

Country Music and the Construction of the Southern White Working Class

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Old time, bluegrass, and country music are often considered to be the music of the southern white working class. This association obscures the significant influence and presence of African American musicians in early country music, and has been constructed through processes of appropriation, genre classification, and commercialization. While contemporary scholarship regarding country music has begun to acknowledge the hitherto ignored subject of race, few have examined race in country music in the context of labor, political economy, and the construction of the southern working class.

The association of working class whiteness with country music relies on countless historical discourses that claim that racial identities in the American South were clearly established, stable, and homogenous at the time of its commercialization. According to these common discourses, country music would be considered a mere expression of an already existent white racial identity. I argue, however, that country music instead was and is an integral part of the construction of southern working class identity. The extreme racialization of southern folk music proliferated during the 1920s in the midst of urbanization, radio accessibility, and the commercialization of music, reflecting the deep tensions and insecurity present as white southerners sought identity in the flux of the collapsing “Cotton Kingdom.” In the process of creating country music as a genre, it was intentionally disentangled from any association with black musicians, performers, or culture. Country music became a contested space for the articulation of racial difference by associating musical style with race. Consideration of country music’s many

incarnations – as regional musical style, as minstrelsy, and as commodity – shapes a working understanding of the role of race in country music, and of country music as a cultural trope informing the construction of southern racial and class identities.

Race and racism are inextricable from the southern working class experience. Beginning in the era of British colonization and continuing throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, the South's economy was centered on the production of agricultural cash crops. Inspired by Thomas Jefferson's idealism of a virtuous agrarian existence free from the corrupting industrialization of the North and its accompanying systems of politics and wage labor, white landowners in the South pursued the production of tobacco and cotton. Both crops demand copious, cheap labor in order to be profitable; the transatlantic slave trade flourished. Scholar Walter Johnson comments, "The liberties promised by Jefferson's vision depended upon racial conquest."¹ The boom of the "cotton kingdom" and slavery established a strong racial hierarchy built upon the commodification of the bodies of African slave laborers bought, sold, and exploited by white plantation owners. Conceptions of race under the system of slave labor lingered long after the abolition of slavery, and still inform racial relations in the South today.

Most white southerners were not, however, wealthy cotton tycoons. The modest Jeffersonian ideal was not attainable in a South oriented toward the production of large-scale cash crops, resulting in a vast population of poor white subsistence farmers and sharecroppers who lacked the capital to purchase their own land. Their lifestyles, later romanticized by the country

¹ Walter Johnson, *A River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard/Belknap, 2013), 4.

music industry, were neither financially stable nor free from the industrial influences they sought to escape; northern interests in banking and shipping played a strong role in the economy of the South. At the close of the Civil War, the South was in crisis. The southern economy was destroyed as capital fled the cotton industry. Poor whites grappled for an identity as the status of whiteness became increasingly complicated; while it had once provided some semblance of freedom and privilege, its legitimacy was uprooted by the emancipation of slaves. Although slavery had been outlawed, exploitative labor did not disappear from the American landscape. The financially high-risk trades of sharecropping and tenant farming became increasingly prevalent among both whites and blacks, allowing wealthy landowners to continue to profit off of the agricultural labor of poverty-stricken southerners.

The modern, industrializing North extended its influence southward at the turn of the twentieth century. Railroads extended throughout the region: scholar Bill Malone describes the rapid increase of railroads as “among the earliest, and certainly the most dramatic, examples of the industrialization process that would ultimately transform the rural South, shatter its façade of isolation, and weaken the hegemony of agriculture over the people.”² As agrarian lifestyles became less feasible for many in the aftermath of the collapse of the cotton industry, southerners were compelled to join the wage labor force. Some flocked to the North or to urban centers in the South, but others maintained their rural existence, however outside of agrarianism,

² Bill Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal. *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 7.

