City Country: The Paradox of Country Music in Urban America
Molly Fay
LaSalle University

No other genre in American music has maintained such a popular presence on the national conscience as country music. Though it is not the only distinct “American” style of music in the United States, this genre has consistently maintained a strong listener base and standard themes of content, more so than any other variation of music. Country music as a commercial industry began between 1920 and 1925 in the rural South.1 Since those grassroots beginnings, the genre has become synonymous with the city of Nashville and songs about love, loss, and drinking. In the 21st century, the popularity of country music hit a new peak with skyrocketing presence in American cities. This once distinctly, rural musical style has evolved to appeal to all Americans, rural and urban alike, leaving one to wonder why that is so. Country music’s popularity in American cities results from the urbanization of the genre especially by mass media and contemporary country artists integrating their music with other genres.

After the harrowing events of September 11, 2001, the nation reached out for an outlet where all could express heartbreak, anger, and patriotism at once. Country music provided the perfect sound for America’s mood. In a July 2002 USA Today article, the Executive Director of the Country Music Association, Ed Benson, explained the rising popularity: “In today’s world, when almost every day there’s another story that shakes our belief in our cultural institutions, it’s a time when our music gives people solace and encouragement, allows them to place their feelings.” Benson cited country music as offering core values of authenticity and believability.2 Alan Jackson particularly captured these sentiments with his 2002 hit “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning).” The lyrics ask the listener where they were when they saw the images of the Twin Towers falling: “Did you shout out in anger, in fear of your neighbor/Or did you just sit down and cry?...Did you go to a church and hold hands with some strangers/Did you stand in line and give your own blood?” The strength of songwriting for this hit paid off for Jackson when his album Drive became one of two country albums that debuted at the top of Billboard album charts.3

In September of 2002, another article appeared in USA Today that further made a case for the rise of country music in post-9/11 America. The overwhelming popularity of Jackson’s hit and Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” shadowed the moderate airplay of other patriotic songs by pop artists. Paul McCartney’s “Freedom,” Neil Young’s “Let’s Roll,” and Bruce Springsteen’s album The Rising never received strong responses, whereas the country hits achieved great radio success.4 For the first time, country musicians were writing songs specifically for American cities, for urban people in addition to their rural fan-base. The artists knew they could not ignore the extensive impact of September 11, 2001 so they delivered new music that adapted to what all American people wanted to hear as evidenced by the success of both Jackson and Keith. Despite sad conditions, country music put itself on the radar of urbanites across the nation.

An unforeseen consequence of country music’s reaction to September 11th was the over-politicization of the genre. Though the songs released by Jackson and Keith saw great success, they laid a foundation for a revival of protest music in country music. No group displayed this trend more than the Dixie Chicks.

The Dixie Chicks released their album Home in 2002, that included two successful singles in “Long Time Gone” and “Landslide” and another steadily climbing the charts with “Travelin’ Soldier.”5 That success slipped away after March 10, 2003, a date that forever rocketed the Dixie

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3 Ibid.
Chicks into controversy. At a concert in London, Dixie Chicks singer Natalie Maines famously said, “Just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas.” A firestorm followed, especially from traditional conservatives making up a significant portion of country music’s fan base. The media attention on the country music group was significant, as it pushed the genre deeper into America’s mainstream culture.

Soon after the controversial comments and the subsequent response, the Dixie Chicks were regular features in American media. Perhaps most famous was their eye-brow raising cover on *Entertainment Weekly*, when all three members of the country group appeared naked while covered in “brands” of responses. The words included “Dixie Sluts,” “Proud Americans,” “Free Speech,” and “Traitors.” Between 2003 and 2006 the Dixie Chicks—the biggest selling “girl group” of all time in any genre—all but disappeared from country radio. Their comeback single, “Not Ready to Make Nice” (2006), simply reignited the controversy, and landed at a weak number 36 on the Billboard country chart. For better or worse, country music became a central outlet of political opinions after the Dixie Chicks.

As an election loomed in 2004, country music stars filled American news networks with interviews or recent displays of political opinion. Sara Evans was one such star thrust into the political realm when she was invited to CNBC to comment on the recent “Vote for Change (Support John Kerry)” music tour in which the Dixie Chicks participated. Seemingly on accident, Evans pointed out that most of her fans were Republicans and received a backlash of her own for aligning herself with one party. As more politically-infused controversies occurred, the genre became more and more mainstream, pushing stars and country music’s hometown of Nashville toward increased fame.

