To Utopianize the Mundane: Sound and Image in Country Musicals

Siyuan Ma

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To Utopianize the Mundane:

Sound and Image in Country Musicals

by

(Max) Siyuan Ma

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a concentration in Film and New Media Studies College of Arts and Sciences University of South Florida

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Dedication

To Judy Seale, Phil and Elisabeth Pearson, Eddie Heinzelman, and those who offered me thoughts and reflections on country music in music stores and banjo shops in Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania.

Yo-Yo Ma, and those who care about music and culture and encourage humanistic thinking, feeling and expressing.

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Abstract

Many consider music, songs, and dance performance as utopian signifiers for cinema, but few has entered the utopian discourse of country musicals, a small genre of cinema usually known as country music films. By closely scrutinizing *Pure Country* (1992), this thesis aims to reveal how country music—as music numbers and as background cues—integrate and connect the fragmented on-screen world for the country musicals so as to offer audiences a fullness of utopian experience, and how this utopian effect are culturally significant for American audiences due to country music’s unique mechanism of constructing utopia and nostalgia in its past-orientations, sentimentalities, and alleged authenticities. I argue because of the American country music’s internal need for utopia as an individual and social agent, *Pure Country*, as well as the neo-traditionalism country music defined by *Pure Country*, reconciles the pop and the old time country music, and also conciliates the tension expressed in such music tastes between the rural and urban communities. This reconciliation makes *Pure Country* a not so perfect cinematic text for documenting country music’s authenticity and origin, but fully and clearly reflects the utopian meaning of country music on an individual and social level.
Country Music and Musicals as Utopian Arts

When country music encounters cinema, a sub-genre of Hollywood musical film comes into being, the country musical. Being part of a larger field of pop music biopics and other related music films, the country musical, along with rock/jazz/hip-hop musicals, fills the gap that existed in the field of the late 20th century film musicals by providing a non-Broadway fashioned dance and music to its domestic and global viewers. Mainstream film musicals such as Singin’ in the Rain (1952), formally developed from stage musical and celebrating Broadway conventions, are aesthetically different from those film musicals including 8 Mile (2002, a Eminem biopic), Ray (2004, a Ray Charles biopic), Walk the Line (2005, a Johnny Cash and June Carter biopic), Notorious (2009, a Biggie Smalls biopic), etc. These films provide a different side of American culture, and the country musical in particular, portrays the music activities occurring at Appalachian farms, spectacle concerts, honky tonk bars, rural living rooms, front porches, and so on. Although mainstream musicals and pop music musicals can be fully justified by film theorist Barry Grant’s definition to film musical, (“those films that involve the performance of song and/or dance by the main characters and also include singing and/or dancing as an important element,”1) both types have distinct forms, themes and ways in integrating music numbers within narratives. By shaking off tap dance, Tin Pan Alley tune singing, and other Broadway conventions, the country musical detaches itself from the mainstream musicals, and exhibits the popular culture associated with mountains, farms,

cowboys, and mostly, country musicians/singers/songwriters. By focusing on the lower position of the American socio-cultural hierarchy,\(^2\) country musicals depict the daily lives of the rugged, rustic, and struggling singers, songwriters, and audiences and how music is expressed in their lives. Therefore, the disparity in forms, themes and aesthetics of mainstream musical and the country musical leads us into a richer field for discussing music as well as its performance in films.

Following sociologist and philosopher Richard Shusterman who coined the term “country musical” in 1999, this sub-genre is an important and under-investigated way to understand certain strands of American cultural politics, especially those surrounding ideas of place and class. He also put,

> Some philosophically interesting issues and intriguing doctrines about human nation, emotion, belief, and authenticity… become especially clear in this film genre generated by country’s great commercial success.\(^3\)

Likewise, Barbara Ching, a cultural studies scholar, despite not employing the term country musical, also enters into these cultural politics\(^4\) by analyzing four “country music films” and their representations of authenticity. A valuable starting point, set by both scholars to combine country music with its cinematic texts, encourages popular music scholars and film musicologists into a wealthy path to reconsider some key notions in country music culture and also to decipher the myths, hopes, and fears of contemporary society. Despite the recent growth of country music scholarship, it is safe to say that the literature on the country musical is


insufficient, and this thesis intends to focus on the form, theme, meaning, and aesthetics reflected in country music’s cinematic expressions.