taking jobs in timber harvesting, sawmill operation, railroad work, and mining.³

Although the South is characterized in popular perception by the open and violent racism normalized by the “Jim Crow” laws of the early 1900s, physical and social segregation was, in fact, slow to arrive in the South. The structure of the slave labor system had required distinctly intimate and interdependent relationships between African-Americans and whites, albeit under an atmosphere of intense racial inequality.⁴ Upon the proliferation of industry in the South, blacks and whites often lived and worked in shared spaces. Working conditions and wages were dismal, though white laborers received somewhat better wages and positions than blacks.⁵ Unionization initiatives were hindered by the efforts of landowners and capitalists to divide the workforce by fueling racial tensions. Author Woodward writes:

Under slavery, control was best maintained by a large degree of physical contact and association. Under the strange new order the old methods were not always available or applicable, though the contacts and associations they produced did not disappear at once. To the dominant whites it began to appear the new order

³ Ibid., 29.

⁴ For detailed discussion and analysis of the progression of Jim Crow segregation in the South, see Woodward, C. Vann. *The strange career of Jim Crow*. Oxford University Press, 2001, 11-29.

⁵ Marc S. Miller. *Working Lives: The Southern Exposure History of Labor in the South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 22

required a certain amount of compulsory separation of the races.⁶

Determined to maintain their authority over the southern space, its resources, and its workers, prominent industrialists sought to encourage the identification of poor white workers with racial, rather than class-based consciousness. Concerted efforts from these industrialists to naturalize racial difference and separation among workers manifested both physically in new laws concerning segregation, and abstractly through cultural industries. Music became a contested space for the articulation of this difference, imagining racial separation through manipulated commercial linkage of musical style with race. With the arrival of access to transportation and cultural exchange via railroads, came the proliferation of radio and recording technology in the South. Recorded music broadcast and sold throughout the country, changed southerners' relationship to music and its performance dramatically.

Music had long been an important aspect of southern culture. Community functions, house gatherings, and fiddling contests highlighted the many musical and cultural influences converging in the South: British and Celtic balladry, African rhythms and instrumentation, blues scales, and more. The fiddle was the instrument of choice for both black and white performers.⁷ Malone writes that fiddling was “both an ‘old-time’

⁶ C. Van Woodward. *The strange career of Jim Crow* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 23.

⁷ Patrick Huber. “Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924-1932” in *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*. Diane Pecknold, ed. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2013), 38.

art and a southern phenomenon, as well as a community enterprise.”⁸ He continues, “Fiddle tunes... did not come solely from the white folk experience. Black fiddlers, for example, were omnipresent in the South in the nineteenth century.”⁹

Indeed, musical styles were not generally divided along racial lines; shared workplaces such as railroad yards presented opportunities for musical exchange and collaboration between members of the working class, and black and white musicians “shared a common repertoire and similar performance style.”¹⁰ If fiddle, one of the most distinctly “country” instruments, was played and mastered by musicians of all colors, why is country music marked as a distinctively “white” genre? A partial answer lies in the early commercialization and categorization of country music.

Although country music often expresses nostalgia for a simple, isolated agrarian lifestyle, it emerged as a genre as a result of the very commercialization and industrialization it thematically opposes. In the 1920s, radio broadcasting – and by association, musical recording – spurred the creation of a quickly expanding and vastly successful national music industry. Faced with the need to be classified for sale on the national market, what was then known as “old time” music entered into a crisis of identification. Diane Pecknold writes, “the connections between race and genre rely on a host of critical and scholarly discourses about purity, authenticity, and commercialism that are not specifically about race.”¹¹ By the 1940s, the categorization of

⁸ Bill Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal. *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Huber, “Black Hillbillies,” 29.

¹¹ Diane Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2013), 11.

“southern country music” had been refined, modified, and standardized – and denied any association with southern African American cultural or musical tradition.

Interrogating country music’s foundations as a genre exposes the ambiguity of racial identities and genre classification in the industrializing south. In his article “Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924-1932,” author Patrick Huber details the formation of “hillbilly” and “race” records as marketing categories by record companies, who not only “assumed that musical style and race were inextricably linked,”¹² but naturalized and cemented the racialized marketing categories as genres.