When Americans began to take more of an interest in country music, they encountered the force of Nashville, country music’s epicenter. The moment of conception for Nashville’s country music scene occurred in 1925 when the WSM Barn Dance radio show was established. Soon after, the overwhelmingly popular show was renamed the Grand Ole Opry. As the show broadcasted from Nashville, country music acts from the region travelled into the city to appear on the show. Soon, a network of publishers and recording studios set up shop in the city. By the 1950s, Nashville was America’s center for country music.

The romantic notion of Nashville presents an interesting paradox: an urban center grounded in an industry of rural music; a city based on selling the country to consumers. The huge success of radio broadcasting across the rural South created a specific type of music that Nashville producers and recording studios wanted to cash in on, regardless of the development of their artists. Tension between artists and the stereotypical “Nashville” sound heightened at the end of the 20th century and at the advent of the 2000s. Technology blurred the lines between rural and urban as artists rose in popularity for both segments.

In 2002, the *New York Times* reported a backlash against Faith Hill for straying from the traditional Nashville sound with her album *Cry*. Logically, Hill pointed out that she had fans all over the world, not just in the rural South, so she thought her music should appeal to a wider market. The backlash for the rock-country album is a little hypocritical considering the roots of Nashville as a hub of rock and roll as well as country music. Nashville’s unnamed identity crisis can be found in many other places.

Contemporary country artist Jason Aldean released a hit song in 2010 describing Nashville. In “Crazy Town,” Aldean called the city: “Hollywood with a touch of twang.” This urban description shows how Nashville’s music industry has been shaped, in part, by executives from New York or other major market cities. The urban style leaks into the songs created in Nashville because it is a city, despite what some traditionalists want the

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6 Ibid, 24-25.  
7 Ibid, xviii.  
9 Willman, 7.  
10 Ibid.  
13 Holt, 64.  
14 Ibid.
music to represent. Country music that comes from Nashville will always be touched by other genres that live in the urban environment. Both Hill and Aldean represent a new breed of Nashville artists. They are adapters: They recognize that their fan base has changed and have tailored their music accordingly.

Now in 2014, the world has taken notice of the city of Nashville. The popularity of country music, economic success, and a hit television show also named Nashville have all contributed to the city’s latest boom. GQ Magazine, a widely circulated mainstream publication, regards the city as “Nowville.” These very urban conditions cannot help but overflow into the music created in this city. The latest country hits have strong pop or rock influences, as the description of Taylor Swift’s latest album can attest: “The banjo pluck of the title track and acoustic ballad ‘All Too Well’ will resonate with country fans, but glossy singles like ‘We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together’ and ‘I Knew You Were Trouble’ seem destined for a broader audience—one that is just as vivid as the title (Red) suggests.” Big Machine Records, headquartered in Nashville, released this album. The editor drafting this description for iTunes may have been unknowingly describing Nashville’s music scene in addition to Taylor Swift’s music.

Media has played a large role in urbanizing country music. Through radio, cinema, and television, the genre has exploded in cities across the United States. Of the three, radio stands as the oldest and most reliable force in bolstering country music popularity.

In post-9/11 America, country music flowed over the airways of 2,028 radio stations while the next closest competitor, talk radio, held only 1,318 stations. Based on those figures, the listenership of country music was at approximately 45,500,000 adults per week, with 35% living in the 25 top markets when compiled. Though these statistics are from 2003, they have only seemed to grow in the United States. By 2011, MRI research indicated that a whopping 42% of the population is country music fans.

In January 2013, the urban epicenter of American culture, New York City, joined the country radio craze with Nash FM, the first country music station in the city after seventeen years. The previous station had switched from country music to pop music in the mid-1990s. The opening of this radio station marks an important milestone for the urbanization of country music in the United States. As New York Times columnist Ben Sisario pointed out:

New York may be the ultimate symbol of American urbanism, but it is a large market for country music. Last year...more country albums were sold in the New York metropolitan area than anywhere in the United States — although as a proportion of all music sales in the region, New York ranks far below less populous areas in the South and Midwest.

