nice house and a nice car to drive."<sup>28</sup>

For a growing number of whites discomfited by the social movements of the 1960s, refuge was alternatively found in the Southern imaginary and the signifiers of white rusticity. In the post-World War II decades, the South had increasingly become associated with conservative politics that many Americans identified with regardless of their regional affiliation. In this understanding, the South was painted as entirely white and conservative.<sup>29</sup> And while the South had long stood as a symbol of whiteness despite a large African American population, this racial affiliation became even more pronounced throughout the 1970s.<sup>30</sup>

The growing embrace of an imagined white Southern identity and culture also came at a time when Americans were contemplating personal family roots, and when white Americans in particular expressed a large interest in reclaiming ethnic identities. Following the Civil Rights Movement, and the rising struggles for African American, Chicano American, and Native American inclusivity, white ethnics—including Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Greek Americans, among others—likewise sought to reclaim their heritage.

24. Despite the industry's preference for conservative politics, recent scholarship has addressed some of the progressive instincts among country artists during this period. See Hubbs and Stimeling in Mark Allan Jackson, ed., *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), and Daniel Geary, "The Way I Would Feel About San Quentin: Johnny Cash and the Politics of Country Music," *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences* 142, no. 4 (2013): 64–72.

25. Buck Owens, "A View of Country Music," *Music City News*, vol. IX, no. 4, October, 1971, 38–A.

26. Christopher S. Wren, "Country Music," *Look*, 13 July 1971, vol. 35, no. 14, 13.

27. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.

28. Steve Berg, "Rednecks Come of Age: It's Fashionable to Be a Hick," *Star Tribune*, 23 September 1977.

29. Grace Elizabeth Hale, Commentary and Response to James N. Gregory, "Southernizing the American Working Class," "A Note on Region, Race, and Vision," *Labor History*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1998, 157.

30. Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 170.

This yearning was only further propelled in 1977, when the wildly popular television miniseries *Roots* premiered. For white, middle-class Americans without a discernible ethnic background, however, country music and the semblance of a purely white American heritage understood through the signifiers of white rusticity could fulfill a yearning for ethnic identity. One Columbia Records ad promoting country music made this link, saying: “Nowadays is a time when the nation is looking long and hard for its roots. And what better place to find them than in the land.”<sup>31</sup> In his cultural study of the hillbilly, Anthony Harkins has explained how middle-class whites could see the Southern rural figure “as a fascinating and exotic ‘other’ akin to Native Americans or Blacks, while at the same time sympathize with them as poorer and less modern versions of themselves.”<sup>32</sup> In an era of Civil Rights and welfare backlash, the semblance of a poor and rural past that the Southern imaginary conjured could also conveniently obscure the systemic privileges—including access to home ownership and higher education—that granted many whites social mobility in the years surrounding World War II, and could also ease the feelings of guilt many white Americans had felt following the tumultuous 1960s.

By the early 1970s, however, it became increasingly clear that not all country listeners identified as the white, adult conservatives the Nashville industry had shown clear preference for. More and more, country music fans showed an interest in diversifying sounds, and cultural and racial multiplicity within country music. Since the 1950s and the introduction of rock ‘n’ roll, Nashville had defined country music as the product of white, middle-class adults who did not identify with youth culture or multiracialism. Led in large part by the work of producers Chet Atkins and Owen Bradley, the Nashville Sound transformed country into music that appealed to middle-of-the-road pop listeners with its lush sounds, orchestral arrangements, and backup singers.<sup>33</sup> But despite the music’s commercial success, many musicians and fans increasingly found the music dull, constricting, and insincere to the country music genre. By the time the dominant forces in Nashville had successfully branded country music as a product of Richard Nixon’s Silent Majority, artists such as the “Outlaws,” Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings began appealing to the very opposite demographic: the counterculture.<sup>34</sup> And meanwhile, a growing number of non-white listeners also emerged alongside greater numbers of commercially successful non-white country artists. Despite these two new avenues for audience growth, the country industry only showed an interest in capturing the predominantly young, white, and male listeners drawn to the countercultural sounds of Nelson and Jennings. And with the emergence of the “redneck chic” fad, the industry did so by paradoxically leaning in to the lowbrow whiteness it had previously fought so hard against.

