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Matthew Arnold
University of South Florida

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"Which Way to the Honky-Tonk?" An Analysis of the Bakersfield and Nashville Sounds

by

Matthew Arnold

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Major Professor: Andrew Berish, Ph.D.
Daniel Belgrad, Ph.D.
Maria Cizmic, Ph.D.

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"Which Way to the Honky-Tonk?" An Analysis of the Bakersfield and Nashville Sounds

Matthew Arnold

ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is to analyze the development of the Nashville and Bakersfield sounds in the 1950s and 1960s through the lens of space. I will examine the role class plays in country music by examining the places in which it developed. Beginning with a historical perspective of the music, I will show that a middle-class outlook controlled labeling of the music. While the early country music industry professed to "discover" the sounds of rural America, this sound was only allowed to be expressed if it conformed to corporate interests.

With the advent of the honky-tonk bar, the working class had an important opportunity to step outside this mold and fashion a music that better reflected its own interests. The developing honky-tonk sound became rougher in its lyrical content, voicing the concerns of failed marriages, alcohol filled nights and urban frustrations. The instrumentation began to include steel and electric guitars. Over time, the developing honky-tonk sound influenced the recording industry. Through the use of jukeboxes in the honky-tonks, patrons voiced a preference for the new, rougher and louder sound.

After establishing the sound of the honky-tonks I will focus attention on the developments of the Nashville and Bakersfield sounds, examining how each responded to the honky-tonk. For the architects of the Nashville Sound, the issue of class remained

king. Chet Atkins professed a goal of making the music more respectable. Respectable in this case meant middle class, prompting Atkins to abandon the honky-tonk altogether by smoothing over the rough edges of honky-tonk music. With respect to the Bakersfield Sound, Buck Owens, in striving to carve out an identity as an "authentic" country performer, identified the honky-tonk as a site of authentic country music, and sought to retain much of the same instrumentation. However, like Chet Atkins, Buck Owens made his own changes to the lyrical content of the music, downplaying some of the rougher themes to honky-tonk music. For Owens, authenticity laid in keeping the artist authentic to the honky-tonk which was more about instrumentation and singing style than it was lyrical content.

Introduction

The Problem of Class in Country Music

Garth Brooks's "Friends in Low Places" is one of many love-gone-wrong songs in country music. In this song the spurned male has a chance to call out his no-good ex-girlfriend. Yet while the song at its core details the troubles between a man and his former lover, "Friends in Low Places" also deals with class. In the first verse, Brooks sings "Blame it all on my roots, I showed up in boots, and ruined your black-tie affair," signaling to the listener that he is out of place when he arrives at the party of his ex-girlfriend, who is now with someone of a higher social class.¹ Brooks goes on to sing, "I'm not big on social graces, think I'll slip on down to the oasis, oh, I've got friends in low places."² With the chorus the narrator confirms his status as a working-class individual and someone who is at the mercy of both capricious women and a middle-class masculinity he perceives as effeminate. However, while the song tells the story of the marginalized male, it must be noted that the song is complicated by the fact that Brooks himself does not share the experience of marginalization. Being one of the most successful acts within the country music genre, Garth Brooks has enjoyed considerable crossover success.

"Friends in Low Places" shows the contradictions that exist within the country music genre. On the one hand, country music is viewed as a music of the people. It lauds old-time values and strives to not get above its raising. The genre sings about the

heartland, mom and apple pie. Yet it is also filled with individuals who are seeking popularity as well financial success in their chosen profession. The pursuit of such success, though, is often denigrated as selling out. While both aims seem antithetical to each other, they have managed to coexist within the same genre, though not without some difficulty. Scholars have long attempted to arrive at a satisfactory explanation for how country music can manage to be both things at the same time. How can the country artist manage to be both the non-presuming, humble farmhand and the successful cosmopolitan at the same time?

Current scholarship focuses on the tension that develops from trying to be both of these things at once. Jeffrey Lange discusses the expansion of the country music audience over the course of the fifties. Lange writes on the ways country music producers altered the genre in order in order to find listeners beyond the working class—a process he describes as a search for respectability.³ However efforts to make the genre more respectable also sparked concerns that the genre was trading its authenticity for increased profits. Joli Jensen examines these concerns within the context of the 1950s by looking at how individuals define authenticity. According to Jensen, the identity of country music became linked to the identity of working class—“Terms like *authentic* work to celebrate ‘our’ music as virtuous and valuable while denigrating... ‘their’ music as insincere, specious, tainted, or false.”⁴ Thus, any change that threatens the authenticity of country music seemingly undermines working-class identity. However, such arguments presume that country music accurately represents working-class culture. Barbara Ching addresses the gap between perception and reality. Ching points out how many country artists became successful by highlighting their abjectness and expressing a

“formulaic articulation of failure.”⁵ While such songs are interpreted by lay audiences as a realistic depiction of the working-class experience, what Ching points out is that often such songs exaggerate the woes of the working class in order to poke fun at a dominant middle class.⁶

In this thesis, I will examine how country music has dealt with the issue of social class in relation to the spaces in which country music is performed. Previous scholarship has already examined the manner in which space informs our conception of social class. Most prominent is Mary Douglas's work on safe and dangerous zones, which theorizes that we divide the world into safe and dangerous zones in order to control our movements and actions.⁷ This model is useful in analyzing country music's development: the honky-tonk, a major space in which country develops, is deemed dangerous to the middle class, who avoid it in order to maintain respectability. However, such a view is further complicated by the fact that while the middle class is ascribing its own set of meanings and beliefs onto honky-tonks, the working class is likewise ascribing its own set of beliefs upon the same space. What is dangerous to the middle class becomes a refuge to the working class. I will explain later how country music can act as a sponge, soaking up the cultural values of the honky-tonks in which it developed. It becomes something to be derided and mocked by the middle class while being embraced by a working class who see the music as an authentic expression of their experience.

The Middle and Working Class

A brief discussion is needed to explain the importance of the middle and working classes to country music. There is no clear-cut delineation between the two groups, as certainly there are middle-class listeners of country music and there are working-class

individuals who were able to make the jump to a middle-class lifestyle. What further clouds the picture of the two classes and their importance to country music is the fact that the primary individuals of importance to this thesis share common racial and religious backgrounds, being white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). During the 1950s however, class took on a particular significance within American culture, given the rapid economic advances and increased opportunities associated with the postwar period.⁸ To be middle class meant performing a variety of different traits, from working a successful job to living in the suburbs and having the perfect wife and children. Sitcoms from the era, such as *I Love Lucy* and *The Donna Reed Show* presented images of the perfect family while scholars like Vance Packard discussed the importance of the “organization man,” explaining how success in the workplace was also dictated by one’s success in his private life.

The idea of the white-collar job became especially important to middle-class status over the course of the fifties, as scholars such as C. Wright Mills pointed out the rising importance of the corporation as comprising the “leading circles of power.”⁹ Thus one’s position within the company became central to one’s social status, as even the location of one’s office became a marker of one’s importance to the company.¹⁰ However, the office also provides an example of the divide between the physical and imagined spaces. During the fifties, the office was filled spaces that marked your importance. Having the corner office and obtaining a key to the executive restroom meant you were more important than your colleagues who worked in cubicles. These things became part of a system of perks that were a better indicator of status than one’s actual income.¹¹ This created a defining feature of the American middle class: “to rise to

the top without disclosing its[the individual's] success in doing so.”¹² At the same time though, things like the executive restroom were satirized in American cinema during the fifties, as films like *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*, mock the executive restroom as mere posturing.

