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SONGS OF SELF-ASSERTION: WOMEN IN COUNTRY MUSIC



mary a. bufwack & robert k. oermann

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The study of all popular culture must be rooted in a careful analysis of the social relations and social environment of the people who make it, buy it, and identify with it. Most studies of country music take one of two approaches. The first describes it as corny, unsophisticated, ignorant, racist, right-wing, simplistic, maudlin, fundamentalist, redneck, sentimental, and/or fascist. The second romanticizes it as a people's music, as the bearer of a noble folk tradition, as an exponent of down-to-earth grassroots honesty, as expressive of our longings for the freedom of a rural past, or as cultural rebellion against an industrialized mass society. Both approaches contain elements of truth, yet neither is adequate. The first fails to take into account the music's sometimes progressive social messages and its usually positive social function. The second ignores its commerciality, its contemporary content, and its continuing vitality and flexibility. Neither speaks of how country music relates to a particular social group (the working class) in a continual and complex way.

Although not all members of the working class, or even the white working class, listen to country music, there is ample justification for viewing country music as a working class phenomenon. First, the daily experiences and world views of working people are the subject matter of many country songs. Jobs such as truck driving, factory working, waitressing, railroad working, mining, prostitution, farming, and house-keeping are not uncommon subjects in them. Second, the music's consumption is distinctly class related. A 1975 survey of 49 country music radio stations' listeners found that:

Country music stations' listeners are nearly absent from professional occupations and are underrepresented among executives and managers.

They are generally overrepresented among unskilled and service workers but are highly concentrated in the skilled and semi-skilled blue collar occupations.¹

A 1973 poll taken at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville indicated that 60 percent of the audience had not completed high school and that only 12.8 percent had had some college.² An analysis of those attending a Tammy Wynette-George Jones concert in New York City revealed a preponderance of occupations in the "craft, skilled, and semi-skilled blue collar" job categories.³ The class nature of this music's audience becomes clearest when the selections on jukeboxes in the neighborhood bars of white working class areas in any U.S. city are examined, when the music preferences in truck stops and union halls are noted, and when the locations and attendance patterns of country music nightclubs, dances, and concerts are considered. Third, the biographies of country music practitioners confirm the near-universal working class origins of its writers, producers and performers.

Women are of central importance in the consumption of country music, and in recent years have assumed greater and greater roles as producers of this genre as well. Indeed, there is ample reason to consider country music an integral part of white working class women's culture. Female visitors to Nashville's Grand Ole Opry were found in one study to outnumber men 57 percent to 43 percent.⁴ Tammy Wynette claims she has a survey which shows conclusively that her listeners are predominantly women between 22 and 45 years of age.⁵ Many radio station surveys have indicated that women are the primary consumers of this music, particularly during daytime broadcasting hours. Country music station KRAK in Sacramento states that it has a larger share of the listening audience than that city's two rock stations combined during the morning hours when teens are in school and the listeners are "mostly housewives."⁶ "Eighty percent of country records are bought by women."⁷

Furthermore, our own survey of the biographies of the 25 top women country singers of today indicates that 84 percent come from working class backgrounds. Thus, this popular music of white working class American women is especially important in that it is both sung by and appreciated by members of the same social group. While certain films, magazines, and television programs are aimed at this group, only in the case of country music are we likely to find blue collar producers as well as consumers.

Like country music in general, women's country music has long been viewed in negative stereotypes. Frequently it is described as masochistic, cloying, mindless, passive, self-pitying, sentimental, non-liberated, feminine and stupid. This in turn has led many to view working class women's consciousness as deficient. Our analysis of women's country music



shows that working class women do have a social awareness of their situation as women, of their subordination in male-female relationships, of their problems in the family context, and of their exploitation in the work force. This study suggests that not only is working class women's culture not deficient, but that it has preserved certain attitudes important to any future culture better serving people's interest for a higher quality of life.

The repertoires of most female country singers are not substantially different from their male counterparts, with heartache laments, cheating songs, love ballads, and other familiar country music themes predominating. There is, however, a persistent minority strain in country music performed by women consisting of strongly self-assertive, tough, and pro-woman songs. This strain is part of a historical tradition in country music that has stayed with the form throughout its history.