New York is not alone in the success of country music in a major urban market. Other major cities have encountered consistent success with their country radio stations:

‘If you look at the other major markets that have a successful country station — Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit — those stations planted a stake in the ground and stayed with it, and now those stations are practically iconic,’ said Mr. Borchetta, of Big Machine. ‘The country radio audience doesn’t spike. It grows in a beautiful, slow arc.’

As an executive with Big Machine Records, Borchetta’s comments reinforce the notion that country music can be and is successful in urban

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16 Ibid.
17 iTunes Music Store, “Editor’s Notes: Taylor Swift, Red” (2012)
20 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
areas. This success indicates that country music has become relevant to city listeners as much as the stereotypical rural fan. The presence of country music in cinema in 1980 and 2010 shows this important shift in the identity of country as an urban genre holding to rural roots.

Country music and popular American cinema have an interesting relationship with one another. For a long period of time, country music appeared in scores for “Westerns,” a film genre depicting cowboys, Native Americans, and the American West. This dynamic shifted in 1980 with Urban Cowboy, starring John Travolta.25

Urban Cowboy depicts a young man from rural Texas, moving into the city for employment. Travolta’s character, Bud, finds himself joining the local “honkytonk” scene where he meets his future-wife, Sissy. Through the duration of the film, country music remains a constant theme reflecting popular images of the genre itself—the archetype American cowboy needing to find work and must leave the country behind. Though he is in the city, the music at the honkytonk reminisces of his rural life. The film follows a simplistic storyline: Hero, villain, damsel in distress, and a happy ending. Despite the film’s setting in the American city, the problems faced by the characters lack typical complexities associated with urban life.

Urban Cowboy represents the beginning of the relocation of country music in regards to cinema. After the film’s release, the impact was substantial for country music. The film reached completely new audiences, as it was targeted to urbanites, made clear in the title. In the years that followed, notably “un-country” areas of the United States started opening country themed nightclubs and dancehalls, such as Whiskey Café in Lyndhurst, New Jersey, established in 1992.26 With these new audiences, country musicians inherently needed to urbanize to maintain popularity.

Thirty years after Urban Cowboy, Hollywood released another country music themed blockbuster with Country Strong.27 This film, a near opposite of Urban Cowboy, marks the vast changes in country music. Main character Kelly Canter, a former superstar trying to rejuvenate her career after an arrest and stint in rehab, is the new country star. Made clear by this film, country music no longer resides in highway bars and honkytonks. In a conversation between Kelly’s manager-husband, James Canter, and show opener, Beau Hutton, the shift is made clear when Canter says, “Why don’t you come out on the road with us? Get out of these honkytonks and step into the big leagues.”28 The “big leagues” refers to the national tour of Kelly Canter to all the major American cities.

In comparing Urban Cowboy and Country Strong, the urbanization of country music is clearly defined. In 1980 when Urban Cowboy came out, popular stereotypes of country music fans and musicians included small town transplants coming to the big city, and local musicians playing for their groceries. In 2010, country music is incredibly popular, glamorous, and mired by urban issues such as substance abuse, adultery, suicide, and constant tabloid attention. The conclusion of Country Strong defines the shift best when Beau Hutton (Gerrett Hedlund) abandons the “big-time” national tour to bounce from honkytonk to honkytonk playing authentic country music.

These depictions of country as an urban style of music reinforce the presence of country music on city radio stations. The genre is being shown on the silver screen as mainstream American music and has the radio presence to back that up. Yet, the media outlet with the most visible and consistent presence of country music in mainstream popular culture is television.

In 2005, CBS broadcasted both the Grammy Awards and the Country Music Association Awards. The former achieved 18.8 million viewers while the latter contended with 18.4 million.29 Statistically, the difference between the two is nearly insignificant, suggesting that country music was just as important to the American people as the multi-genre music award show during 2005. Not surprisingly, this particular instance comes hand-in-hand with the unprecedented success of American Idol.