31. Columbia Records advertisement, “Country Music for the Whole Country,” *The Palm Beach Post*, 7 June 1970.

32. Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

33. Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998).

34. Travis D. Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin’s Progressive Country Music Scene* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jason Mellard, *Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).

After more than a decade of the CMA's efforts to convince outsiders of country music's respectable, solidly middle-class white Silent Majority status, a growing number of non-white listeners visibly showed interest in the genre. This was heavily driven by an unprecedented number of popular non-white artists. Far from representing a truly multiracial display, the 1970s nevertheless stand as a bright point of racial diversity in commercially successful country music artists' history. In 1965, Charley Pride became the first non-white country artist signed to a major record label, and his superstardom continued into the 1970s and beyond. Though no other black country artist has ever achieved success comparable to Pride's, in the decade following his debut, black artists O.B. McClinton and Stoney Edwards also earned a string of small hits on the country charts. Mexican American artists Johnny Rodriguez and Freddy Fender also achieved success during this period, each having earned multiple number-one hits. And though far less visible, a handful of black women also attained some popularity in the country field, the most successful of whom was Linda Martell, but also included Ruby Falls, Barbara Cooper, Lenora Ross, and Virginia Kirby.<sup>35</sup> To some at the time, the presence of these artists suggested an evolution was occurring in country music, and that the genre was no longer defined by the whiteness it was founded upon. "Country entertainers are no longer required to be from the South, to have been raised in the country, to be white, or even to be familiar with the music's history," concluded one article in 1976. "All that's required is that they sell records. Freddy Fender is a case in point."<sup>36</sup>

The popularity of these artists highlighted the presence of non-white listeners and suggested country music's audience could expand beyond the purely white listeners the music industry had always imagined for the genre. Though market research on popular music from this period often failed to acknowledge race as a demographic characteristic, there is evidence to show that non-whites represented more than an insignificant portion of country music listeners. One listener survey by radio station WDYL in Richmond, Virginia, for instance, showed that 40 percent of the station's country music listeners were black.<sup>37</sup> Still, reports on the performances of non-white artists provide the most common and concrete evidence of racially diverse country listeners. In 1971, Charley Pride noted changes in his fan base, saying, "I see more and more black faces in my audiences, especially in the last few years."<sup>38</sup> Johnny Rodriguez noted, "I've known for a long time since I was growing up that Mexican-American people loved country music, but they didn't have anyone to identify with."<sup>39</sup> Freddy Fender likewise viewed his race as a selling point, saying: "The Chicano population of the United States is large, and I hope to be able to capitalize on that."<sup>40</sup> Reports from Fender's concerts indeed revealed a multiracial audience. "Back in Texas," reported

35. Outside of the Nashville-based industry, several other non-white artists also recorded country albums during this time period, including Tina Turner, the Pointer Sisters, Bobby Womack, Joe Simon, and Ivory Joe Hunter.

36. Martha Hume, "What the Hell is Happening to Our Music?" *Country Music* magazine, February 1976, 30.

37. Arnold Shaw, "Country Music and the Negro," *Billboard: The World of Country Music*, Section 2–28 October 1967, 82.

38. Kenny Meyers, "Charlie [sic] Pride: An American with the Courage of His Convictions," *Music City News*, vol. IX, no. 4, October 1971, 21-A.

39. Lee Rector, "Johnny Rodriguez is Country's Gift to Acting," *Music City News*, vol. XII, no. 12, June 1975, 28-B.

40. Jack Hurst, "Freddy Fender Today: Career is Getting Hot (and It's High Time)," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 March 1975.

one magazine in 1975, “he’s a local legend to the cult of long-haired hippies, redneck cowboys and Chicano rockers who frequent the smoky little honky tonks where he was playing not more than six months ago.”<sup>41</sup>