Country music grows out of a communal folk tradition which stretches back hundreds of years through rural American life to an Anglo-Saxon folk music heritage. In this tradition women were at least as important as men as creators and performers of music, and were likely more important than men as song-savers and carriers of musical tradition. An examination of folklorists' collections of the Appalachian ballads that have survived to the present day reveals a rich vein of woman-oriented material. In fact, Alan Lomax asserts that most of the pre-

commercial country songs—these Appalachian ballads—are concerned with sexual conflict as seen through feminine eyes.⁸

Woman Single, Woman Strong

In addition to the many escape fantasies (like “The Gypsy Rover”/ “Black Jack Davey” type of folksongs), ballads with women as central characters (like “Barbara Allen” and “Lady Isabel”), and heartache laments or courting complains (like “Careless Love,” “All For the Love of a Man,” and “Come All Ye Fair and Tender Ladies”), there are a number of female protest songs in the folk tradition. Some espouse a fierce independence, a refusal to admit to male domination. These include the versions of “Who’s Gonna Shoe Your Pretty Little Foot,” which conclude “I don’t need no man,” aspects of “I Never Will Marry” which states “I never will marry, I’ll be no man’s wife,” and a variant of “How Old Are You My Pretty Little Miss,” which contains “I’ll marry you but I won’t do your washing or your cooking.” “I’ll Not Marry At All” completely rejects the idea of marriage and subservience. In the area of housewife protests, “Stir the Pudding” and “Housewife’s Lament” view the repetitive drudgery of housework as totally self-defeating labor. One stanza of the well-known folksong “The Wagoner’s Lad” contains the protest:

Oh hard is the fortune of all womankind,
They’re always controlled, they’re always confined,
Controlled by their parents until they are wives.
Then slaves to their husbands the rest of their lives.⁹

Women in the work force also developed a number of protest songs in this pre-commercial folk country songbag. One of the United States’ oldest labor protest songs is “The Lowell Factory Girl,” whose North Carolina variant is called “No More Shall I Work In the Factory.” “I Love My Union” and “All the Doo Da Day” have been found in women’s mill worker journals which began appearing in the 1840s.

The renowned “Rising Sun Blues” and the “Young Girl Cut Down In Her Prime”/“Bad Girl’s Lament”/“When I Was a Young Girl” song family are sung from the perspective of the bitter, rueful working prostitute.

There are also folksongs wherein women take homicidal revenge against men. Among these are “Frankie Silvers,” a woman’s version of “Greenback Dollar,” and the well-known “Frankie and Johnny,” which frequently concludes, “This story has no moral, this story has no end, it only goes to show you there ain’t no good in men.”

Another important group of folksongs that helped to form country women’s positive sense of self and self-assertive attitude is that number wherein women belittle and make fun of men and their weaknesses.

Among these are "The Young Man Who Didn't Know How To Court," "The Husband With No Courage In Him," "Common Bill," "Lazy Farmer Boy" and certain versions of the "Four Nights Drunk" song family.

The transition between the era of country folk music and the commercial period of country music's history began in the mid-1920s. In the early years of commercially recorded country music, a good amount of material put on records by women continued to be songs from their folk tradition. Country music's first significant female solo performer, Roba Stanley, recorded her "Single Life" in 1925:

Single life is a happy life
Single life is lovely
I am single and no man's wife
And no man shall control me¹⁰

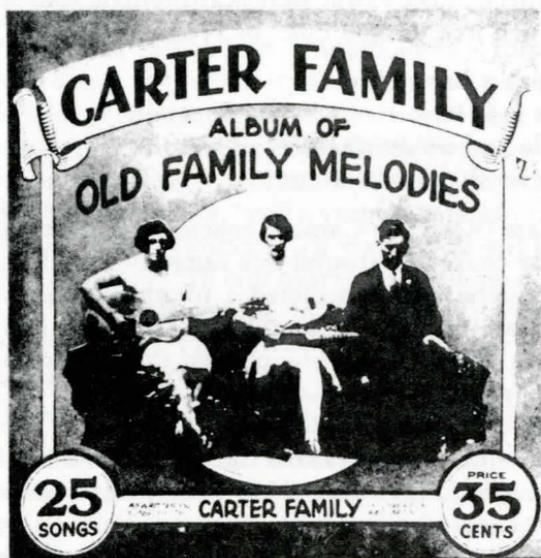
Moonshine Kate (Rosa Lee Carson) enacted a pugnacious, sassy mountain gal comedy character around this same time; and Vernon Dalhart's duet partner Adelyn Hood depicted a tough pioneer woman on such records as "Calamity Jane," "Daughter of Calamity Jane," and "Alaska Ann and Yukon Steve," while she praised the idea of using men for all they are worth in such records as "Madame Queen," "He's On the Chain Gang Now," and "Westward Ho For Reno." One of the first recorded country string bands was Samantha Bumgarner and Eva Davis who performed the sprightly "Fly Around My Pretty Little Miss" for Columbia Records in 1924.