28 Country Strong, directed by Shana Feste (2010; Culver City, CA: Screen Gems Productions), DVD.
29 Willman, 6.
From the 2003-04 television season through 2010-11 season, *American Idol* has been the most-watch prime-time program in the nation. The show, styled to mirror Britain’s highly successful *Pop Idol*, auditions people in major cities across the country, passing along potential talent to future shows. As the season progresses, the pool becomes smaller as contestants are judged weekly. In the finale, a winner is crowned “American Idol” and receives a recording contract and numerous financial royalties. Country music has reaped the benefits of *Idol*’s success with two winners, Carrie Underwood and Scotty McCreery, joining the genre. In addition to the winners, other singers have found success in country music from the show’s overwhelmingly popularity. Bucky Covington, Josh Gracin and Kellie Pickler all enjoyed Top 10 country hits in the subsequent years following their appearances on *Idol*.

In the second decade of the 21st century, *American Idol* has declined while other television shows have stepped forward to replace it. In April of 2013, NBCs *The Voice* starring enigmatic country star Blake Shelton, and ABCs *Dancing with the Stars*, with previous mentioned Kellie Pickler, have pushed *Idol* down to third in “competition” show category of television ratings. The high popularity of these three shows constantly maintains country music’s presence in mainstream American culture.

Television network ABC has cashed in on the urban popularity of country music with the show *Nashville*. The plot revolves around the glamorous lifestyles of two country music superstars living in Nashville. It is a much brighter depiction of city life than what was shown in *Country Strong*. Holding a primetime slot, *Nashville* is another highlight of the popularity of country music in America right now.

The strong television presence of country music solidifies the genre’s status as a mainstream fixture in America. To reach that coveted place, country music has undoubtedly urbanized to appeal to the broad audiences of American television. The stars and Nashville, a city depicted as being run by the music industry, are highlighted constantly to make strong connections with urban markets.

The future of country music appears even more urbanized. As early as 2004, country stars began teaming up with hip-hop artists to reach higher levels of popularity in urban areas. Tim McGraw and Nelly achieved success with their fast-rising Top 40 hit “Over and Over.” In an interview, hip-hop artist Nelly described why he and McGraw partnered to make the song:

...Everybody knows hip-hop was born within the inner city and the urban community and it’s become one of the most popular forms of music on the planet. And country’s the same way—they both come from those kind of poverty-stricken communities and expand out. So putting those together, it’s gonna work—it just has to be done right.

Unfortunately, some artists encounter immense opposition when attempting to combine country music and hip-hop.

In April of 2013, country singer Brad Paisley and hip-hop artist LL Cool J joined forces with their song, “Accidental Racist.” The media’s negative response came swiftly within hours of the song’s release. *Rolling Stone*, *Gawker*, and even *CMT.com* spoke out against the song using phrases such as “questionable,” “horrible,” and “clumsily written.” The outcry from the collaboration reached the highly popular *Saturday Night Live* in a spoof during the show’s weekly segment of “The Weekend Update with Seth Myers.”

Within the song, Paisley explores the mistrust between a white southern man wearing a rebel flag shirt and the African-American barista at Starbucks. Regardless of the lyrics, the subject of the song shows the new clash between country music and its appeal to broad audiences.

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34 Willman, 181.
music and hip-hop in urban culture. Though hip-hop has become mainstream and expanded beyond its roots in African-American inner-city neighborhoods, the genre is still associated with African-Americans. Country music on the other hand has historically been a “white” genre. As recent as 2008, CMA released a study of consumer segmentation citing the “Core Country Music user” as likely to be Caucasian and more affluent than the average American citizen.\(^{38}\) As country music progresses in urbanization, the genre now faces similar racial tensions to those plaguing American cities.

A new generation of country musicians currently lead the charge to blur boundaries between country, pop, rock and hip hop. Based on the foundation of Garth Brooks, artists in this second decade of the 21st century are integrating genres as a norm, rather than an exception.

In the 1990s, Garth Brooks was at the height of his career with record album sales and sold out shows across the nation. Shockingly, Brooks decided to retire just after the millennium to spend time with his family. As he temporarily left the world of country music, Brooks left a legacy of a new style of performance for his successors. Most every show Brooks performed included covers of songs from other genres that Brooks was influenced by or simply enjoyed. For the fans, hearing Brooks perform a cover of a classic rock song or current popular hit added more entertainment for their ticket price. In 2009, Steve Wynn coaxed Brooks out of retirement to play a stint in Las Vegas. For three years, Brooks played sold out shows from the Wynn Resort that were entirely based on the multi-genre musical influences of Brooks throughout his life. These shows broke down the barriers of “genre” for musicians and fans alike.\(^{39}\)