New York City’s popular all-country radio station, WHN—which earned the largest country radio audience in the U.S. by the end of the decade—capitalized on the potential to broaden country’s listenership by making conscious appeals to both Latino and African American listeners. The station positioned itself as welcoming to non-whites by posting subway ads with non-white artists like Charley Pride, and by featuring ads in Spanish. The station’s program director, Ed Salamon, commented on the rarity of this strategy, saying “This was probably the first time any country station advertised in Spanish.”<sup>42</sup> WHN also made a conscious effort to take calls from listeners with a variety of ethnic accents on air. The decision to target non-white listeners was touted by Salamon, who noted that country music “has true mass appeal. You’ll hear it in suburbia, in the kitchens of Chinese restaurants, in Puerto Rican markets or on the radios of black cab drivers. If you didn’t, we could have never made it in New York.”<sup>43</sup> One of the station’s popular disk jockeys, Jessie Scott, has echoed this description of the station’s listeners, saying they “would be Stanford attorneys, they would be Bed Stuy black kids, they would be New Jersey housewives . . . They defied stereotyping.”<sup>44</sup> The radio station’s ability to appeal to non-whites was met with surprise but was nevertheless acknowledged by one article in 1976 which marveled: “[is] country in New York appealing across class, race, creed or whatever lines? Seems so . . . WHN has not only succeeded in New York, but has also managed to cater to the musical vacuum of the inner city . . . almost as well as it has (naturally enough) penetrated the suburbs and the white working class fringes.”<sup>45</sup> But though WHN found success in marketing country to non-whites, Ed Salamon has recalled that he “did not notice any other country stations that specifically reached out to black and Hispanic listeners.”<sup>46</sup>

Salamon’s recollections are supported by Ed Benson, former Country Music Association executive director, and a high-ranking member of the association since the late 1970s. According to Benson, there was knowledge within Nashville about country’s multiracial listeners. Regarding this sector of the audience, he recalls: “It has been discussed as long as I can remember. When I started in ’79, there was discussion about the African American audience, there was discussion about the growing Hispanic population in America,” but also adds that he does not remember “that there was ever a targeted campaign.”<sup>47</sup> Elsewhere, lack of racial data in market research led to presumptions that country music appealed to whites only. A number of studies on the country music audience during this period by sociologist Richard A. Peterson highlight this omission and conclusion about the racial makeup of country listeners. While Peterson could rely on solid evidence regarding things like the

41. J.R. Young, “Freddie Fender El Bebop Kid,” *Country Music* magazine, August 1975, 61.

42. Ed Salamon, *WHN: When New York City Went Country* (Los Angeles: Archer Books, 2013), 43.

43. Lawrence C. Levy, “Nashville’s Bite of the Big Apple,” *New York Times*, 4 July 1976.

44. Jessie Scott interview by Martinez, 25 June 2019.

45. Patrick Carr, “New York’s WHN: The Real Story,” *Country Music* magazine, May 1976, 18.

46. Salamon, 44–45.

47. Ed Benson interview by Martinez, 4 June 2019.

regional, class, educational, and age characteristics of these listeners, he acknowledged that race was a neglected factor in market research. This suggests that the Nashville-based industry, along with the wider public, failed to adequately consider non-whites as a potential demographic. “All observers agree that the country music audience is almost exclusively white,” concluded one study by Peterson, while another acknowledged that a “survey has no data on the race of listeners but all observers agree that country music’s audience is almost exclusively white.”<sup>48</sup>

What was most peculiar about the mainstream industry’s failure to seriously consider non-whites as a potential demographic was that it occurred despite a proven potential to sell records by non-white country artists, and the visibility of non-white listeners at country performances. In spite of these successes, non-white artists generally understood their popularity as accidental and not sanctioned by an industry that continued to define country music as a product for whites only. While country’s biggest non-white star, Charley Pride, often claimed to be unaffected by his race—saying: “I’m an individualist in the way I think about people, and I look at people as individuals. To me, I’m just an American with a tan”—others had a different view.<sup>49</sup> According to Fender, the success of his biggest hit, “Before the Next Teardrop Falls,” came as a surprise, as he later recalled: “I think that before [the industry] knew what was going on, my song was number one, it was too late. I don’t think they had a choice on whether they should accept me into their society or not . . . most of them didn’t think that I was a Hispanic, they didn’t know.”<sup>50</sup> Fender’s interpretation that his song’s success was accidental was mirrored by O.B. McClinton’s understanding of how the genre’s most popular black star achieved success. Along with Stoney Edwards, McClinton was one of the few additional black artists to find success on the country charts following Charley Pride. Unlike Pride, McClinton was hyperconscious of his race, openly discussing it in several interviews and particularly in his recordings, including songs like “Black Speck,” and “Country Music, That’s My Thing.” By the 1980s, McClinton summarized his feelings on Charley Pride’s role in country by saying: “Many people . . . looked on Charley Pride as an accident.”<sup>51</sup>