However, the use of space in such settings as the office, highlight the importance of performativity to middle-class values in the fifties. One wasn't simply middle class in the fifties, one had to perform the role of middle class. In examining the popular culture of the era, it becomes clear that middle-class success was not tied simply to the work one did, but rather to the overall life they lived. Happiness during this era was not simply tied to your income, but how well you performed your middle-class identity. An example of this can be seen from an episode of *The Donna Reed Show*, titled “Donna Plays Cupid,” which originally aired in 1959. In this episode, the show's protagonist Donna engages in efforts to bring together two of her friends, Ceil Pennington and Dr. Bo Bolind (*The Donna Reed Show*, “Donna Plays Cupid,” episode 21 [originally aired February 11, 1959]). While each individual in this episode works a respectable middle-class job—Ceil as a librarian and Bo as an obstetrician—they both are viewed as unhappy for still being single, sending the message that a key aspect of middle-class performativity during this era was being married. Such media messages were not limited to *The Donna Reed Show*, as most of the popular sitcoms from the fifties sent similar messages. In fact, a skit from a 1979 episode of *Saturday Night Live* parodied the formulaic structures of the fifties sitcom by showing Ricky Nelson wandering through the sitcom homes of *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best* and *Make Room for Daddy* while attempting to get home.¹³ Furthermore, many Americans felt inadequate compared to the sitcom families.¹⁴

In this thesis middle class refers to the range of values making up this social class. In contrast the term working class is used to describe those individuals and behaviors viewed as not performing as middle class. Hence their status is not simply attributed to having limited economic means, but is reinforced by their failure to behave in ways that are identified as emblematic of an upper class. These are individuals who were labeled as not working white-collar jobs, having failed marriages and drinking too much. The hillbilly stereotype became useful in deriding and caricaturing these individuals, as well as making them appear as dangerous to a middle-class ethos.

This is not meant to completely disvalue Weberian concepts of class that reduce the term to its economic components, identifying those members of a class as “a group of people who share the same life chances.”¹⁵ While my focus is on the performative component to class, economics affect the range of activities available to an individual. Certainly those individuals most often frequenting honky-tonks share a common background of limited economic means and opportunities. However expansions in consumer credit over the fifties created additional opportunities for individuals to display wealth without being wealthy.¹⁶ As a result, there was a “lessening contrast in the material way of life of rich and poor” within America over the course of the fifties.¹⁷

The Development of Country Music

Spatial ideas alone are insufficient to fully explain the development of country music and its relationship to class. Considering the lack of scholarly literature on the issue of space and its relationship to the genre, this thesis focuses on space’s relationship to country music. As such, I will give a brief account of the genre’s history, its relationship to class and its relationship to space. From its earliest recordings, country

music was tied to both issues of class and race. Class was apparent from the genre's origins during the 1920s as "hillbilly" music, giving a voice to the "rediscovered," backwoods segments of the American population.¹⁸ It was also dubbed as hillbilly music despite the genre sharing many characteristics with blues music. Scholarship on Hank Williams argues it would be just as appropriate to label him a blues musician as it would be to label him as a country artist.¹⁹ However, given racial policies in the recording industry in the early twentieth century, it became necessary to segregate white and black musical forms and as a result, hillbilly music became the music of white, rural Americans.²⁰

This is not to overstate the importance of urban producers in the creation of country music. Country music originated among rural performers. However, the importance of the producer was in the manufacturing of the image of the performer. George Hay, the founder of the Grand Ole Opry, played a vital role in "rusticating" his performers in order to make them conform to middle-class stereotypes about how a hillbilly should appear.²¹ Such depictions retained their dominance throughout the twenties and thirties as the music remained in the control of the producers. However, over the course of the forties, the audience of country music expanded, due to both the growing youth culture in America as well as the diaspora of working-class Americans throughout the United States.²²

Although the country music audience expanded during this period, representations of the hillbilly did not improve. Depictions of the hillbilly, particularly in the fifties were often negative. For example, a 1958 article in the *Chicago Tribune*, described hillbillies in the following manner: "The Southern hillbilly migrants, who have descended like a

plague of locusts in the last few years, have the lowest standard of living and moral code (if any), the biggest capacity for liquor, and the most savage tactics when drunk, which is most of the time."²³ Such depictions continued in Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd*, from 1957, which stars Andy Griffith as country artist Lonesome Rhodes, who despite achieving fame within the genre, remains a threat to middle-class values, as he is depicted as "a symbol of social and political decay."²⁴ Such depictions of the Southern migrant are informed by the idea of place, as they evoke tensions between the city and country. It must also be remembered that the fifties was a time when social critics sought to undermine cultural hierarchies, as typified by Vance Packard's *The Status Seekers*.²⁵ Thus a film like *A Face in the Crowd* can be seen as carrying a dual message. While the first is to paint the picture of the hillbilly as a dangerous element within society, it also carries a message to the broader American culture that distinctions of taste, and by extension class, still matter.²⁶

The image of the hillbilly has a problematic history within country music. On the one hand, images of the hillbilly, such as those found in the *Chicago Tribune* article and *A Face in the Crowd* were anything but positive. Even when depictions of the hillbilly were not intentionally negative, they were still far from flattering. During the early years of the Grand Ole Opry, the Opry's founder, "Judge" Hay went out of his way to "rusticate" his performers.²⁷ As such, Hay often downplayed the professional, middle-class roots of his performers and dressed them in overalls and straw hats in order to "authenticate" them with the target audience. Such depictions are pandering to negative middle-class stereotypes held about the hillbilly. Regardless of the negativity in these

images, the audience of hillbilly music had little choice but to accept them because the music represented the first genre targeted specifically at a rural audience.²⁸

Regardless of this, the hillbilly image was still one that the genre tried to move beyond. The roots of the hillbilly image are found in the 1920s, when country recording was still in its infancy and urban producers who represented the interests of the middle class controlled the recording technology.²⁹ Lacking control over the means of production, hillbilly artists could not adequately defend their rights in the recording process. As such, many artists entered into contracts that benefited the recording companies and which did not pay the artist all that they were entitled to under the law.³⁰ Further, by consolidating control over the recording process, the production companies were also able to maintain control over the advertising strategies of the music.³¹ In order for a hillbilly artist to record, he had to accept the policies of the producers, consequently, listeners of hillbilly music accepted the hillbilly image because they had no other alternative. Furthermore, many hillbilly artists came into the genre because they had no other options to make ends meet. Such was the case with Hank Williams, who started performing largely because chronic back problems made it difficult for him to hold down other jobs.³²

However, as individuals such as the working-class Chet Atkins themselves become producers of the music during the 1950s, an effort is made to reform the image of the hillbilly.³³ As will be explored further in chapter two, Chet Atkins desired to abandon the image of the hillbilly, replacing it with his idea of the “country gentleman,” a symbol of the refined southern working class.³⁴ Such efforts marked the transformation of hillbilly music into country music, although even now the image of the hillbilly was

not soon forgotten and remained problematic for country music. The hillbilly made a resurgence during the 1970s in the form of Outlaw country, when country artists self-identified as hillbillies as a marker of pride, a symbol that they were true to country music.³⁵

The Country Music Audience

In the previous pages I have discussed the audience being white as well as a rural and working-class citizen. But, country music had far-reaching appeal. Particularly after World War II, the music moved from being a regional art form to a national one, and the audience was no longer viewed as strictly working-class.³⁶ As such, it cannot be forgotten that the same set of media messages, from the presentation of the artist, to the instrumentation and lyrics, can mean vastly different things depending on who is doing the listening. So while the Outlaw movement pioneered by Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson in the Seventies was perceived as a return to the roots of country music and a re-embracing of the working-class audience, their music also resonated among college students.³⁷

It is the purpose of my study to look specifically at what messages the Bakersfield and Nashville alterations of country music are sending to their working-class audience. The reason for this is the fact that the working class is the intended audience for this music. In doing this, I will move beyond what music historian Barbara Ching describes as the trap of the rube.³⁸ What Ching refers to with this idea is the obsession previous scholarly research has over the issue of authenticity. In this view, the music starts as authentic to the working class, but then becomes something else as it tries to attain crossover appeal.³⁹ However, as Ching rightly points out, such views on authenticity

paint the researcher into a corner where he ends up accepting the idea of early hillbilly music as an “authentic” art form and thereby sees the depictions of early hillbilly artists and performers as "realistic" images.⁴⁰ However, as has been stated above, such depictions themselves are themselves more emblematic of a middle-class understanding of the working class instead of presenting a realistic picture of the working-class experience.⁴¹