Starting with the examine on the debate on country music’s arena of authenticity, this thesis centrally aims to argue the perceptible authenticity contributes in building the utopian aspect of country music culture by linking the individuals to a more profound imaginative image in the daily realistic and modern environment, and a harmonious, collective, and Confucius-savored social relationship generated by country music exemplifies a utopian community due to its converting of the personal and individual hardships and traumas into a nostalgic group concern for the working class Americans. Shortly put, this thesis is about how country music and country musicals idealize the daily experiences exposed in an American mode of life. After analyzing how country music intensifies the daily mundane in its music, films, and philosophy in Chapter 1 and 2, this thesis, in Chapter 3, will analyze how the country musical *Pure Country* (1992) is a clear illustration of country music’s utopian signifier to nostalgia, hope, and perfection. To focus on *Pure Country*, like many other country music scholarships did, is due to the fact that *Pure Country* reflected multiple concerns and issues of the early 1990s country dynamics such as the rock/pop influenced concert tendency, transitional music tastes, and the controversial authenticity, and the way *Pure Country* responded to these issues clearly aims for a state in which everything is perfectly worked out, and thus, turns out to be utopian.

I also argue country music blurs the boundary between American individuality and collectivity. Although country politics proudly proclaims individuality, the fact that tradition is highly emphasized in country music lyrics, monologues, and interviews introduces country’s internal and heavy dependence upon its cultural community and collectivism. Furthermore, country music’s collectivity supports its utopia, for utopia, as an ideal vision for a better, perfect
world, is grounded in social relationships. Specifically, when the lyrics express individual nostalgia about the mundane and constant occurrences in daily American life, which inherently call for mutual and collective recognition and empathy, what is reinforced is the relationships between individuals and the homecoming places, individuals and the long-lost past, and individuals and other individuals. By the personal experiences being centered and intensified in the nostalgic atmosphere generated by country music, and shared among its community, the boundary of private life and public life could be blurred, so that personal conflicts and anxieties engendered in the context of American modernity can be defused, and thus, an American identity can be idealized by the music in which “twin fiddles and a steel guitar sounding the American heart.”

**History and Forms of the Country Musical**

Western music and Appalachian music, two predecessor forms of country music, accompanied early films such as *In Old Santa Fe* (1934), *Oh, Susanna!* (1936 film), *Red River Valley* (1941), etc., and successfully anchored our understanding to the American background with its musical creation of the Western and the Southern atmosphere. However, the country musicals are neither Western films featuring a John Wayne character nor singing cowboy films like Gene Autry’s or Roy Rogers’, but based on Shusterman, films “about people deeply involved in contemporary country music culture, either as established or aspiring performers or songwriters or consumers,” including,


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5 Shusterman, “Moving Truth,” 221.

Even though country music, as a commercial and historical result of its preceding roots such as hillbilly, western, and Appalachian songs, is supposed to be rich in its diversity and localness, the pursuit for more record sales and ideological representations makes country music sort of marginalize its roots. Therefore only a small range of films can be fit into the category of the country musical: those either directly depict the ongoing style, fashions, things, and thoughts in contemporary country music industry, or portray the individuals exposed in country music culture. According to the foregoing generic claim, even though The Electric Horseman (1979) integrates five country songs into its narratives including the iconic “My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys” and “Mama Don’t Let Your Baby Grow up to Be Cowboys” written by country music legend Willie Nelson, who is also in the cast of the film, it is generically excluded by Shusterman’s definition, because neither the focal point of the narrative is music (or Willie Nelson), or the levels of narration is connected by music sequences. Simply put, it is not fundamentally a film about country music. Meanwhile, many other recent films concentrate on country music itself either by integrating multiple musical numbers into the narratives or by directly portraying real life or fictional musicians in the country music industry. In that light, I would suggest to extend Shusterman’s list by adding at least Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story (2007), Crazy Heart (2009), O Brother, Where Art Thou? (2000), Walk the Line (2004), The Broken Circle Breakdown (a 2012 film produced in Belgium), and a biopic of a Japanese country

⁶ Ibid., 221.
artist Tomi Fujiyama *Made in Japan* (2015) to this small genre of films because of their obvious approach to country music culture.