But it was not until the recording and subsequently phenomenal success of The Carter Family in 1927 that country music really came into its own as a commercial form. This woman-dominated group first caught Victor Records' talent scout's ear with the female protest song "Single Girl":¹¹

Single girl...going dressed so fine
Married girl...goes ragged all the time
Single girl...goes to the store and buys
Married girl...rocks the cradle and cries
Single girl...going where she please
Married girl...baby on her knees¹²

In the 1930s women country music performers continued to contribute self-assertive, female-oriented songs. Kentucky's Coon Creek Girls became the first totally self-contained all-girl string band on radio. Their leader, Lily May Ledford, composed the spunky "Banjo Pickin' Girl" partly in response to the difficult experiences the group had with male audiences and musicians on tours.¹³ The vein of domestic protest was carried on in Hazel Scherf's "Married Girl's Troubles" (1934), Zora Lay-

man's "Seven Years With the Wrong Man" (1933) and "Hurray I'm Single Again" (1934), and Judy Canova's "Never Trust a Man" (1939). Canova, who subsequently became an extremely popular Hollywood comedienne, had recorded one of country music's most enduring songs of this type in 1929: "I Wish I Was a Single Girl Again." This song was also popularized by the woman who was once voted the most popular radio performer in the U.S., Lulu Belle.



In 1936 Patsy Montana became the first woman in country music to have a million-selling hit with "I Want To Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart." This song, despite its title, is actually a woman's wish for the independence, physicality, and ruggedness of a cowhand's life. Its lyrics actually are about wanting to be a cowboy; and the theme was repeated in Montana's "I Want To Be a Real Cowboy Girl" (also recorded by The Girls of the Golden West and The Chuck Wagon Gang). This notion of singing the praise of independent, tough female role models was also a feature of Charlotte Miller's "Dangerous Nan McGrew" and "Poker Alice." One of the most independent and individualistic of all the female performers of this era, Cousin Emmy, performed such self-assertive, woman-oriented songs as "Single Girl," "Ruby Are You Mad At Your Man" and the humorous "Cat's Got the Measles" with its repeated chorus "Doggone any woman—who let a man be her boss."

During the Depression, field recorders for the Library of Congress Archive of American Folk Song discovered many strong mountain women singers of quick-witted native intelligence, from whom country

music has frequently drawn its best female singers. Many of them used their music as a political tool. Aunt Molly Jackson sang union organizing songs like "I Am a Union Woman" and "Join the C.I.O.," and also commercially-released material like "Kentucky Miner's Wife (Hungry Disgusted Blues)." Sarah Ogan Gunning contributed "I Hate the Company Bosses," "I'm Going To Organize," "I Am a Girl of Constant Sorrow," and the blunt "I Hate the Capitalist System" among others. During the same period Ella May Wiggins wrote "Mill Mother's Lament," Lessie Crocker wrote a version of "Hard Times In the Mill," Cleda Helton wrote "Shirt Factory Blues," and Florence Reese wrote "Which Side Are You On?," which became the most famous of all union organizing songs.¹⁴

The incompatibility of such explicitly political work-related material with commercial interests resulted in record companies encouraging those women singers who couched their protests in more personal and domestic terms. Thus, in the 1940s and 1950s records like Becky Barfield's "Don't Talk To Me About Men," Louise Massey's "I Only Want a Buddy Not a Sweetheart," Cindy Walker's "Why I Don't Trust the Men," and Texas Ruby's "Don't Lie To Me"/"Don't Let That Man Get You Down" became the more typically indirect kinds of female self-assertion in commercial country music. Statements on poverty and work were few, with Rosalie Allen's "Po' Folks All the Time" and the Miccolis Sisters' "Truck Driver's Blues" being rare examples of this type of music by women performers of that era. It was during this period, however, that female country music singers began to find their first truly assertive singing styles in the authoritative, commanding and intense deliveries of such women as Molly O'Day, Texas Ruby, Daisy Mae, Wilma Lee Cooper, Martha Carson, and Rose Maddox.