The Importance of Place

If Brooks's "Friends in Low Places" provides a modern take on country music's struggle with class, it is important to remember that Brooks often frames the debate in terms of space. He describes himself as being "high as that ivory tower" his ex-girlfriend is now living in.⁴² Furthermore, while the song gives Brooks a chance to indict his ex-girlfriend for betraying the working class and buying into the middle class, Brooks is only able to do this by retreating to the safety of the honky-tonk, as in the song's unreleased third verse: "I'll head back to the bar and you can kiss my ass."⁴³ The song is further complicated by the fact that this third verse was never included on the original release of the song, and only came to be heard by attendees of Brooks's live concerts. Hence one can see the original release of the song being manipulated to remove some of the scorn such lyrics may hold for middle-class listeners. Nevertheless, even on the single as it was released for radio, the song still evokes a sense of strength for the place of the honky-tonk, as the song refers to the bar as an "oasis."⁴⁴

Such interpretations of the honky-tonk become critical for examining the way country music deals with class through the use of space. In examining the historical developments of country music, one begins to see the importance of the honky-tonk in

inserting a working-class voice into the genre. As has already been stated, country music as performed on the Grand Ole Opry was performed through a middle-class understanding of what working-class and rural America looked and sounded like. Even when the artists making up the Opry sought to modify the sound of country music, they ran into resistance from those in charge. One such example was seen in Hay's attempts to keep electronic instrumentation out of the Opry, when he told musician Sam McGee, "Now you wouldn't play that [electric guitar] on the *Grand Ole Opry*. You know we're going to hold it down to earth."⁴⁵ Thus even when artists wanted to work outside of the constraints placed upon the genre, the power dynamics of the place, whether it be the Grand Ole Opry or the recording studio, prevent them from doing so. As a result, even though the music being performed originated in rural areas and was being marketed towards those same rural areas, it was still performed within a space that was governed by middle-class understandings of what it meant to be rural.

As such, the honky-tonk became one of the first sites where a working-class voice was able to assert control over its own music. This is due to the fact that the honky-tonks become sites for the working class run by the working class. Here there are no Judge Hays to tell people what is and is not allowed. As a result, after country music enters the honky-tonk, listeners begin to hear the music change. The instrumentation starts including steel guitars and electronic instruments, especially electric guitar.⁴⁶ The lyrics become rougher. Now people can hear songs that talk about loneliness, divorce and alcoholism.⁴⁷ And while such music is initially limited to those artists playing within the honky-tonk, the reformulations of the genre developed here worked their way back into the industry, primarily through the jukebox.⁴⁸ The context of the honky-tonk, particularly

the playing of music inside a crowded, loud environment, forced changes to the style of country music being recorded.⁴⁹ As such, many artists begin to record songs that are louder just so honky-tonk patrons can hear them above the noise of the bar.⁵⁰

The Plan of this Thesis

The first chapter of this thesis will deal in depth with the honky-tonk bar itself. I will deal most directly in this chapter with a brief history of the bar and its role in class-consciousness, as well as the lived experience of a honky-tonk bar. After setting up the physical experience of a honky-tonk, I will move next to examining the imagined place of the bar. In capturing the working-class conception of the place, I will examine the music that develops in the honky-tonk. To capture the middle-class understanding of the honky-tonk I will turn to the way the honky-tonk comes to be described by the legal systems of the time.

In the second chapter I will focus on the ways in which honky-tonk music changed with the development of the Nashville Sound. To examine the metamorphosis that takes place I will begin by looking at the life of producer and artist Chet Atkins. Atkins is a figure that is surprisingly conscious of class considerations and wants very much to be part of the middle-class mainstream. Such desires on his part lead to his efforts to move the music "uptown," and in so doing smooth over the rough edges that developed within the honky-tonks.⁵¹ In doing this, one can see that Atkins had a keen sense of the honky-tonk as a space of the working class that was something alien to the middle class.

In the final chapter I will discuss the changes made to country music with the development of the Bakersfield Sound. The Bakersfield Sound can be attributed to the

honky-tonk music as developed by Okie migrants to California. Facing constant discrimination and marginalization by a Californian mainstream that did not want them, Buck Owens and the other architects of the Bakersfield Sound had little incentive to move country music "uptown" like Chet Atkins. However, while Owens did not desire to move the music "uptown," this does not mean he did not desire upward mobility. Owens, like Atkins, is a figure who uses country music as a means of escaping memories of poverty and discrimination. However, unlike Atkins, Owens did not equate upward mobility with assimilation into the middle class. Rather, while Owens made his own adjustments to the honky-tonk sound and brought in his own messages of upward mobility, he still positioned himself as authentic to country music, using authenticity to market himself to the working class while Chet Atkins was marketing country music to the middle class.⁵²

Figure One

“Mind Your Own Business”

Hank Williams, *Hank Williams Essential Collection, Vol. 2*

If the wife and I are fussin', brother that's our right
'Cause me and that sweet woman's got a license to fight
Why don't you mind your own business
(Mind your own business)
'Cause if you mind your business, then you won't be mindin' mine.

Oh, the woman on our party line's the nosiest thing
She picks up her receiver when she knows it's my ring
Why don't you mind your own business
(Mind your own business)
Well, if you mind your business, then you won't be mindin' mine.

I got a little gal that wears her hair up high,
the boys all whistle when she walks by.
why don't you mind your own buisness
(Mind your own business)
Well, if you mind your own business, you sure won't be minding mine.

If I want to honky tonk around 'til two or three
Now, brother that's my headache, don't you worry 'bout me.
Just mind your own business
(Mind your own business)
If you mind your business, then you won't be mindin' mine.

Mindin' other people's business seems to be high-toned
I got all that I can do just to mind my own
Why don't you mind your own business
(Mind your own business)
If you mind your own business, you'll stay busy all the time.

Chapter One

"If I want to honky-tonk around 'til two or three/ Now, brother that's my headache, don't you worry about me/ Just mind your own business."⁵³

The story of country music during the fifties begins in the honky-tonk bars. This chapter will begin with the bar in a more general sense, to examine the ways in which it helped form a sense of identity and class-consciousness. The places we frequent hold a wealth of information about who we are. Whether it is the nightclub, the jazz lounge or the county line saloon, the bars we go to speak volumes of how we understand our places within society. After laying the groundwork by looking at the bar in general, I will turn my attention to a history of the honky-tonk itself, examining its roots within the Prohibition era, and how both the working and middle classes eventually come to understand the honky-tonk itself. My analysis of the honky-tonk will conclude in a song analysis of Hank Williams' "Mind Your Own Business."

The Local Tavern and Class Consciousness

In *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, Kathy Peiss focuses her attention on women's leisure in an urban center, but also provides useful insight into how working-class men spent their time in the city at the turn of the last century. In examining the role of the bar, Peiss writes: "Dominating the physical space of most tenement neighborhoods, the saloon exemplifies workingmen's

public culture."⁵⁴ Amidst the frustrations of urban life, the saloons and taverns provided a haven in which men could forget their troubles.⁵⁵ However, what is most useful to our understanding of bars is the way in which saloons have historically constructed themselves to cater to specific clientele, particularly members of similar ethnic backgrounds. Peiss states that "[o]ne saloon, for instance, advertised that it supplied Serbians, Croatians and Hungarians with a large meeting room, money barter, steamship tickets, employment, board, and lodging."⁵⁶ In another instance, Italians preferred "waterfront cafes on President Street."⁵⁷ During the 1900s, when society favored blending in, the saloons provided a space where the particularities of your culture could stand out.

This is not to say however that everyone approved of the tavern life. Class divisions over the understanding of saloons were apparent. As stated above, women in bars, especially women who were alone, were often viewed as prostitutes, which in turn drew the attention of city police.⁵⁸ For example, one vice investigator, when attempting to sit in a tavern's back room (reserved solely for couples) was told by the owner, "this is no whore house, you'll have to come out to the bar."⁵⁹ This sets up a concept that will be important later to the discussion of the honky-tonks: conflicting understandings of place. While to working-class men, the saloon becomes a haven where they can find support amidst the difficulties of urban living, to middle-class sensibilities working-class taverns represented something dangerous that needed to be quarantined. Furthermore, to women the taverns became threatening to their respectability. To each group then we can see a different imagining of the place being formed, and this imagining in turn affected how each group reacted to the space.