Dance is important to almost all genres of musicals. However, barn dances, square dances, or line dances in country musicals, are essentially different from tap dances in classical Hollywood musicals. According to Peter Cuomo, from the standpoint of the ruling ideology, tap dance (specifically in Broadway conventions and Hollywood mainstream musicals) exists for the purpose of demonstrating individual flexibility, and individual flexibility exists for the purpose of signifying a correspondent value in the highly-populated and diversified cosmopolitan urban settings. This value better solves the issues, fears, and crisis engendered in the sophisticated and modernized environments, just as Donald (Gene Kelly)’s flexible method of dubbing Lina (Jean Hagen)’s grating voice with Kathy (Debbie Reynolds)’s silvery voice for his first Hollywood musical in *Singin’ in the Rain*. While barn dancing, as displayed in country musicals, mostly occurs for emphasizing collective participation in a rural setting to signify community. The form of barn dance is the participants executing the choreographed steps at the same time in a barn, or in the form of line/square dance in a local honky tonk bar, so that the social function of this dance as a nonverbal communication is highlighted in country musicals for the creation of a vibrant community.

Although the country musicals, being an expression of some certain aspects of American culture, is well noted for its embodying a strong sense of individuality on many characters, the appearance of barn dance otherwise leaks an underlying emphasis on community and collectivism. The collectivism manifests itself to some degree as a balance to the heavy burden of individualism with a comforting belongingness to the collective community activities. In

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country musicals, we seldom see a barn dance participant be individually highlighted as a
performer, singer, or musician, because obviously enough, performing the choreographed steps
while holding a guitar would seem impractical (arguably Elvis is another case). But I contend the
collective barn dance sequences exist as a symbol for country music’s internal emphasis on
community, because country music is highly dependent on the mutual and communal
understanding to a certain logic of being pure and country in its lyrics, language, and mechanism.
This notion will be elaborated in details in the following sections.

As mentioned, the characters in mainstream musicals reveal a high degree of flexibility
while the characters in country musicals present no such intention. The tap dance performance in
Singin’ in the Rain (1952) is displayed by Donald Lockwood (Gene Kelly) not only on stage but
also in street, office, studio, living room, with guitar, violin, chair, curtain, and even umbrella
functioning — as flexible as it can be — as unsounded accessories. The enhanced flexibility
illustrated in tap dance’s bodily movement and performance style, as noted by film theorist
Richard Dyer, contributes for film musicals, one of the purest forms of onscreen entertainment in
creating an escapist utopian sensibility as a temporary answer to the inadequacies and
inflexibleness of society.8 Don Lockwood, being a gregarious entertainer, is in fact an
ambassador for a utopian slogan “being optimistic in adversity” (as its title Singin’ in the Rain
indicates) through the flexibility in his dance and the solutions he devises to his urban
Hollywood career crisis.

Dissimilarly, the characters in country musicals discard flexibility, improvisation, and hyper
intricacy in their dances or songs, instead, they come into our view as lonesome and struggling

songwriters, most of the time being tough, hard, and stubborn.9 Instead of being a conformist to the American sociocultural reality and mainstream entertainments, they present an oppositional attitude by bottling up emotions in reality and expressing the emotions through their lyrics and singings. In other words, they demonstrate a sense of individuality in daily lives, yet in songs, they are conformists to a certain politics of their culture, longing for the understanding of people from the same pond. Take Dann in Payday (1972) and “the Bad Blake” in Crazy Heart (2009) for example; in spite of their overdeveloped egos stubbornly doing everything in their own way and constantly causing dramas, they sensibly articulate their motives, characteristics and experiences in writing and singing songs. As a result, they “live(d) every line of their lyrics,”10 which indicates a sense of authenticity and a lyrical orientation towards the past.11 From the viewpoint of community, all these issues and signifiers including authenticity, past orientation, good ol’ days, and emotional sentimentality, connect country performers with their (past) communities by presenting an ostensive individuality while confirming a deep-seated presumption of the past, tradition, and community.

Many of the semiotic elements of country music, including cowboy hats, boots, bars, dirty roads, getting drunk, etc., signify a working class identity, individuality, and masculinity, and also create a collision between the community of country and the rest of the world. It may seem

9 Barbara Ching also made this observation in her Wrong’s What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture (2001), and also claimed the purpose of singing hardness, struggling, and failure in country music is to live up to the American standards of affluence.
paradoxical that on the one hand, many of the generic elements signify an American individuality, and on the other hand, they simultaneously signify a cultural community and collectivism. However as I will fully analyze later, since community is the fundamental form of a social utopian, it is the community, a “greater collective entity, to which the individual could relate emotionally,”12 that in part resolves the affliction brought by individuality which took place in the American modernity context. And country music is largely responsible for co-creating and maintaining that community in its contributing role for enhancing the continuity and stability of the ideological utopia of America.