While the Nashville-based country music industry failed to adequately consider a non-white demographic, it instead remained fixated on enlarging the white and middle-income audience it had focused on for more than a decade. With the massive success of artists like the “Outlaws,” Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, who released country music’s first platinum album, *Wanted! The Outlaws*, in 1976, the country industry came to eagerly welcome the generally white, male, and younger urban demographic this new subgenre attracted. An outgrowth of the “Progressive” country scene in Austin, Texas, this new brand of music was

48. Richard A. Peterson and Paul DiMaggio, “From Region to Class, the Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis,” *Social Forces*, vol. 53, no. 3, March 1975: 503; Paul DiMaggio, Richard A. Peterson, and Jack Esco, Jr., “Country Music: Ballad of The Silent Majority” in *The Sounds of Social Change: Studies in Popular Culture*, ed. Serge Denison and Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), 49.

49. No author, “The Pride of Country Music,” *Country Music Reporter*, January 1975, 17.

50. “Interview with Augie Meyers and Freddy Fender,” NPR’s *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*, 28 September 1990.

51. Quoted in Charles L. Hughes, “Country Music and the Recording Industry,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 216.

closely associated with a growing fad of the period, “redneck chic.” By the mid-1970s, Americans not only expressed a growing interest in country music, but in acting and dressing the part of the stereotypical Southern white figure of the redneck. While this affinity began as admiration, by the time of the bicentennial, it evolved into widespread appropriations of a redneck identity.

Though long a term of derision, by the 1970s, “redneck” increasingly became a badge of honor.<sup>52</sup> This figure, like the cowboy out West, was white, male, agrarian, and, during a period when the nation’s bicentennial celebration lingered, played into mythologies about the origins of the United States and self-reliant, bootstrapping capitalism. The redneck, often conflated with similar terms like “hillbilly,” was championed by both Southerners and non-Southerners, and by the 1970s was associated with hard work and self-reliance. In 1973, George Wallace described his affinity for the white male Southerner, telling a reporter:

“I don’t know whether you use the term hillbilly any more. But I still use it. We still use it down here and we think it’s all right. We think a hillbilly is a fella that don’t mind doing an honest day’s work in the sun. Sometimes they call us rednecks; we have a lot of rednecks in Alabama. Well, people don’t mind getting their necks red by doin’ an honest day’s work. They’re working people and they’re proud of it.”<sup>53</sup>

As the nation contemplated its beginnings during the bicentennial celebration of 1976, widespread understandings of the redneck like Wallace’s (along with his implication that the redneck’s hard-working nature was unique) fed into white boosterism and aligned the figure with Jeffersonian understandings of the American past. This interpretation promoted the idea that the United States was built solely on the efforts of white male farmers—which, historically speaking, most directly obscured the role of slavery in the American South. The bicentennial’s white overtones were further indicated by the fact that non-white Americans often found less to celebrate. The *New York Times* reported on a “consensus among blacks that the 200th birthday of the United States was more of a dramatic event that pointed up continuing racial inequities of the nation than a cause to celebrate.”<sup>54</sup>

The presidential election of Jimmy Carter, a peanut farmer from Georgia, in 1976—during the nation’s bicentennial celebration—further propelled the celebration of the redneck. Though Carter himself wasn’t championed as a redneck, his brother, Billy Carter, who described himself as “the token redneck on the campaign,” fit the bill better than anyone.<sup>55</sup> As one newspaper reported: “It is easy to pinpoint when [redneck chic] changed from a cult to a full-fledged fad . . . Jimmy Carter is the culprit. He got elected president and accidentally transformed his baby brother Billy into a national celebrity—a beer-sloshing personification of the good ol’ boy, a national symbol of redneck chic.”<sup>56</sup> Shortly after

52. Patrick Huber, “A Short History of ‘Redneck’: The Fashioning of a Southern White Masculine Identity,” *Southern Cultures*, vol. 1, no. 2, Winter 1995, 161.