The distinctions between “race records” aimed at black audiences and “hillbilly records” aimed at white audiences were ambiguous at best. Hillbilly music, for example, often contained songs written or performed by African American musicians,¹³ while its “records, catalogues, and advertisements disseminated images of an idyllic white rural Mountain South that existed outside of modern urban America; a closely knit, socially homogenous and harmonious world free from flappers, foreigners, and African Americans.”¹⁴ Recordings made exclusively by African Americans were occasionally distributed for sale in the “hillbilly” genre, albeit under “racially ambiguous pseudonyms.”¹⁵ Additionally, record companies occasionally marketed the exact same recording to both race and hillbilly

¹² Huber, “Black Hillbillies,” 23.

¹³ “Nearly 180 recordings featuring African American artists appeared in hillbilly series or on records intended for sale in the hillbilly market,” writes Huber (47). He adds that there were “more integrated sessions in hillbilly than in any other genre except vaudeville” (28).

¹⁴ Huber, “Black Hillbillies,” 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

audiences, increasing their profits significantly. Musical difference divided along racial lines was a contrived concept that manipulated the perceptions of listeners and consumers.

“Hillbilly” as signifier for “white southern country” was a contested term, as it was not always associated with the privilege of whiteness with which working-class southern whites wished to identify themselves by. Although used by most musicians, reviewers, and fans of early country music throughout the 1930s (after which point, the genre was reclassified as “country and western”), the term “hillbilly” had racist and classist connotations. It was an exaggerated reminder of the failed Jeffersonian citizen of the South, the poor white farmer marginalized from the privilege and plenty promised by agriculture, and characterized by crude sensibilities. A 1900 New York Journal article describes “a ‘Hill Billie’ as ‘a free and untrammled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of... drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him.’”¹⁶ Writer Abel Green in 1926 waxed poetic, pronouncing the hillbilly to be a “mountaineer type of illiterate white whose creed and allegiance are to the Bible, the chautauqua, and the phonograph... the mountaineer is of the ‘poor white trash’ genera... illiterate and ignorant, with the intelligence of morons.”¹⁷ The use of “hillbilly” as a slur to imply low class was not its only manifestation; however, it was also used jovially among some performers who claimed the term as a proud signifier of their rural roots.

¹⁶ Anthony Harkins. “The Significance of ‘Hillbilly’ in Early Country Music.” *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1996, 312.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.

The image of performers of “hillbilly” music was often manipulated – “rusticated,” writes Harkins - to fulfill and embellish the audience members’ conception of “country folk.”¹⁸ While early country musicians were usually noted for their upstanding and formal dress on stage, they donned exaggerated and sometimes degrading costumes at the urging of producers and record companies. This whitewashed, dramatic characterization of country music performers facilitated the record companies’ marketing goals and was met with great commercial success. African Americans were systematically excluded from photographs and advertisements commissioned by record companies. Huber notes the suspicious absence of African American fiddler Jim Booker in his otherwise white band’s 1927 portrait. Holding the fiddle is the band manager, who did not know how to play the instrument.¹⁹ Just as the use of racially ambiguous pseudonyms had disguised African American participation in “hillbilly” recordings, the fictitious and exaggerated presentation of musicians served to reinforce the association of country music with whiteness.

Blackface minstrelsy was yet another arena for the expression of whiteness via the performance of “old time” and country music, associating it with the leisure of poor white workers at the expense of poor blacks. David Roediger writes, “Minstrelsy did not steal Black material stealthily. It did so brazenly, acknowledging and emphasizing its Black roots, insisting, for example, on the banjo’s African origins.”²⁰ By

¹⁸ Ibid., 314.

¹⁹ Huber, “Black Hillbillies,” 50.