Historically, country music has connected with the Western clothes and behaviors since at least 1930s, “when the singers dress cowboy and sing country.”13 These elements frequently appear and develop in its lyrics, its performances, and then after mid nineteenth century, in its films. Pure Country (1992) uses boots, specifically a pair of working class boots to demonstrate the character’s willingness to return to his “roots”: when the country music star Dusty (George Strait) begins his self-exile journey in a rural place for searching the lost purity of playing country music, one of the first things he does as we see in the film, is to exchange his fancy boots with a local truck driver’s working class boots. Cowboy hats are omnipresent in country musicals, and they usually signify a real country identity and a sense of masculinity. In Coal Miner’s Daughter (1980), a cowboy hat is used to signify the character’s identity as husband and manager: when Loretta Lynn (Sissy Spacek) is unsatisfied with the way her husband Mooney (Tommy Lee Jones) responds towards her desire for more publicity, she throws Mooney’s cowboy hat out of Patsy Cline’s car and leave her husband in the street by himself. The close-up

of his cowboy hat thrown on the ground hence signifies Mooney’s manhood identity as Loretta’s manager and husband, is marginalized in their relationship, and also subtly reveals Mooney’s lonesomeness, unyieldingness, and the “broken heart” to his wife Loretta’s rising fame and ambition to set foot in the upper class community.

Many country musicals take place within the basic frameworks that correspond to the dual setting of a cowboy life: on the one hand, the household and village on the other, the open road. Although to be “On the Road again,” as the title of a hit song written by Willie Nelson advocates, embodies an impulse of adventure and aspiration of cowboys and a pioneering spirit of America, the road is always homeward bound in country musicals back to the farms, the mountains, and the South, “where habits are strong and memories are long.”14 For example, even though the opening scene of Urban Cowboy (1980) depicts an image of a folksy Texan family and locality which the main character Bud (John Travolta) is excited to leave, it is nonetheless the same place which the gradually urbanized Bud nostalgically longs to return and “to buy some land” in the latter half of the narrative after Bud experiencing some tragicomic dramas (bar fights, marital troubles, bull riding contest), and putting an end to his affair with a urbanite girl (whose family own huge fortunes and property in steel industry). It appears that the ostensively urbanized cowboy Bud still yearns for the small things of the rural South which Urban Cowboy portrays in its opening scene: a southern-accented family; a traditional valued mother and a harping sister; gravy, biscuits, field peas mentioned in the dialogue; cowboy hat, jeans, truck, tractors, and a wide area of farmland. Thus it is the unsophisticated and unaffected side of the South that is really highlighted in the narratology of Urban Cowboy. In Pure Country (1992), it is a journey in a rural and yet idyllic town that wakes up the artistry zeal for Dusty (George

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Strait), an always on the road country music star, and inspires the theme song “I Cross My Heart” performed in the last musical number. The fact indicated by the narrative that “I Cross My Heart”, being the only musical number written from Dusty’s ranch-coming experience, is the final solution to his double crisis of romance and career, hints to its audiences that, to write a “pure”, and “country” song requires a certain connection with the root community that originates the alleged authentic country music.