The Rise of the Honky-Tonk

In the discussion of the bar in general, one can see how taverns and saloons emerged as social institutions at the turn of the century catering to a host of ethnic others seeking opportunity in the United States. In a nation that preached assimilation and conformity, the bars provided a space where one could be different and get away with it. They provided spaces in which individuals could find respite from the pressures of daily life and commiserate with others like them. While bars did not always meet with the approval of middle-class authorities, they remained popular with their working-class male clientele.

Such trends would continue as rural migrants began their own exodus into urban centers. While much of the literature on the honky-tonk does not refer to either the historical or geographic specifics of the place, the origins of the honky-tonk are traceable to the 1930s and the roadhouses associated with the Texas oil boom.⁶⁰ While the literature only refers to the honky-tonk generally, some basic parameters can be established as setting the honky-tonk apart from other bars. The first and most obvious difference is the music being played within the honky-tonks. These become sites associated with country music and havens for rural migrants new to the city.⁶¹ Beginning in the 1930s and 40s rural migrants headed to the cities in search of defense work.⁶² And once there these migrants would search out for all things that were reminiscent of the home they left behind, attending "churches, community centers, and taverns that most reflected their socioeconomic backgrounds."⁶³ Their demand most often was to find "hillbilly music," and the place they most often found it was at the honky-tonk.⁶⁴

And like most taverns and saloons, honky-tonks embodied tension between the middle and working class. Honky-tonks are semi-segregated spaces that cater to a mostly white, working-class clientele.⁶⁵ Even the name honky-tonk refers to this semi-open stance as the term originates with African-American slang meaning “white shack.”⁶⁶ The honky-tonk represented economic opportunity for musicians, “playing for nickels and dimes at root beer stands or in wide-open taverns and dance halls where illegal liquor was consumed.”⁶⁷ However, the selling of illegal alcohol during Prohibition placed honky-tonks outside of a legal system that enforced temperance. And while the honky-tonk would be legitimized with the repeal of Prohibition, honky-tonks still embodied a tense relationship with the middle class, as honky-tonks were often built on the outskirts of town to find lower taxes and less police oversight.⁶⁸ While the honky-tonk still provided a space for the working class to express themselves, it was still a space on which the middle class tried to impose its own value system. Proposed legislation from the era provides evidence of the ways in which the middle class attempted to impose its values on the honky-tonk. In the 1940s, Senator George Moffett of Texas proposed legislation against honky-tonks that would take away their liquor licenses for allowing “conduct lewd, immoral or offensive to public decency.”⁶⁹ The same bill goes on to describe honky-tonks in the following manner:

The use of or permitting the use of loud and vociferous or obscene, vulgar or indecent language. The exposure of person or permitting any person to expose his person. Rudely displaying or permitting any person to rudely to display a pistol or any other deadly weapon in a manner calculated to disturb the inhabitants of such place. Solicitation of any person for coins to operate musical instruments or other devices. Solicitation of any person to buy drinks or beverages for consumption by the retailer or his employees. Intoxication on licensed premises [licensed to sell alcoholic beverages] or permitting any intoxicated person to remain on such premises. Permitting entertainment performances, shows or acts

that are lewd or vulgar. Permitting solicitations of persons for immoral or sexual purposes or relations.⁷⁰

While such legislation attempted to impose middle-class values upon the working class, it was also a way of protecting middle-class virtue by quarantining the honky-tonk. For while the government was not able to go as far as to outlaw the existence of the honky-tonks, by attempting to do so it sent a message to the middle-class that these are places that stand outside their value system and are best to be avoided. In addition to being associated with drunkenness, the law outlined the following sins of the honky-tonk: rough language, violence, panhandling, lewd performances and prostitution.

Violence was probably the biggest concern middle-class authorities had in terms of honky-tonks. It has been argued that the honky-tonks "encapsulated the worst stereotypes about rowdy, uncontrollable backwoodsmen and updated them for an undeniably contemporary context."⁷¹ The honky-tonk became symbolic of the hillbilly's "association with drinking and violence."⁷² Even into the 1970s honky-tonks would retain this atmosphere of violence; the Rose Bowl honky-tonk in Urbana, Illinois had a reputation among the college crowd "as being a 'bucket of blood.'"⁷³ However, while the middle class engaged in efforts to keep their kind away from honky-tonks, these efforts are not unwelcome to the working-class patrons of the honky-tonk, who maintain the honky-tonk as a semi-segregated space.⁷⁴ Even the Rose Bowl in Illinois maintained an atmosphere "where rednecks hung out and students were unwelcome."⁷⁵

Music Inside the Honky-Tonks

Of course, while honky-tonks share similarities with taverns and saloons in general, the main point of difference that distinguishes a honky-tonk is the music played

inside of it. While country music existed prior to its entry into the honky-tonk, its entry changes the sound of the music entirely. One of the primary changes to occur to the genre was in its choice of instrumentation. Country musicians, needing to find ways to be heard over the noise of the bar, adopted the electric guitar.⁷⁶ Such concerns would also lead to the adoption of string bass, pianos and occasionally drums.⁷⁷ The noise of the honky-tonk would also lead to new ways of playing the instruments, as a "sock rhythm"--the playing of closed chords, or the striking of all six strings in unison" became introduced to the music.⁷⁸

In addition to changes in instrumentation and playing, the honky-tonk also brought about changes to the lyrical content of country music. Gone were lyrics that evoked the "pastoral or down-home emphasis of the music."⁷⁹ In were lyrics that evoked the frustrations of the listener. Songs now dealt with themes of divorce, infidelity and drinking.⁸⁰ However, while such songs became more topical, they also became more exaggerated, providing an escapist context to the music.⁸¹ Several of these features can be heard in a listening of Hank Williams's "Mind Your Own Business." Along with being emblematic of the honky-tonk sound, it also evokes the tension that exists between the working and middle classes.

"Mind Your Own Business"

"Mind Your Own Business," sung by Hank Williams, features several of the instrumental changes found in honky-tonk music. The song features string bass, as well as steel guitar.⁸² In addition, the playing of the stringed instruments itself takes on a percussive aspect that seems to punctuate the title of the song. Furthermore, it should be noted that during the live performances of the song, the chorus often took on a call-and-

response nature, as the audience would often echo Hank Williams when he sang "mind your own business."⁸³ All of this helps the song take on a more pointed nature when analyzed as providing a rebuke to middle-class efforts to legislate against honky-tonks. Such a rebuke is most pointed when Williams sings, "minding other people's business seems to be high-toned."⁸⁴

However, while the song may rebuke the middle class, it does not idealize the working class. Lyrically, the song deals with several of the frustrations experienced by the working class, including marital discord and drinking. Williams enumerates these in each verse of the song, beginning by saying, "if the wife and I are fussing, brother that's our right."⁸⁵ Williams discusses the problems of drinking when he sings that "if I want to honky-tonk around 'til two or three/ now brother that's my headache, don't you worry about me."⁸⁶ Again, while Williams discusses the problems with drinking here, he does it in a pointed nature that seems to be directed against the middle class listener. While the middle class fostered an understanding of the honky-tonk as violent and dangerous to middle-class sensibilities, Williams is saying here that honky-tonking is no threat to the middle class and only hurts the working class. However, while the song can be read as a rebuke of the middle class, it must be noted that concerns over honky-tonking are also shared by working-class women, and such lines might just as well have been directed towards them, although the use of "brother" implies a male listener.