²⁰ David R. Roediger. “White Skins, Black Masks: Minstrelsy and White Working Class Formation before the Civil War,” in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso), 117.

donning the cultural disguise of “blackness,” performers were able to claim and transgress racial boundaries both physically and musically, implicitly stressing the power and privilege held by “whiteness.” Roediger comments, “Just as the minstrel stage held out the possibility that whites could be ‘black’ for a while but nonetheless white, it offered the possibilities that, via blackface, preindustrial joys could survive amidst industrial discipline.”²¹ Nostalgia for an imagined agrarian past allowed those claiming whiteness as a racial category, to do so under the guise of sentimentality for an idyllic lifestyle corrupted by the modern industrial world, thus bypassing claims of racism and exclusion.

The naturalization of the whiteness of southern country music by claims to an isolated white past was also imposed by the project of “song catchers” in the southern Appalachian region. These (usually northern) ethnomusicologists travelled the region, recording music and lyrics performed by southern musicians. Their “collecting,” however, was selective: song catchers “attempted to trace the origins of Appalachian music back to its roots in Britain,” and focused on the Anglo-Saxon-influenced balladry tradition of the South.²²

This focus intentionally ignored the diverse musical styles and influences found throughout the South, from gospel to bluegrass. Cecil Sharp, a song catcher quoted by writer Ann Ostendorf in “Song Catchers, Ballad Makers, and New Social Historians: The Historiography of Appalachian Music,” remarked that:

²¹ Ibid., 118.

²² Ann Ostendorf. “Song Catchers, Ballad Makers, and New Social Historians: The Historiography of Appalachian Music.” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (2004), 194.

The primary purpose of education is to place the children of the present generation in possession of the cultural achievements of the past, so that they may as quickly as possible enter into their racial inheritance. What better form of music or literature can we give them than the folk-song and folk-ballads of the race to which they belong?²³

Song catchers' findings, often accepted uncritically as objective and factual, served to reinforce the concept of southern music as homogenous and lily-white.

The construction of country music as the music of the southern white working class obscures its diverse origins and influences, serving to legitimize the history and privilege of white racial identification. The appropriation of country music as "white" defines it against "black" music, naturalizing racial distinctions by assuming that genre labels arise spontaneously out of the separate musical traditions of different racial and ethnic categories. This construction relies too on the myth of complete physical and social segregation of blacks and whites throughout the history of the South, which became a reality only as whites grappled for identity and influence in the wake of the Civil War. A critical reexamination of the history of country music notes that participation and influences in early country music were not so sharply defined, and that the whiteness of country music was constructed. Through appeals to agrarian nostalgia, the classification of musical genres, and the creation of a distinctive image of country musicians, notions of racial and musical authenticity functioned to simultaneously reinforce and develop one another.

²³ Ibid., 196.

The reluctance of scholars to critically reexamine the history of country music reflects the power dynamics and racial hierarchies existent in our society today. As Diane Pecknold writes, we must seek to “examine how the genre’s whiteness was produced and is maintained, to imagine country music not merely as a cultural reflection of a preexisting racial identity but as one of the processes by which race is constituted.”²⁴ An interrogation of the relationship of whiteness to country music does not seek to demonize the genre, the musical tradition or those who enjoy and perform it. Instead it seeks to reimagine the genre, to reinterpret its history and analyze, through music, race’s role in the construction of the southern working class.

Cultural industry informs reality. Country music’s association with whiteness served the project of dividing the southern working class along racial lines, by naturalizing racial difference through music, hindering progress for working-class solidarity and labor unionization in the South. The association of working-class whiteness with country music does not always imply uncomplicated privilege; it is based on nostalgia for a romanticized agrarian existence that arose as northern industrialization encroached upon the failed space of southern whiteness. Cemented by the recording industry’s designation of genres, the perception of country music as lily-white has played a strong role in conceptions of the southern working class. Analysis of the power dynamics and competing interests inherent in the construction of country music at the turn of the twentieth century, serves to complicate southern African American and white working class histories. This analysis thereby reconsiders the conceptions and implications of race, genre, and power in music today.

²⁴ Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 2.

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