Following in the pioneering footsteps of Garth Brooks, many country musicians have since altered their sound to include nods to other artists outside of this genre. In 2013 especially, a trend of song lyrics that include references to hip-hop artists permeated throughout the airwaves of country radio. Tim McGraw, possibly the first major country star to delve into hip-hop as discussed earlier, released his song “Truck Yeah” that opened with the lines “Got Lil’ Wayne pumpin’ on my iPod, Thumpin’ on the subs in the back of crew cab.” Lil Wayne is a popular rapper in many of the major markets. Similarly, country duo Florida Georgia Line released a song with Luke Bryan titled “This is How We Roll” that began with the lyrics “The mixtape’s got a little Hank, little Drake, A little something bumping, thump, thumping on the wheel ride.” They are referencing famous country singer Hank Williams Jr. and Drake, a contemporary hip-hop artist. These songs are just two of many country hits from 2013 that include allusions to other genres. By nodding to other popular artists, country musicians make their music more accessible to urban listeners.

The duo of Tyler Hubbard and Brian Kelley of Florida Georgia Line skyrocketed to major country and pop success in 2013. Their first single “Cruise” set the all-time record for highest number of country digital downloads, though almost 40% were of “Cruise Remix” featuring Nelly, a previously mentioned hip-hop artist.\(^{40}\) Florida Georgia Line’s music is relevant to more people than just rural listeners. They sing with popular hip-hop stars and sing about listening to country and hip-hop music. Though the pair only has one album, many of their newest radio releases have elements of hip-hop or pop music. The popularity of Florida Georgia Line indicates a clear shift in what country is and what fans like. The future appears very bright for this pair as they have access to multiple markets of fans across the country.

Beyond the visible stars of country music, another essential group of artists in the business, songwriters, are also demonstrating an urbanization of this genre. Sam Hunt, a relatively unknown songwriter, openly discusses his influences in a self-published YouTube video on his website. Growing up in rural Georgia, the only music Hunt was exposed to came from the radio and eventually affected his song writing:

In the country world, I was drawn to the stories and the lyrics, and the song

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writing devices that were prevalent in that music. I was attracted to the beats and the rhythmic nature and phrasing of hip-hop and as I got a guitar and started to write—the cadence of what I was singing and what I was saying is more associated with the hip-hop thing but the lyric and the content have to do with the country culture that I came from.\textsuperscript{41}

Further into Hunt’s personal video he addresses the blurring of genres specifically as a consequence of the internet, the rise of YouTube, and a generation growing up that has been exposed to multiple styles of music. Hunt’s name may not be well known but the material he has written includes a number of chart topping records including Kenny Chesney’s “Come Over” and the rising hit “Cop Car” by Keith Urban.\textsuperscript{42} Hunt plans to release an album in 2014 of his own that will continue to blur the dividing lines of musical genres.

The intense popularity of country music in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century is undeniable. A stereotyped style of music that was once considered overwhelmingly rural has infiltrated mainstream American culture and become nearly as popular in large cities as it is in small towns. An “urbanization” of country music has occurred to achieve this monumental shift. No single factor catapulted country music into popular culture. Instead, a combination of national events, politics, media and artist styles formed country music into the urban musical genre it is today. Following September 11\textsuperscript{th}, country musicians reached out to the American people, connecting emotional lyrics to the national mood. Soon after, these same musicians were faced with the polarizing effects of politicization when stars became prominent features on national news conglomerates. Further urbanization came into country music as the genre ties with the city of Nashville became more prominent. No force was stronger in de-ruralizing country music than mainstream media. The radio presence of country music increased in cities across the United States, causing musicians to adjust their sound to appeal to the new audiences. Hollywood produced successful films about country music, depicting it as dully glamorous and plagued by typically urban plights. American television solidified the genre’s place in the mainstream with the overwhelming popularity of American Idol, The Voice, and Nashville. Currently, the success of contemporary country has caused new territory to be sought. Musicians are now attempting to cross between country and hip-hop to reach new levels of urban popularity. The artists that do this like Tim McGraw, Luke Bryan and Florida Georgia Line push themselves deeper into mainstream music, rather than remaining solely in “country.” The future may have the emergence of a new urban musical genre if Sam Hunt and others continuing their rising popularity.

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