World War II brought more and more women into public activity, and marked the beginning of large-scale participation of women in country music. Nearly all those who were active during this period contributed recordings in support of the fight against fascism. Among these were Judy Canova's "Stars and Stripes On Iwo Jima," Jenny Lou Carson's "Dear God Watch Over Joe," Rosalie Allen's "Hitler Lives," Louise Massey's "Army Rookie Polka," Patsy Montana's "Good Night Soldier," Bonnie Blue Eyes's "The War Baby's Prayer," and The Story Sisters' "I Only Have One Life To Live, But I'd Gladly Give It Up For My Country."

The history of country music in the late 1940s and early 1950s is the history of a social group's transformation from a rural agrarian life style to an increasingly urbanized, proletarianized existence and the resulting disruption of its social relationships. During World War II there was a breakdown of emphasis on woman's family role, and women became still more involved in the work force. This also involved a shift in identity as many women came to identify positively with wage earning work and the

independent social standing it gave. A reassertion of a subordinate domestic role after the war resulted in inevitable male-female conflicts. Both men's and women's country music lyrics came increasingly to focus on the problems of love, marriage, and family life during these years. A musical battle of the sexes reigned, with women stars performing more and more material aggressively sung from a subjugated working class woman's perspective.

"It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" by Kitty Wells (1952) became the first massively popular woman's song of self-assertion in country music. This song claimed that every time one found a fallen woman of loose morals it "was because there... was a man to blame," insisting that women's problems were the result of male domination. Profiting from the huge success of this initial breakthrough, dozens of women singers of the 1950s and 1960s began recording this type of material. Jean Shepard's long string of hits and her outspoken personality place her as the founder and chief spokeswoman for this group. Wanda Jackson followed with such records as "My Big Iron Skillet," "A Girl Don't Have To Drink To Have Fun," and "Tennessee Women's Prison." Connie Hall criticized men for their drinking in "The Bottle Or Me." The Carter Sisters and Jan Howard kept tradition alive with renditions of "I Never Will Marry" and "I Wish I Was a Single Girl Again" respectively. Bonnie Owens complained about her "Number-One Heel" while Liz Anderson threatened hers with "Mama Spank." Mattie, Marthie, and Minnie's "You Can't Live With 'Em and You Can't Live Without 'Em" effectively summarized the prevailing attitudes.

A common way of expressing dissatisfaction with roles and expectations was with the "answer song" which would reply to a man's song with the woman's perspective. After Jim Reeves's command "He'll Have To Go" told his girlfriend to dispose of his rival, Jeanne Black calmly replied "He'll Have To Stay," explaining his thoughtless behavior that led her to find a new lover. Margie Bowes smartly turned the tables on Johnny Cash's macho "Understand Your Man" with the retort "Understand Your Gal." Roger Miller's "Dang Me" was humorously answered by Ruby Wright's "Dern Ya."

While Skeeter Davis delivered "It's Hard To Be A Woman" in a small, private-sounding voice, others used more confrontationlike tactics to get the point across. This was often done in the context of duets, which in country music are often dialogues between male and female points of view. They have also tended to be small slices of working class life. Jonie warned Johnny Mosby "Don't Call Me From a Honky Tonk." Jean Shepard and Ray Pillow humorously argued divorce in "I'll Take the Dog," and Johnny Cash and June Carter carried on a musical spat in "Jackson." Ernest Tubb and Loretta Lynn further explored marital problems in "Mr.

and Mrs. Used-To-Be" and "Who's Gonna Take the Garbage Out?" Among the many Porter Wagoner/Dolly Parton duets are several songs that deal with the effect of poverty on working class relationships and others that enact domestic sex role tensions. George Jones and Tammy Wynette celebrated their membership in the working class with "(We're Not) The Jet Set," and divorced in "Golden Ring." Jones and Melba Montgomery enacted the familiar scene of a domestic quarrel following a party in "Party Pickin' " and sang of a hillbilly couple on welfare in "Livin' On Easy Street."