Changing the Industry

While country music changed upon its entry into the honky-tonk, these changes invariably filtered back to the recording studios. While most honky-tonks preferred live performance, many also supplemented the live band by using jukeboxes.⁸⁷ However,

music on the jukebox dealt with the same difficulty as live performance, the noise of the bar. Often this led to some records receiving little play in the honky-tonks. Even Ernest Tubb was once told: "But as soon as the crowd gets in there and gets noisy, they start dancing, they can't hear your records, they start playing Bob Wills. They're not playing your records: you need to make them louder."⁸⁸ However, while the music of the honky-tonk filtered back to the recording studios, a central problem would remain. While the honky-tonks existed as a working-class space, giving birth to a music identifiably working-class in nature, the recording studios remained a middle-class institution. The question then would be how would the studios react to the honky-tonk sound. As will be discussed in the following two chapters, the responses by both the Nashville and Bakersfield recording industries will be vastly different, and yet hold surprising similarities in their implications about what it means to be working class in the United States during the fifties.

Figure Two

“The Oklahoma Hills” Lyrics

Jim Reeves, *The Definitive Jim Reeves Collection, Vol. 3*

Many years have come and gone since I wandered from my home
In those Oklahoma hills where I was born
Many a page of life has turned many a lesson I have learned
And I feel that in those hills I still belong

Way down yonder in the Indian nation ride my pony on the reservation
In the Oklahoma hills where I was born
A way down yonder in the Indian nation a cowboy's life is my occupation
In the Oklahoma hills where I was born

As I sit here today many miles I am away
From a place I rode my pony through the drove
Where the oak and blackjack trees kiss the playful prairie breeze
In the Oklahoma hills where I was born

Way down yonder in the Indian nation ride my pony on the reservation
In the Oklahoma hills where I was born
A way down yonder in the Indian nation a cowboy's life is my occupation
In the Oklahoma hills where I was born

As I turn life a page to the land of a great old sage
In the Oklahoma hills where I was born
Where the Black bony River flows in the snow white cotton grows
In the Oklahoma hills where I was born

Way down yonder in the Indian nation ride my pony on the reservation
In the Oklahoma hills where I was born
A way down yonder in the Indian nation a cowboy's life is my occupation
In the Oklahoma hills where I was born

Figure Three

“He’ll Have to Go” lyrics

Jim Reeves, *He’ll Have to Go*

Put your sweet lips a little closer to the phone
Let's pretend that we're together all alone
I'll tell the man to turn the juke box way down low
And you can tell your friend there with you he'll have to go

Whisper to me tell me do you love me true
Or is he holding you the way I do
Though love is blind make up your mind I've got to know
Should I hang up or will you tell him he'll have to go

You can't say the words I want to hear
While you're with another man
Do you want me answer yes or no
Darlin' I will understand

Put your sweet lips a little closer to the phone
Let's pretend that we're together all alone
I'll tell the man to turn the juke box way down low
And you can tell your friend there with you he'll have to go

Chapter Two

World War II and the Expansion of the Country Music Audience

While country music through the 1920s and 1930s was originally marketed and produced as a rural musical form, World War II widened the genre's audience.⁸⁹ The expansion of the audience was an important factor in the renaming of hillbilly music as country music. May 26, 1953 was the date country music became the preferred label for the genre, as it marked a daylong celebration honoring the 20th anniversary of Jimmie Rodgers's death, a day that "validated the genre's presence in southern society by demonstrating its respectability and reverence for tradition."⁹⁰ A variety of reasons brought about this expansion: "country music's plaintive lyrics appealed to Americans in wartime; music publishers and promoters aggressively marketed country music; a shortage of new popular music led many Americans to country music's novelty; country intermingled with persons with other musical preferences in the armed forces; rural southerners migrated to urban areas throughout the country; and the jukebox industry expanded."⁹¹ According to Jeffrey Lange, the demographic shifts are the most important reason for this expanded audience; employment opportunities in the big cities enticed record numbers of rural citizens to make the move.⁹² Historian Francis Abernathy summed up the rural migrants motivation to move by stating: "A farmer making a bare living on his eighty acres found out that somebody paying a dollar an hour in the shipyards, and it didn't take him long to figure out that he could live better in the city—

with paved streets, picture shows, and brick schools—than he ever thought about on the farm.”⁹³ While many southerners made the move to the city in order to pursue better economic opportunities, this did not imply they were eager “to abandon their rural cultural heritage.”⁹⁴ In fact, especially in northern cities, rural migrants would form their own communities in order to maintain their culture, one important aspect of it being country music.⁹⁵

However, country music artists stood at a crossroads. On the one hand they were members of a genre that prided itself on performing authentic American music. Such music had made them popular with the rural audiences they originally courted as well as the honky-tonk crowds they performed for later on. On the other hand, the genre’s expanded audience after the war brought additional opportunities to the country artist to achieve economic success. However, country artists had a problem in achieving this success because their music was associated with the honky-tonk, a site of difference in the face of the fifties middle-class value system. Such difference is not indicative of the conformity that was viewed as a feature of the fifties middle class. C. Wright Mills noted that, “When white-collar people get jobs, they sell not only their time and energy, but their personalities as well. They sell by the week, or month, their smiles and their kindly gestures, and they must practice the prompt repression of resentment and aggression.”⁹⁶ Furthermore, it was this conformity that allowed the United States to think of itself as a classless society, where “the middle class eventually emerged... as the basic class from which higher and lower strata deviate.”⁹⁷

However, believing that America was becoming a classless society did not make it fact. Thus while economic opportunities drove many rural migrants to move to the

cities, the limitations they experienced often caused them to find an escape in the honky-tonks. While the honky-tonks gave them the opportunity to take part in a working-class community, the cultural difference performed within the space made sure that they did not rise above their working-class status. First and foremost the honky-tonk was viewed as a site of irrespectability. Second, and just as important, the honky-tonk represented an economic barrier to upward mobility—it might provide an escape from the pressures of city living, but that escape came at a price, especially to a group of people already on limited incomes.

As a result, many rural migrants found mostly frustration in the big cities and this frustration became a central theme of the music. Songs such as Hank Williams's "Mind Your Own Business," take a combative tone in defending working-class identity from the threat of middle-class conformity. However, while "Mind Your Own Business" took a combative tone, it failed to point out those social inequities that marginalized the working class. Greil Marcus writes that the country music of the late 1940s "so perfectly expressed the acceptance and fatalism of its audience of poor and striving whites, blending in with their way of life and endlessly reinforcing it, that the music brought all it had to say to the surface, told no secrets and had no use for novelty. It was conservative in an almost tragic sense, because it carried no hope of change, only respite...Country music lacked the confidence to break things open because it was not even sure it could find the space to breathe. Hank Williams was eloquent, but his eloquence could not set him free from the life he sang about; he died proving it, overdosing in the back of a car, on his way to one more show."⁹⁸ It is into this context that the life and work of Chet

Atkins would take country music into a new direction, striving to make both the genre and himself more respectable in the process.

Chet Atkins: Moving Uptown

An analysis of the career of Chet Atkins shows the importance he placed upon upward mobility in country music. In his biography Atkins' indicates the power of music to improve his economic circumstances. In the 1920s and 30s when country music was still in its infancy, Atkins stated: "making it' meant playing on the radio."⁹⁹

Furthermore, Atkins noted that he cried upon first hearing his brother play on the Chicago National Barn Dance.¹⁰⁰ And even though Atkins is most famous for his guitar playing, early in his career he chose to focus on fiddle playing as he thought it was more marketable than guitar playing.¹⁰¹

While Atkins was keenly aware of the economic realities within the country music industry, he was also cognizant that there was more than economic success to "making it." During Atkins's early career he moved from radio station to radio station playing as a sideman. At several of these stations Atkins encountered bias based on his rural background. For instance in discussing his experience at WNOX, Atkins wrote: "Some of them were pretty hard on me. They would call me hillbilly and tell me I wasn't any good but that just made me work harder to catch up with them."¹⁰² What is interesting to note here is that while the rival musicians told Atkins that he was no good, their only justification is Atkins's hillbilly status. Furthermore, Atkins does not question the other musicians' judgments about him, but rather internalizes them as true and turns this into a motivation to become a better musician. However, in accepting the other musicians' judgments about him, Atkins is also accepting the class hierarchies present in

society, with the middle class being positioned above the working class. Thus in order to become a better musician, Atkins had to leave the hillbilly behind.