Working-class identity is vital to country music, and is usually reflected in the country musical biopics. Almost all the biopics tend to focus on the humble-rooted side of country stars. *In Coal Miner’s Daughter* (1980), the country music singer Loretta Lynn (Sissy Spacek) — a girl from an extremely impoverished family, marries at the age of 15, being a mother of 4 children at 19 years old — writes songs when doing farm work, sewing, or breast feeding. Before tasting the euphoria surrounding her rising fame, Lynn is soon hit by a nervous breakdown due to extensive touring, marital discord, and a sudden death of her close friend Patsy Cline. And even the title of the film implies Loretta’s humble origin from a working-class family. In *Sweet Dreams* (1985), country music legend Patsy Cline (Jessica Lange) starts her singing career from some small-time gigs in the tri-state nowhere area consisting of Virginia, West Virginia and Maryland. After she leaves her first unhappy marriage, the second marriage turns out troublesome too: she gives up on her singing career to focus on raising her children due to her husband’s drafted into the U.S Army; then she has to deal with her husband’s domestic violence and cheating during her stardom. Despite her legendary position in country music culture, her success on stage seems not to be the focal point in the narrative but her traumatic identity as a victim of her husband’s aggressive chauvinism is.
This cognitive linking of country music with the South, “rurality,” the US and even the “whites” is traditionally regarded as justified, but in recent years, is seen questionable because of the foreign approach towards this music genre reflected in the non-American films. *The Broken Circle Breakdown*, a 2012 Belgian film, employs a great amount of bluegrass music to accompany an extremely melancholy story (a couple lose their child due to cancer) set in a small town in Europe. The tragic visual space distances and challenges the audio space created by the bright, happy tunes of country music in the whole narratology, which invites its viewers into a cinematic experience full of tensions and contradictions, and therefore develops an external relation of country music to the world cinema. In the case of *The Broken Circle Breakdown*, country music does not signify a locality, a group of people, or a nationality, but contributes in pushing the audiences to question and explore the universal concerns of life, fate, and death of human experience and therefore equally resonates among the American audiences and global audiences. This film, then, along with other non-American country musicals and those real-life non-American country musicians, challenges a claim of George Strait’s line in *Pure Country* (1992): can country music sound a non-American’s heart? Barbara Ching pointed out the dilemma of country music’s belongingness in her *Wrong’s What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* that, on the one hand there is “so much writing about country music insists that it presents the life of ordinary yet exotic people: not us, [on the other hand,] at the other extreme lies a bland insistence that the music represents us all.”15 She then propose more attention upon this genre from academic works and also from fans understanding this genre in an otherwise way. This following sections of this thesis attempt to be a confirmation and

continuation on Barbara Ching’s proposal by exploring the reason of country music’s domestic popularity and global influence with a central focus on language, community, and utopia.

**Country Music and Country Musicals: Interrelation and Function**

Country music and the country musical have been mutually referencing, reflecting, and popularizing each other. Films invite public attention to country music by reproducing the little-known stories behind the music industry, reflecting the decadal social changes reflected in music, challenging or restoring notions and representations, and thus to some degree develop and re-shape our understanding to country music. For Hollywood musicals, country music provides a different aspect of American culture and its music expression to the Broadway-influenced musical tradition, gives birth to a series of classic soundtracks, and creates a special filmic effect with the sound of country music and the image of an American life.

Country music’s historical success attracted Hollywood in marketing its films with country’s popular tunes and figures. Despite its predecessor hillbilly songs’ early history of accompanying Western films since 1910s, country music began to appear in films as a “leading character” in 1960s, with a background of Hollywood facing industrial shocks since mid-century brought by the Paramount Case, the advent of television, and the younger generation of viewership. To deal with those shocks, Hollywood began to embrace popular music not only because the “1960s exponentially expanded” pop songs can contribute in re-popularizing Hollywood films, but also due to the realization of the function of songs to film’s narratology, as it can “draw an audience’s conscious attention more directly than background music and thus

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16 Aka, the Hollywood Antitrust Case of 1948.
establish meaning more quickly and efficiently...and [songs] have access to language, specifically lyrics, which can be a very explicit means of transmitting meaning.”

The lyrical content usually provides a verbal description to the characters’ inner monologue for its audiences to know what they are thinking or feeling, hence indicating and developing the narrative progression.

For example, in *Urban Cowboy*, as Bud’s truck leaves from his hometown in a crane shot with a fast-paced background country song “Hello Texas” cutting in, the local cowboy’s euphoria of leaving this village for Pasadena, a heavily industrialized city to the eastern side of Houston is lyrically portrayed and emotionally boosted by the liveliness and ebullience embodied in the fast-paced rhythm. “Hello Texas” viscerally provides insight into the character’s excitement with its lyric,

Hello Texas, sure is good to see you again.
Hello Texas sure is good to see me a friend...
A part of my heart, somewhere in the lone star state

To sum up country music’s functions to films in this case by borrowing Kathryn Kalinak’s thorough overview of film music, we can conclude that “Hello Texas” is an indicator and occupier of the narrative space: it establishes a setting of the South, and clarifies a rural, working class identity. In conjunction with the fast-paced cinematic images of urban sceneries along the highway, “Hello Texas” serves as an expressionist tool in demonstrating Bud’s excitement of hitting the open road and going to the unknown urban journey.