53. Peter McCabe, “The Wallaces Are Keeping Country Music in the Family,” *Country Music* magazine, October 1973, 36–37.

54. Thomas A. Johnson, “Few Blacks Inspired by Bicentennial,” *New York Times*, 8 July 1976.

55. Jeremy Rifkin and Ted Howard, *Redneck Power: The Wit and Wisdom of Billy Carter* (Toronto, New York, and London: Bantam Books, 1977), n.p.

56. No author, “‘Hick Chic’ Has Arrived on the Scene,” *The Orlando Sentinel*, 30 October 1977.

Carter was elected president, one of Nashville's top talent agencies, Top Billing (whose clients had included Dolly Parton, Porter Wagoner, and Tom T. Hall), aggressively pursued Billy Carter and took him on as a client. Over the next few years, the president's brother was marketed as the ultimate Southern stereotype that groups like the Country Music Association had previously fought so hard against. Through hundreds of television appearances (including on the popular country-themed show *Hee Haw*), visits to the Grand Ole Opry, and his very own brand of alcohol, Billy Beer, Billy Carter was touted and sold as a beer-drinking, bigoted, white Southerner. Reports indicated Carter was indeed a complicated figure. While he was said to be a voracious reader, and Lilian Carter claimed he was her smartest child, his heavy drinking sent him into rehab in 1979, and he was also charged with making anti-Semitic comments.<sup>57</sup> Following his decline, however, his agent, Tandy Rice, faced criticism for his overexposure of the president's brother as a Southern caricature. "After all," reasoned one article, "it was Tandy who led Billy down a trail of empty beer cans, booking him into events like 'Hee Haw,' 'Anything Goes,' and assorted shows like the World Championship Bellyflop and Cannonball Contest."<sup>58</sup>

But the exploitation and outright appropriation of redneck stereotypes went far beyond Carter. Americans throughout the country joined in on the trend. "Now, of course, it is fashionable to play at being a redneck," noted writer Paul Hemphill in 1976. "Everybody is dressing like a double-knit cowboy, including the stars of the Grand Ole Opry, and business has never been better for Levi Strauss."<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere a report stated: "Rednecks. If you are one of the tribe, enjoy it. If you aren't, fake it."<sup>60</sup> High fashion even participated in the fad, as reports stated: "Lord & Taylor said it can't keep enough blue bib overalls on hand to meet the demand. 'We call them 'Georgia Tuxedos,' said a salesman."<sup>61</sup> Several hit songs of the period also saluted the redneck, including Johnny Russell's "Rednecks, White Socks, and Blue Ribbon Beer," Vernon Oxford's "Redneck! (The Redneck National Anthem)," and Jerry Reed's "I'm Just a Redneck in a Rock and Roll Bar." In 1977, an entire book, *Redneck*, was published on the craze, stating: "Redneck chic has arrived . . . City slickers from north, south, east and west are climbing on the buckboard. From New York City to Los Angeles, and from Minneapolis to Miami, it's chic to be hick."<sup>62</sup> But not everyone found reasons to celebrate the trend. As one critic noted, *Redneck* had "produced, in overstated slang, a demeaning collection of stereotypes."<sup>63</sup>

Nowhere was the embrace of redneck chic more common than in Austin, where images of the fad dominated the city's progressive country scene. Fans of this music were predominantly white, middle-income, young, male, and drawn to the music's optics of white rusticity. The cartoonist Ace Reid capitalized on this trend by selling "redneck" cowboy hats and

57. Robert D. Hershey Jr., "Billy Carter Dies of Cancer at 51; Troubled Brother of a President," *New York Times*, 26 September 1988.