Class Consciousness

Norma Jean continued the tradition of working women's songs with her "Heaven Help the Working Girl (In a World That's Run By Men)" and in "Truck Drivin' Woman"; as did Linda Gail Lewis in "(I'm a) Working Girl." Billie Joe Spears complained about the degradation of her secretary job and quit it in "Mr. Walker It's All Over (I Don't Like the New York Secretary's Life)." As more and more women have moved into the trucking profession, several lady trucker songs have appeared in country music. Country/folk music performers like Hedy West ("Cotton Mill Girls"), Anne Romaine ("Indiana Factory Job"), Sylvia Fricker Tyson ("Trucker's Cafe"), and Hazel Dickens ("Working Girl Blues") have also contributed songs to the working-woman genre.

Paramount among today's blue collar heroines of country music is Loretta Lynn. She has maintained country music's long tradition of interpreting and dealing with the everyday life experiences of working class women in her art. Kentucky-born Loretta Lynn goes even further than her immediate predecessors (and most of her contemporaries) in promoting a positive, self-affirming image for them. Her compositions stress a refusal to be stepped on by either her man or society at large. She warned her man "Your Squaw Is On the Warpath (Tonight)" (1968), and told him "Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' (With Lovin' On Your Mind)" (1966). Defensive of her working class background, she has asserted that she is proud to be a "Coal Miner's Daughter" (1970) and has effectively portrayed the lot of the blue collar housewife in "One's On the Way" (1972).

Recent songs have been still more assertive and ideologically specific, addressing themselves specifically to women's issues. "Rated X" (1973) condemns men who look upon divorced women as used property and easy lays. In her biggest selling single "The Pill" (1975), she celebrates the freedom that birth control has given women. "Hey Loretta" (1973) serves notice that she will no longer be exploited by her husband. In it she sings "This woman's liberation, Honey, is gonna start right now." Cleverly appropriating the familiar Virginia Slims cigarette slogan she crows

"We've Come a Long Way Baby" (1979).

Although she has had little formal education, the earthy wisdom, spunk, and sensitivity of Lynn's tremendously popular songs have made her an articulate spokeswoman for abused working class women. Her sassy point of view has a genuinely liberating effect on her audience.

Country music women's songs of self-assertion often appear as affirmations of feminine traits and of a subordinate and supportive role. These values often appear to bring country music into line with values that are in opposition to self-affirmation, but within the working class context they take on a different meaning. Thus, the decidedly self-assertive material performed by Tammy Wynette is a celebration of her distinct role as a woman that avoids glossing over the difficulties of that role ("sometimes it's hard to be a woman . . ."), which nonetheless seems "conservative" in orientation to middle-class ears. On record after record she suffers through bad relationships with men, maintaining all the while that it is a woman's lot in life to give and to understand and expect nothing in return. Underlying all is a desperate wish to believe in the power of love, in hearts-and-flowers romantic ideology, and in the myth of marital happiness and fulfillment. In Wynette's works the woman, although victimized and hurt in clinging to these ideals, is ennobled by suffering. Many of her songs are veritable textbooks of the ways in which women may knowingly choose to suffer. Examples of this ideology are "Stand By Your Man" (1968), "I'll See Him Through" (1970), "My Man" (1972), and "I Still Believe In Fairy Tales" (1975). These express an understanding of the difficulties men have as men and as workers, the pain women experience in dealing with this, the need for women to affirm solidarity with them, and the necessity of filling a supportive role.

Thus at least part of the nobility and pride inherent in these acceptance-of-abuse songs grows out of the value of solidarity under adversity which overrides individual needs. Wynette's brand of solidarity, however, is dependent upon only the woman's conscious understanding of the social and family situation in which she finds herself. Wynette's songs about female role-playing isolate this aspect of the complex of attitudes she represents. The role-playing songs take an articulate and clear-eyed view of the inequalities in male-female relationships—indicating the woman's superior intellectual and emotional grasp of that reality—yet they advocate the acceptance of inferior status. Songs with this theme have included "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad" (1967), "A Mother" (1975), "The Only Time I'm Really Me" (1971), and "Good Lovin'" (1971).