Over the course of Atkins's career, improving himself as an artist also translated into improving the perception of his social class. Atkins took steps of reforming his image as a country artist to shed aspects of the previously held hillbilly stereotype, replacing it with the image of the "country gentleman."¹⁰³ For Atkins this image was one of "guitarist as a refined, sensitive, and creative musician."¹⁰⁴ One example of Atkins's efforts to form this image was the story of how he obtained his first guitar, by trading two guns inherited from his father for a guitar owned by his stepfather.¹⁰⁵ Such a story shows Atkins's efforts to position himself outside of the hillbilly persona, shedding the stereotype of the hillbilly as some dangerous "other" who was a potential threat to society. The way in which Atkins described the guitar also helps illustrate one of his primary concerns: improving the overall perception of his social class. Atkins writes of the guitar: "It was not a toy. It was life itself to me. I dreamed of someday becoming a great star, though using it to make money never crossed my mind."¹⁰⁶ Thus while Atkins would use music to improve his economic circumstances, it was also of paramount importance to him to gain social acceptance. Furthermore, as Atkins progressed in his career to take on a greater role as a producer he would also take steps in gaining social acceptance for country music as a genre, ushering in a series of changes that would create the Nashville Sound.

The Nashville Sound

Bill Malone traces the origins of the Nashville Sound back to 1954, which "saw the emergence of a new musical force which completely engulfed the other musical

forms, dominated American popular music for several years, and shattered the existing conceptions of what a popular song should be.”¹⁰⁷ What Malone is referring to is the appearance of rock’n’roll on the American musical scene, which symbolized the fusion of white and black musical forms that gained appeal with the growing youth culture in America.¹⁰⁸ While in most cases “crossing over” meant transcending racial boundaries and fusing white and black sounds together, for Chet Atkins, “crossing over” meant crossing class boundaries.

Although the work of Bill Malone helps explain the significance of rock’n’roll as providing a justification for loosening the boundaries between white and black musicians, it alone is not sufficient to explain the emergence of the Nashville Sound. The scholarship of Joli Jensen provides a more complete picture of why the Nashville Sound developed. While in the previous chapter I examined the social conditions of the honky-tonk, explaining how the context of live performance resulted in the honky-tonk sound and liberated the musician from the corporate concerns of the studio, the industry of radio helped restore control of the genre back to the record industries by removing country music from the space of the honky-tonk.

It is within this context that the work of Chet Atkins as a producer becomes important. In the previous chapters I explored how the honky-tonk as an institution catered to rural working-class whites. The artists within the honky-tonk adopted as its themes the frustrations of the white working class in America. However, as noted previously, Atkins defined success not just by economic mobility but also by middle-class acceptance. He described this as moving beyond the pain of his childhood poverty.¹⁰⁹ In developing the Nashville Sound Atkins would play down several markers

of the honky-tonk sound thus downplaying its working-class roots. For Atkins, these roots meant the music of the honky-tonks. Honky-tonk music involved rougher lyrics that spoke of the frustrations experienced by the working class: alcoholism, adultery and failed marriages. However, such topics would have gone against the grain of the nation's middle-class ethos and were abandoned by Atkins who wanted to have country music accepted by the middle-class.

The Nashville Sound can best be described as an effort to smooth over the edges of the honky-tonk sound.¹¹⁰ While these changes involved softening the lyrics of country music, they also affected the instrumentation, as Atkins designed a music that could be called country without being overly reminiscent of the honky-tonk bar. This was accomplished by removing instruments like fiddles and steel guitars and replacing them with “smooth vocal choruses, lush string sections, and the ‘round warm tones’ of hollow-body electric guitars.”¹¹¹ While the introduction of the electric guitar was originally achieved through the honky-tonks, in time artists would begin to experiment with the quality of sound achieved through the instrument.¹¹² For Atkins, this experimentation would be geared towards achieving “purity of tone,” which in turn was part of Atkins’s “easy-listening strategy” to help expand country music’s audience.¹¹³ These strategies were designed to assert the respectability of the country artist “in the face of hillbilly stereotypes.”¹¹⁴

Jim Reeves

A study of Jim Reeves’s career highlights many of the changes made to country during the Nashville Sound era. His career is also worth attention because unlike other artists, Reeves was able to maintain a country identity despite his efforts to broaden his

audience.¹¹⁵ “Oklahoma Hills,” recorded in 1956, features traditional country instrumentation, featuring both a steel guitar and fiddle.¹¹⁶ Yet the song also indicates the transition of country music, as the singing style of Jim Reeves is more indicative of crooning. Crooning of course refers to a softer style of singing designed to create a more personal relationship between the artist and audience. Furthermore, Reeves’s voice contains the faintest hint of a southern accent.

While the singing style of “Oklahoma Hills,” is more in line with what was encouraged during the Nashville Sound era, lyrically the song harkens back to more traditional topics. It is a cowboy song, containing such lyrics as “Way down yonder in the Indian nation/ Riding my pony on the reservation/ In the Oklahoma hills where I was born.”¹¹⁷ Thus while “Oklahoma Hills” was positioned as a traditional song lyrically, it managed to sidestep the issue of the honky-tonk by not referring to it at all. Eddy Arnold’s “Cattle Call,” which sings about such things as the “coyotes... howling,” acts in a similar vein to remain traditional and yet broaden its appeal by recalling older country themes within the music that avoid the honky-tonk.¹¹⁸

By contrast, Jim Reeves’s 1960 release, “He’ll Have to Go,” is firmly entrenched in the style of the Nashville Sound. The crooning is still present, reinforced by such lyrics as “let’s pretend that we’re together, all alone,” that attempt to create a one-on-one relationship between Reeves and the listener.¹¹⁹ “He’ll Have to Go,” also updates the instrumentation by removing the fiddles and steel guitars, as well as adding a lush vocal chorus to accompany Reeves. Thematically, the song deals with the potential for heartache, something not unknown to a honky-tonk listener. However, the song deals with the topic in a completely different fashion. In the song, while the ending of a

relationship is a very real possibility, Reeves maintains confidence that this will not happen, singing “I’ll tell the man to turn the jukebox way down low,/ And you can tell your friend there with you he’ll have to go.”¹²⁰ Furthermore, Reeves’ voice is largely emotionless during the song, containing little of the angst or invective that would be a marker of honky-tonk songs. In fact, other than the reference to the jukebox, there is little indication within the song that the singer is anywhere near a honky-tonk. Thus “He’ll Have to Go,” provided another solution to the problem of the honky-tonk by dealing with the same thematic material while removing the emotional baggage at the same time.

While the developments of the Nashville Sound were often derided during the fifties as selling out, on the Pacific coast another brand of country music was being developed. Unlike the Nashville Sound, it was developed not as a response against the honky-tonk sound, but rather promoted the honky-tonk sound. The Bakersfield Sound, developed by Buck Owens, was marketed as “authentic” country music. However, as will be seen in the next chapter, Buck Owens, like Chet Atkins, is keenly aware of the power that lay in how he marketed himself. In creating the image of the country gentleman, Atkins reinforced the middle-class understanding of the honky-tonk as a working-class space.

Figure Four

“Sam’s Place” lyrics

Buck Owens, *Buck Owens: 21 #1 Hits: The Ultimate Collection*

There's a place down the street we call Sam's Place.
It starts a-jumpin' every evening when the sun goes down.
You can always find me down at Sam's Place,
For that's where the gang all hangs around.

There's ol' Shimmy Shakin' Tina
She hails from Pasadena.
She always got a big smile on her face.
There's Hootch-y-kootchy Hattie, she comes from Cincinnati,
Yeah, there's always a party at Sam's Place.

Well, they've got a swingin' band down at Sam's Place.
You can hear 'em pickin' twenty blocks away.
They're playin' country music down at Sam's Place,
From the setting sun until the break of day.