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18 Ibid., 87.
19 Kalinak, *Film Music*, 1.
Songs not only have access to language, but also access to timbre, harmony, and guitar artistry: the heavy employment of major chords for harmony\textsuperscript{20} would help building the emotionally delighted, ecstatic atmosphere\textsuperscript{21} for narratives, the extra notes added in the guitar accompaniment can present an artistic individuality, and the cracked and rough voice can signify authenticity and struggling. The song “Man of Constant Sorrow”, for instance, despite its many different melodies, rewrites, and iterations, is played in \textit{O Brother Where Art Thou} (2000) in major keys (chords E, B, and A) along with a festive stage performance, to which the audiences yell, clap, and dance when hearing this song. The diegesis of this music number is more or less altered by the tonal brightness distancing its audiences from the lyrical “sorrow” about how a wandering rambler breaks up with his memory, hometown, and love.

In another case, although the musical number “The King of Broken Hearts” does not sound broken hearted in a bucolic sequence from \textit{Pure Country} (1992) at the first glance due to its major keys, under a closer view, one would find this number full of presentations other than just being happy and positive in the face of adversity. Dusty (George Strait)’s vocal roughness and frequent cracked voice are an expressive gesture of struggling, which could be associated with Dusty’s flounder, lonesomeness, and trauma from the previous plots. Also, the fact that “The King of Broken Hearts” ends in a blues gesture indicates black music’s influence on country music, and at the same time reinforces Dusty’s inner struggle, for blues is known for singing about sorrows and discomforts.

Mutually, by showcasing country songs, films become a marketing device for popularizing country music as well. Sometimes the plots of a country musical are forgettable for audiences while the original soundtrack gets incongruously memorable over time, such as “I will always Love You” sung by Dolly Paton in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1982) and the recent *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) soundtrack which won several crucial awards.\(^2^2\) By restoring a historical context, most country musicals would cinematize to its audiences the origin and developments of country music, and at the same time highlight the musicians’ guitar artistry, vocal character, and performing style. Their songs, being written and performed within the narrative, hence indicate to its audiences that, a “real” country song is a musical result of “authentic” experiences (usually tough, struggling or sad experiences), emotions and sentimentalities. In this light, the country musicals, serving as a lengthy music video with multiple music sequences, no matter of its approach to country music as critical, self-reflexive, or complimentary, objectively speaking can be used and viewed as a marketing device intended to promote the sale of music recordings.

The country musical at times closely reflects the social-cultural changes of the United States, and sometimes predicts the re-popularization of country music. For example, when Dusty (George Strait) shears his stardom ponytail in *Pure Country*, he not only separates himself from the popularized spectacle trend emerging in country music, but also as Barbara Ching noted, eliminates the last “vestige of the counterculture.”\(^2^3\) Dusty’s attitude reflects “many of the conservative ideals that were just beginning to surface in American life in nineties.”\(^2^4\) *Pure Country* \(^2^2\) including the Grammy Award for Album of the Year in 2002, the Grammy Award for Best Country Collaboration with Vocals, and the Grammy Award for Best Male Country Vocal Performance for "O, Death" by Ralph Stanley. \(^2^3\) Ching, *Sounding the American Heart*, 220. \(^2^4\) Bruce Feiler, *Dreaming Out Loud: Garth Brooks, Wynonna Judd, Wade Hayes, and the Changing Face of Nashville* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 38.
Country thereby proclaimed a turnaround of the public appreciation towards country music. Noted by journalist Bruce Feiler, “by 1993, 42 percent of Americans were listening to country radio every week, twice the number of a decade earlier.”\textsuperscript{25} And also drawn from many data by Shusterman, the country music radio stations in the United States has rocketed from 2200 in 1992 to 2600 at the end of 1996.\textsuperscript{26} In addition, the soundtrack album of Pure Country performed by George Strait is regarded by critics and enthusiastic fans as neo-traditionalism country music, which spearheaded the development of country music in the 1990s and maintain mainstream popularity in the mid-2010s.