Thus, Tammy Wynette explicitly articulates and explains the dilemmas of her audience who out of love and understanding often choose a supportive role, and who furthermore usually lack educated middle-class



Tammy Wynette

women's options of fulfilling independent lives. In this sense her songs show a realistic assessment of a working class woman's options for a meaningful life and grant a dignity and importance to the supportive role that is related to the solidarity with the difficult class position experienced by her man.

Few country women singers have functioned more clearly as communicators of working class attitudes than Dolly Parton. Again and again her best early songs emphasized her working class background. In fact, one can begin to speak of an embryonic class consciousness in this artist's early works. There is an implicit social criticism in such songs as "In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad)" (1968), a painful recollection of Parton's past filled with images of hard work, going to bed hungry, grinding poverty, cold winters, rats, and material deprivation. Her recording of "In the Ghetto" (1969) is an encapsulation of the cycle of poverty, crime, and death in the inner city that ends with a plea for understanding and a "helping hand." "Chicken Every Sunday" (1971) asserted that poverty was nothing to be ashamed of. In it she contrasts some of the positive values that coincided with shared rural poverty against the negative attributes of rich people. Of the former she sings, "If that's the lower class then I'm glad that's what I am," while of the latter she asserts, "Just because they've got money and a big, fine house, why we won't take no sass offa them." "Coat of Many Colors" (1971), "Poor Folks Town" (1972), "Daddy's Working Boots" (1973), "We'll Get Ahead Someday" (1968), and "The Better Part of Life" (1973) recapitulate this poor-but-proud attitude.

Like Loretta Lynn, Parton has demonstrated the country musician's ability to creatively express the problems and aspirations of her working class women constituency. Her first big hit was a self-assertive song called "Dumb Blonde" (1967) that indicated she was nothing of the kind. "Just Because I'm a Woman" (1968) decried the sexual double standard. "Washday Blues" (1972) was a humorous housewife's protest number; and "(I'll be Movin' On) When Possession Gets Too Strong" (1970) is yet another of her self-assertive songs. "Daddy Come and Get Me" (1970) describes the way mental illness is used by men against women. The allegations made by the institutionalized protagonist of this song were from a woman rendered powerless in the face of a male-dominated system. In songs that have both defended the social honor of the poor and stood up for women's dignity, Dolly Parton repeatedly had gotten at social truths through the medium of country music. In the late 1970s, however, she has abandoned these approaches in a career move to become a pop music star.

We have chosen Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, and Dolly Parton as the 1970s representatives of working class women's attitudes revealed in country music, because according to *Billboard* magazine's year-end charts of this decade, they are the most consistently popular female stars.¹⁵ But many others also fill the bill as articulators of women's positions in blue collar culture. These three are only the tip of an ever-growing iceberg of such talents.

Strong, tough women's images are also projected by such performers as Jeannie C. Riley (whose "The Rib" may be the closest thing to a true women's liberation country song), Diana Trask (whose "It Meant Nothing To Me" is probably the most violently angry woman's country song of the decade), Margo Smith (whose "I'm Still a Woman" attacks men's ageism in sexual relationships), Emmylou Harris (whose version of Dolly Parton's "To Daddy" features a housewife's leaving home), and Sammi Smith (whose "Girl In New Orleans" is a brilliant analysis of prostitution). Jean Shepard, Dottie West, and Jeanne Pruett, as mature over-forty performers, sing exceptionally insightful articulations of working class relationships. Arlene Harden's "Congratulations (You Sure Made a Man Out of Him)," Loretta Lynn's "Dear Uncle Sam," Jan Howard's "My Son," and Skeeter Davis's "When You Gonna Bring Our Soldiers Home?" are women's anti-militarist songs from the Vietnam War era. Jody Miller's "Home of the Brave" defended long-haired youngsters, and her "Queen of the House" stood up for housewives; while Barbara Fairchild's "I'm Not Weak, I'm a Woman," "This Stranger My Little Girl," and "(You're Gonna Be a) Lonely Old Man" represent the wide range of her compositions with women's themes.