There's ol' Shimmy Shakin' Tina
She hails from Pasadena.
She always got a big smile on her face.
There's Hootch-y-kootchy Hattie, she comes from Cincinnati,
Yeah, there's always a party at Sam's Place.

Chapter Three

“On the fourteenth day of April
Of nineteen thirty-five
There struck the worst of dust storms
That ever filled the sky.

You could see that dust storm coming
The cloud looked death-like black
And through our mighty nation
It left a dreadful track....

It fell across our city
Like a curtain of black rolled down
We thought it was our judgment
We thought it was our doom.”¹²¹

Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, while the Nashville Sound was being developed a rival form of country music was taking shape across the country on the Pacific Coast. Centered in Bakersfield, this rival took issue with the alterations made by the Nashville Sound, arguing that their country music was “true” country music. Like country music elsewhere in America, Bakersfield country music underwent changes inside the honky-tonk. For these musicians, the honky-tonk music of Bakersfield provided an escape through laughter rather than crying into one’s beer. While the chief architect of this sound was Buck Owens, Bakersfield country was being developed prior to his arrival on the scene. The origins of Bakersfield country can be traced to the Okie migrants who traveled to California over the course of the 1930s in order to escape the poverty of the Great Depression and the drought conditions of the Dust Bowl. This chapter will explore the reality of the Okie migrants over the course of the thirties, examining the social and economic realities they faced in California and how these realities effectively shut

them out of the middle class. Facing an extreme amount of bias unknown to most southern migrants, the Okies were still able to find a sense of community within the honky-tonks. The honky-tonks in turn began the careers of the most well-known Bakersfield acts. While the music of Bakersfield dealt with the same frustrations other honky-tonk musicians dealt with, the artists examined in this chapter dealt with their frustrations using humor. The Maddox Brothers and Rose dealt with these issues by incorporating the sounds of the honky-tonk into their recording and making light of everything including murder. Buck Owens, in "Sam's Place," focuses on the honky-tonk as a site of revelry, rather than a symbol for frustration.

The Dust Bowl and the Okie Migration

During the 1930s, some 550,000 square miles of the United States ranging from Canada to Mexico suffered from drought, including an area of 150,000 square miles containing parts of "western Kansas, eastern Colorado, northern New Mexico, and the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles."¹²² Coined the "Dust Bowl" by Robert Geiger,¹²³ the extreme drought exacerbated economic problems already brought on by the Great Depression. It was during the migrations out of Oklahoma during this period that the image of the Okie was born.

Okie is a term assigned to the host of immigrants entering into California during the 1930s. However, although the term is associated with migrants entering into California from Oklahoma in order to escape Dust Bowl conditions, it should be noted that only 2-3% of migrants from Oklahoma were coming from parts of the state affected by the Dust Bowl.¹²⁴ In actuality, the majority of migrant whites from Oklahoma were "poor white sharecroppers and tenant farmers from the cotton lands in the south and east of the state."¹²⁵ While southwesterners had been entering into California prior to the Dust Bowl, the economic hardships brought on by the Great Depression would have an impact on the way migrants in the 1930s were received.

The San Joaquin Valley

While migrants entering into California prior to the 1930s tended to favor the metropolitan areas of the state, during the 1930s migrants favored non-metropolitan areas, chief among these being the San Joaquin Valley.¹²⁶ Economic prospects however were more limited for migrants favoring the valley over the city, causing many to enter into farm labor.¹²⁷ The menial labor found in the valley often paid less than jobs in the city would have, as the median income for an individual working in the city during 1939 would have been \$1,145 while an individual working on farms during the same period was only \$650.¹²⁸

The economics of living in the San Joaquin valley also affected the living conditions of those new to California. While those migrants moving to cities such as Los Angeles often faced few difficulties in being assimilated by the broader community, those moving to the San Joaquin valley were often forced “into situations that reinforced their ties to one another.”¹²⁹ The Okies turned into an easy target for discrimination based on their isolation from the wider community. Based on the limited economic conditions of the San Joaquin valley, the Okies often had a lower standard of living. The resident Californians often labeled these communities in California “Little Oklahomas” or “Okieville.”¹³⁰ They detested the squalor of these communities and voiced concerns over their sanitary conditions.¹³¹ The Kern County Health Department voiced their concerns:

Bakersfield has experience the creation of new subdivisions almost completely inhabited by people from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Many have purchased lots for as low as \$3 per month; houses have been constructed of any materials that can be salvaged from the alleys or retrieved from dismantled structures in exchange for labor. Some of these communities have no satisfactory water supply, poor sewage disposal, no gas nor electricity...crude often offensive, toilets...threaten to leach their contents into the same strata of sand and subsoil from which comes the water supply.¹³²

In addition to the living conditions of these communities, Okies were often resented due to their willingness to perform farm labor for lower wages than native Californians.¹³³ This problem was

compounded by bitterness over government aid provided to the Okies. Such headlines as “Kern Spends Millions to Take Care of Needy” painted a picture of the Okie as a drain on society.¹³⁴

It was within this social and economic context that Okie stereotype was born. A California radio broadcast from the thirties described the Okie as “often a whole family with bedding, luggage, cooking utensils, and other miscellaneous possessions crowded into a battered and wheezing jalopy.”¹³⁵ John Steinbeck wrote: “Well, Okie use’ ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you’re a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you’re scum. Don’t mean nothing itself, it’s the way they say it.”¹³⁶ In the scholarly work *American Exodus*, James Gregory states:

For several years now “Okies” had been the targets of one ugly slur after another, usually uttered carefully out of earshot. A King City bartender called them “no-good bastards” and refused them service. To a prominent San Joaquin Valley businessman, they were “ignorant filthy people” who should not be allowed to “think they’re as good as the next man!” A Madera County doctor insisted that they were “shiftless trash who live like hogs, no matter how much is done for them,” while a Kern County physician held that they are “a strange people—they don’t seem to know anything. They can’t read at all. There is nothing especially wicked about them—it’s just the way they live. There is such a thing as a breed of people. These people have lived separate for too long, and they are like a different race.”¹³⁷

If the career of Chet Atkins and the development of the Nashville Sound were an attempt to use country music to chart a course towards respectability, the social context of California during the thirties taught a persistent lesson: “You’re not welcome here.” Despite this message of exclusion, Okies, like rural migrants elsewhere in America were able to feel a sense of community within the honky-tonks. However, in Bakersfield the honky-tonk music addressed the experience of prejudice in a different manner than honky-tonks elsewhere in America. Whereas Hank Williams took a confrontational tone against middle-class prejudices in “Mind Your Own Business,” the country music of Bakersfield dealt with such themes using humor instead. This is most evident in the work of the Maddox Brothers and Rose, who often attempted to capture the live sound of the honky-tonk within their recordings, by mimicking the sounds of the bar, including the laughter

and shouts of the crowd. In songs such as “Philadelphia Lawyer,” a cover of Woody Guthrie’s social ballad, such laughter becomes ghoulish, as the song takes shape around the story of a cowboy who kills the lawyer who is sleeping with his wife.¹³⁸

Buck Owens

Buck Owens moved to Bakersfield in 1951 in order to work in the city’s honky-tonks.¹³⁹ Over the course of Owens’s career, the Maddox Brothers and Rose were an important influence—particularly through the use of humor as a coping mechanism.¹⁴⁰ Owens, like Chet Atkins was interested in using country music as a means of overcoming poverty. However, while Chet Atkins used this desire as motivation to completely overhaul the instrumentation and vocal stylings of country music, Owens simply opted to change the subject matter. He chose to ignore themes of hardship, choosing not to focus on what he was before performing country music but rather focusing on what country music had allowed him to become, stating at one point: “those were terrible times. I don’t remember ‘em very good, and I’m glad I don’t.”¹⁴¹

The fact that Buck Owens used country music as a means of escaping poverty indicates a greater amount of complexity to Buck Owens’s development of country music than simply taking a stand against the Nashville Sound. For Chet Atkins, the Nashville Sound was a means of shedding all of the baggage that had been attached to the honky-tonk. The sounds heard and the activities taking place within the honky-tonk were identifiably working-class. The only way to fully rise above working-class roots was to abandon honky-tonk music for the more middle-class Nashville Sound.