58. Bob Allen, "Tandy Rice: Mr. Showmanship," *Nashville!*, November 1980, n.p.

59. Paul Hemphill, "Redneck Chic," *The San Francisco Examiner*, 7 October 1976.

60. Kenneth F. Engle, "Hippies Out and Rednecks In," *Democrat and Chronicle*, 4 September 1976.

61. Henry Hanson, "Redneck Chic, a Newfangled Phenomenon," *The Miami News*, 25 August 1976, 7-A.

62. Bill AuCoin, *Redneck* (Matteson, Illinois: Greatlakes Living Press, 1977), 1, 3.

63. No author, "'Hick Chic' Has Arrived on the Scene," *The Orlando Sentinel*, 30 October 1977, 86.

shirts, which came already equipped with sweat stains. Reid explained that he got the idea after seeing a group of young men deliberately distress a hat before wearing it, saying: “They paid about \$35 for a hat called The Dude . . . They took it outside, beat the devil out of it, rubbed it in the ground and decided it was dirty enough to wear with their \$40 faded Levis . . . I don’t know where they get money.”<sup>64</sup> By the mid-1970s, the popularity of the progressive country scene in Austin, and particularly the success of Willie Nelson’s 1975 album *Red Headed Stranger*, convinced the mainstream country industry it was also time to capitalize on the trend. What resulted was the 1976 album, *Wanted! The Outlaws*, the concept of which was largely the vision of producer Jerry Bradley (the son of Nashville Sound producer Owen Bradley), and became the first country album to sell one million copies.

Despite allusions to leftist, progressive or outlaw politics, however, the marketing of the music produced by artists like Nelson and Jennings nevertheless fell into unabashed commercialism and the conservative tropes of patriarchy and white exclusivity.<sup>65</sup> With the exception of Jessi Colter (Waylon Jennings’s wife), Outlaw country was male-dominated and celebrated histories of American conquest, as the *Wanted! The Outlaws* album cover, a bullet-ridden wanted poster, along with songs like “My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys,” conjured images of the American West. Furthermore, though these musicians had initially faced resistance from the Nashville industry, their success was ultimately sanctioned and made possible by the very same industry, even prior to the release of the popular Outlaw album. As one country listener noted in 1976: “Had record companies such as Liberty Records and RCA not been willing to take a chance on a country songwriter, and released that product at the label’s expense, Willie Nelson would never have succeeded in creating the so-called Austin Sound. So in effect, Willie succeeded in beating the system only by first joining it.”<sup>66</sup>

By the end of the 1970s, the redneck chic fad had evolved into another craze celebrating a mythic white and rustic figure: Urban Cowboy. As Americans traded in their sweat-stained shirts for glitzy cowboy hats and boots, Ronald Reagan—a cowboy of the silver screen—was elected president in 1980. Despite growing racial diversity in country music throughout the 1970s, the genre had emerged as an even stronger symbol of whiteness by the end of the decade. In the following years, the country music industry grew to very explicitly define its music as the product of whites only. In 1986, *Billboard* reported on a study conducted by the Country Music Association and noted that, to qualify for the study, “subjects had to be white and have purchased a record within the past three months.” The magazine expressed surprise at this strategy and commented, “White? It’s a well-known fact that blacks also frequent malls and record stores. Why did the survey exclude them?” According to those conducting the research, “It’s known that the predominant country market is white people,

64. Nat Henderson, “If You’ve No Time to Look Cruddy, No Sweat; ‘Cowpoke’ Can Help,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 6 March 1976.

65. Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 162; Stimeling, 26; Mellard, 114–24.

66. John B. Henderson, “Letters,” *Country Music* magazine, April 1976, 4.

and we wanted to get the greatest utility out of the study.”<sup>67</sup> The following year, Country Music Association Executive Director Ed Benson discussed a survey aimed at potential markets, and specifically acknowledged that “blacks are not considered a potential market.”<sup>68</sup>

For nearly a century, continuous effort by the music industry has been required to maintain the perception that country music is a genre performed exclusively by and for whites.<sup>69</sup> Though recent country music scholarship has complicated these racial affiliations, shedding light on the multiracial musicians and influences that have always been present in the production of country music, an analysis of the marketing practices and efforts of the country music industry can offer understandings of how the genre’s supposed whiteness has been perpetuated.<sup>70</sup> At perhaps no point in time did this require effort greater than in the 1970s, when growing numbers of commercially successful non-white artists emerged alongside a non-white audience for country music, and when the Nashville industry capitalized on the trend of “redneck chic” and emboldened its efforts to consciously brand its music as that of middle-income whiteness exclusively. ■

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67. Gerry Wood, “Nashville Scene,” *Billboard*, 23 August 1986, 34.

68. United Press International, “Country Music’s Market,” *Newsday*, 12 April 1987.

69. Geoff Mann, “Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 31 (2008): 83; George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Benefit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

70. For more on the constant multiracialism in the production of country music, see Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013); Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Mark Allan Jackson, ed., *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018).

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