The emphasis on woman-oriented issues in country music is such

that even ordinarily anti-feminist singers record some spunky self-assertive material. Donna Fargo's "Superman," Susan Raye's "What'cha Gonna Do With a Dog Like That," Lynn Anderson's "Rose Garden," and Connie Smith's "Just For What I Am" are examples. Barbara Mandrell's contribution has been her singing about subjects previously considered as "male" topics (cheating, sex). Jeannie Sealy has also been instrumental in breaking down constraints put upon female country performers. In 1975 songwriter Ava Aldridge released the groundbreaking "Frustrated Housewife," a concept album totally dealing with working class women's issues.

Generally speaking, an analysis of women's country music indicates not only a social awareness of being female, but also a social awareness of a particular class position. It is this awareness which encourages working class women to express a solidarity with working class men, or at least discourages them from identifying with a women's liberation movement that has a middle-class image. Thus, the consciousness and awareness as revealed in women's country music may proscribe political activity in the interest of women, not because of any ignorance of women's situation, but because of an identification with a working class position.

The extent of women's participation in country music and the form's emphasis on lyric content make it a particularly appropriate subject for analysis. While we are not proposing that such an analysis reveals any comprehensive critique of capitalism or any clear articulation of social alternatives, it does appear that country music's female performers do critically evaluate their working class experiences, are critical of present relationships, maintain strong self-approving images, and do articulate their own and their audience's aspirations for liberation and change. The self-assertive songs they sing and write come from a certain resistance to oppressive class and sexual experience. That this is expressed in the personal rather than social orientation of these self-assertive songs is a condition of the commercial popular culture industry. On the other hand, country music has always managed to maintain political tendencies by way of 1) the close relationship between the producer/artist of country music and the consumer/fan with their shared experience of working class life; 2) the emphasis on country music lyrics as the poetry of blue collar life; 3) the form's maintenance of roots with and popularity with working class people; and 4) a certain Southern "rebel" ethic. Thus, we are not examining these absolutely commercial products—country music songs—as totally manipulated marketplace-oriented fantasies or illusions; but neither can they be seen as straightforward documents of U.S. working class life. Rather, these are mediated cultural expressions of a class, exhibiting all the contradictory influences of social relationships in commercial capitalism.

Commercialism

Country music today contains two opposing tendencies. On one hand, the form has persistently retained its working class character. On the other hand, this music is a major entertainment business motivated by commercial concerns which push it toward blandness. Commercial interests and producers tend to remove its content aspects, its issue orientation, so that it is palatable to the widest possible audience. Like all American popular music forms, country music lyrics are dominantly about love and romance, with strains such as self-assertive women's songs, workingmen's anthems, protests, social commentary, folk songs, recitations, and blue collar humor remaining always minority forms. With the mass marketing and ever-increasing profit motivation brought on by the centralization of the recording industry into a handful of corporate conglomerates in recent years, such minority forms may well be endangered species.

Another factor working against the maintenance of country music's blue collar identification is the star system. In seeking the wider audience, country music performers become interested in selling themselves on the basis of factors other than their lyrics' messages. Dolly Parton comes to mind in this respect. Others place themselves in the hands of producers and promoters who are openly contemptuous of the working class and its culture, and who are trying to escape their own backgrounds in it. The star system further tends to remove musicians and their songs from their original working class context and thus makes the bond between performer and audience more tenuous.

Forces working to encourage country music's class emphasis and character are still strong, however. There is a social awareness among artists that their music has proved to be popular because it has spoken to ordinary working class people about their everyday lives. There is a self-conscious effort among many to produce songs which emphasize a pride in the down-home aspects of country music and assert the value of the country music culture as against the pop and rock music cultures. This includes a questioning of commercial interests' motives, of homogenization, and of oppressive outside control in the form of the entertainment conglomerates. Freedom and diversity are preserved as values in this struggle to preserve the form's essential character. While few would phrase this struggle in such political terms, what is in effect here is a clash of classes. From the perspective of the musicians, then, the forces working to maintain the blue collar aspects can be summarized as self-awareness involving a self-conscious effort to speak of the ordinary and everyday, a pride in country music's heritage, a healthy questioning of



Dolly Parton

authority and mistrust of big business and big government, and an emphasis on individual freedom that grows out of a "rebel" tradition.