However, such changes to the genre had large implications for the artist. The honky-tonk was often the site of journeyman artists. Buck Owens perfected his craft inside the honky-tonk.¹⁴² However, the Nashville Sound shifted the importance away from the honky-tonk towards the recording studio. This brought with it a professionalization of the artist. Country crooning was an example of this. This professionalization led to the use of sessions musicians on recordings.¹⁴³

These were musicians who did not tour but were used to back up artists recording in the studio—as such, they were not limited to any one artist but served on a variety of recordings.¹⁴⁴ The results of these changes have already been shown, as both the vocalists and musicians sound as though they have received professional training.

By contrast, the artists within the Bakersfield Sound come across as having a more elementary musical education. Buck Owens has a rougher voice that does not sound accustomed to crooning like Jim Reeves's voice does. Owens went as far as to satirize the idea of professional training in "Act Naturally" by placing it within the context of the film industry.

Owens sings:

They're gonna put me in the movies
They're gonna make a big star out of me
We'll make a film about a man that's sad and lonely
And all I have to do is act naturally.¹⁴⁵

While the song is making a joke out of Owens's suffering, it also sends the message that formal training is not necessary to form a genuine connection with the audience.

Additionally, the instrumentation of the Bakersfield Sound comes across as rougher than the Nashville Sound. Musicians within the Bakersfield Sound do not achieve the same clarity of tone that their counterparts in the Nashville Sound do. This presents the key difference between the two styles. The artist of the Bakersfield Sound comes across as still being authentic within a honky-tonk context, whereas the professional quality of Nashville Sound recordings sounds out of place within the honky-tonk.

Owens was in favor of broadening country's audience but maintaining the honky-tonk sound in getting there. A mural commissioned by Owens illustrated his goal for country music as "an Okie jalopy with a mattress strapped to the top...catches the eye in the left-hand corner; familiar figures from the Bakersfield music community follow; as the eye travels upward and to the right, Owens and the Buckaroos tower over the Bakersfield crowd; the mural culminates in

scenes of global glory such as the Sydney Opera House.”¹⁴⁶ This mural represented Owens’s strategy when it came to country music. While he attempted to stay true to the honky-tonk sound, he was not opposed to bringing that sound to new places, playing at venues such as, Carnegie Hall, Kosei Nenkin Hall in Tokyo and the London Palladium.¹⁴⁷

Especially during the 1960s, when country music recording was being consolidated in Nashville, Owens hitched his horse to the issue of authenticity, going as far as to make a pledge to his audience that he would record no song that was not a country song.¹⁴⁸ What is central to understanding Owens’s ideas of authenticity is how he locates authentic country music within the honky-tonk. This is the key difference that separates Owens from Chet Atkins, whose work within the Nashville Sound saw the honky-tonk as a barrier to middle-class acceptance. While the Nashville Sound changed the musical styles of honky-tonk country music, it still maintained its own position of authenticity, primarily by side-stepping the honky-tonk and recalling earlier pastoral themes within country music, such as those heard in Jim Reeve’s “Oklahoma Hills” and Eddy Arnold’s “Cattle Call.”

“Sam’s Place”

Released in 1967, Buck Owens’s “Sam’s Place,” embodies much of the complexity to be found in the Bakersfield Sound. As Barbara Ching notes, although the song is about a “real honky-tonk in Richmond, California, it doesn’t use the word ‘honky-tonk,’ and it says nothing about alcohol.”¹⁴⁹ Rather, “Sam’s Place” focuses on the honky-tonk as a site of fun and excitement without focusing on the potential pitfalls. It states that the honky-tonk “starts a-jumpin’ every evening when the sun goes down” and says “they’ve got a swinging band down at Sam’s Place.”¹⁵⁰ Both lines deal with the honky-tonk as a place where one can escape the stresses of everyday life. However, the song also avoids the potential troubles that accompany honky-tonking, such as excessive drinking. This is due probably to Owens’s own views on the honky-tonk experience, as he appreciated the money he received for live performance, but

criticized the activities of the place, stating: “Damn fools. I saw people get drunk, get out of control, and spend their week’s pay in one night...I saw people’s lives break apart, wives go crazy, men go nuts...I always looked at it that it’s better if they do it where I’m playing than down the street where somebody else as singing.”¹⁵¹ And while the song introduces women into the honky-tonk, it does not focus on them as being threatening to the marriages of men; rather Owens sings:

There’s old shimmy shaking Tina
She hails from Pasadena.
She always got a big smile on her face.
There’s hootch-y-kootchy Hattie, she comes from Cincinnati
Yeah, there’s always a party at Sam’s Place.¹⁵²

Musically, the song also defies the conventions of the Nashville Sound. It does not strive for the same sort of urbane sophistication so important to Chet Atkins. Rather, the music of the song mirrors the fun of the honky-tonk voiced in the lyrics, adding to the complexity of the Bakersfield Sound. While the electric guitar in the song is not played in the same manner as a Nashville guitarist would play it—as it sounds more accustomed to rock’n’roll than the jazz-inspired guitar of the Nashville Sound—it also sounds markedly different from the honky-tonk sound of the thirties. However, Owens is able to position these guitar riffs as country by singing “they’re playing country music down at Sam’s Place,” reminding the listener of the real life location that served as the inspiration for this song.¹⁵³

Buck Owens, while making changes to the honky-tonk sound, positioned himself as remaining true to that sound by setting himself up against the Nashville Sound. Much as the original honky-tonk sound developed as a result of the music becoming liberated from the constraints of record producing through the live performance context of the bar, Owens was able to become the rebel standing outside of the Nashville establishment by aligning himself with the working-class audience who frequented the honky-tonks. In this manner, the Bakersfield Sound

arrived at complicated conclusions for its audience. In positioning himself as remaining true to the honky-tonk sound, Owens established that sound as working-class. Like Chet Atkins, Owens favored social advancement, but unlike Atkins, Owens did not see the necessity of completely abandoning the honky-tonk sound in getting there.

Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis I have examined the ways in which the idea of place sheds further insight into our understanding of country music's relationship with class. From its roots as hillbilly music, when country was produced, recorded and directed towards a rural audience, it was an art form that maintained the superiority of an urban middle class over a rural working class. Spaces such as the Grand Ole Opry were areas where the middle class maintained this dominance by controlling what the artists could and could not do. Country music's entry into the honky-tonk however provided a venue in which the working class could express more control over their music. Here the music spoke to the pressures of being working class, evoking the pains of poverty, adultery and alcoholism. In the honky-tonks, the artists could be more than caricatures created by producers. Here they could be real people speaking to real issues.

While honky-tonk music provided an expression of working-class culture, like the patrons who listened to it inside the honky-tonks, it too was forced to suppress its particularist aspects when it exited the honky-tonk. In the examination of the Nashville Sound, I showed how these changes affected everything from the music's thematic material and instrumentation to the singing style itself. The nature of the recording studio changed the entire context in which country music was performed. No longer did the artist have the immediate feedback of a live audience. Now the performance was for a record producer who stressed professionalism in country music recording. An artist with blue-collar roots became a white-collar employee upon entering the Nashville recording studio. All of this was done in a manner to win middle-class acceptance for the music, despite being criticized as selling out. The Bakersfield Sound, while

attempting to maintain much of the honky-tonk instrumentation, made its own changes to the honky-tonk style, by downplaying some of the rougher themes of the music, and by dealing with working-class frustrations through the vein of laughter. The Bakersfield Sound attempted to maintain its authenticity to the genre by maintaining the authenticity of the artist, downplaying the sense of professionalism that was a marker of the Nashville Sound. Both the Bakersfield and Nashville Sounds validated the reading of the honky-tonk as working-class.

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- ¹⁵² Owens, "Sam's Place."
- ¹⁵³ Owens, "Sam's Place."