From the perspective of the audience, it is a certainty that the gap between working class experience and the middle-class American dream can only grow wider as wages fail to provide the kind of life style to which workers aspire in their leisure hours. The audience for country music is still experiencing the continual problems of working class life in a system unable to meet its needs, and this will presumably maintain a desire for a musical culture which reflects the attendant frustration and dissatisfaction

One way of viewing today's country music is as a musically distinct subculture wherein lyrics are taking an increasingly less significant part in the recordings. Working class consumers are kept by the use of certain musical codes (the sound of the steel guitar, recognizable rhythm and chord patterns, fiddles, familiar melodies and harmonies, song structures, honky-tonk singing styles) which frequently serve as nonverbal means of identifying with the music. Thus, it can be said that as a form the music can maintain its blue collar identity without benefit of working class lyrics; and it is unquestionably true that a content analysis of country music song lyrics tells only part of the story. Nevertheless, both country music artists and audiences continue to cite songs' lyrics as reasons for their love of the form, and as reasons for individual songs becoming their favorites or most remembered ("That song tells it like it is," "This song is my life in a nutshell," "I feel like that one was written about me").

This emphasis on song content and lyrics in country music has

encouraged a unique (if not exactly direct) two-way relationship between this music and the social group to which it is addressed and from which it springs. In women's country music, then, these self-assertive songs are on some level a reflection of working class women's attitudes and can be an especially important building block of self-definition and social awareness (consciousness); at the same time they are commercially successful. There is no doubt that the women's liberation movement would be immeasurably stronger with blue collar women's support; and there is no doubt that cultural products like country music songs play an important role in forming and reflecting social awareness and consciousness. While it is true that women's country songs' emphasis on personal relationships with men often fails to relate to such topics of importance to blue collar women as wage labor, the music does nonetheless address a central group of issues in working class women's lives in a variety of self-assertive and socially aware ways. These issues of male-female relations are kept alive in women's country music in the assertion of women's desire for and right to personal happiness and individuality. Country music as an important element of working class women's lives does have a political role in culturally maintaining a criticism of experience and the desire for a better life. By themselves these cultural products (women's self-assertive songs) cannot determine political action, awareness, or organization; but they can encourage social class identity, direct interests and concerns, raise issues to consciousness, and promote the formation of a culture of resistance.

FOOTNOTES

1. Richard A. Peterson and Paul DiMaggio, "From Region To Class, the Changing Locus of Country Music: A Test of the Massification Hypothesis," *Social Forces*, March, 1975, p. 503.

2. Bill Williams, "Grand Ole Opry," *Billboard* (Section 2, The World of Country Music), October 20, 1973, p. 25.

3. Peterson and DiMaggio, op. cit., p. 503.

4. Williams, op. cit., p. 25.

5. Melvin Shestack, *The Country Music Encyclopedia*, New York, 1974, p. 319.

6. Paul Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music*, New York, 1971, p. 11.

7. Joan Dew, "Country Music's New Women," *Redbook*, January, 1975, p. 73.

8. Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America*, Garden City, New York, 1975, p. xxi.

9. As quoted by Dorothy Horstman, "Loretta Lynn," in Bill C. Malone and Judith McCulloh (eds.), *Stars of Country Music*, Urbana, Illinois, 1975, p. 309. Horstman cites the version of the song recorded by Buell Kazee.

10. As quoted by Charles Wolfe and Patricia A. Hall, "Banjo Pickin' Girl," in liner notes to *Banjo Pickin' Girl* (Rounder Records LP #1029), Somerville, Massachusetts, 1978, p. 4.

11. John Atkins, "The Carter Family," in Bill C. Malone and Judith McCulloh (eds.), op. cit., p. 97.

12. As quoted by Steven D. Price, *Take Me Home: The Rise of Country and Western Music*, New York, 1974, pp. 29-30. A nearly identical version is heard on The Carter Family LP *The Original Carter Family From 1936 Radio Transcripts* (Old Homestead LP #OH-90045), Brighton, Michigan, n.d.

13. Lily May Ledford, "Lily May Ledford" (interview), *Sing Out!*, no. 2, July-August, 1976, pp. 4-5, 8.

14. John Greenway, *American Folk Songs of Protest*, Philadelphia, 1953, pp. 142-252.

15. *Billboard* magazine, year-end charts in the last issue of each year, 1970-1976. Lynn, Wynette, and Parton have all been in the top 50 country vocalists in all of these years. In addition, all have been named as Female Entertainer of the Year by the Country Music Association during the 1970s.

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