The Country Musical as a Utopian Form

When the country musical unfolds its narrative with the sound of country music and the image of an American life, it utopianizes the cinematic experience and even the reality for audiences. When summarizing music’s ideological function in film, Caryl Flinn noted,

Music offers an impression of perfection and integrity in an otherwise imperfect and unintegrated world…Music offers listeners a fullness of experience…an ability to return…to better, allegedly more ‘perfect’ times and memories.\textsuperscript{27}

According to this argument, Kathryn Kalinak added,

Film scores transport listeners from the technological and fragmented experience of a postindustrial capitalism and its mechanically reproduced art forms to an idealized past of wholeness…Film music always carries with it traces of plenitude, wrapping film content in a kind of nostalgia and making us desire what the film offers. In the process we become less critical of a film’s values and value judgements.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{26} This information is based on figures drawn from Richard Shusterman, “Moving Truth,” 222.
\textsuperscript{28} Kalinak, Film Music, 27.
Especially in country musicals, when country songs, appearing as film scores or musical numbers, are themselves nostalgic, past-oriented, and emotionally expressive, the utopian effect is more substantial than that from other musicals and films. Because on the one hand, the frequent appearance of country music in country musicals give a great amount of chances for music to integrate and connect the fragmented on-screen world so as to “offers listeners a fullness of experience,” on the other hand, country music and country musicals are more concerned with the realistic description of daily life, which not only gives audiences a more visceral identification with the on-screen worlds, but also leads to the utopian effects more associated with reality, instead of an animated world, a remotely future world, or even a religious heaven vision. We do not include Disney films such as Barnyard (2006) into the country musical, although Barnyard has many country songs sung by standard nasal voices on a farm. Because an underlying assumption of our perception of the country musical and country music is that it has to be about reality: either it is a real story, or it is based on a real story. In other words, the more real, authentic, or true the plots appear, the more utopian effect the country musical can offer.

In a recent article Johan Siebers articulates the utopian effect between sound and image,

> Not just subjective emotion, but also the whole reality becomes music and is expressed from its musical, read utopian, core as a longing and a hope for an identity between objective and subjective, the human and the world—a longing for the world at home. Music points in the direction of what is not yet in its ultimate space...[and] the utopian is encountered in the gap between sound and image.

In other words, when we watch film, what moves us is film’s ability to utopianize the reality by having music directing our consciousness in understanding the on-screen reality. From that sense, all genres of film musical can be a clear illustration of film’s cinematic utopia. The Hollywood mainstream musicals not only provide a “temporary pleasure” entertainment of
singing and dancing, but also offers a utopianized filter to understand the hardships in urban and Broadway reality. Just as indicated by the name *Singin’ in the Rain*, a title itself demonstrates the importance of a physical act of singing means in the face of adversity. Likewise, the country musical, from another approach, utopianizes the American sociocultural reality by having tons of country music guiding and dominating our understanding of the on-screen stories. Most musical numbers, being micro-music television videos intervening in country musicals, generates fragmented frames into a wholesome felt reality by having music linking these frames with continuity. A country song could be sad, mournful, prayerful, struggling, and can also be happy, accelerating, and vigorous. These emotional ingredients bring us into the cinematic experience when we watch a country musical, and “bring a smile on your face, and a tear to your eye,”29 and make the audiences open to the diegesis of a country story and community, a utopianized world.

Barbara Ching concluded Roger Angell and several other critics’ reviews upon *Coal Miner’s Daughter*,

*Coal Miner's Daughter* didn’t make me feel exactly patriotic, but I did realize somewhere in the middle of it that an Oxford don or Castilian winemaker would probably not share the joy I felt while watching Sissy Spacek astride a mule on a steep, wintry-looking Kentucky hillside...or when I saw the fringed, shiny-white, narrow cut satin cowboy shirts worn by the backup guitar-pickers at the Ryman Auditorium....A possessive, homebred pleasure comes to you often when you see this movie, and you smile in the dark, almost embarrassed because you have been affected so simply. 30

In other words, films like *Coal Miner’s Daughter* could affect audiences with an overwhelming perfection moment by intensifying some common, daily, and imperfect American reality. Even though the American reality can be very non-utopian, the individual sharing and collective empathy in country music culture nonetheless makes the daily and mundane experiences a source of affection and nostalgia. In addition, the country music stars’ rags-to-riches saga pattern

is a standard utopian signifier of realizing an American dream. Therefore *Coal Miner’s Daughter* “means a lot to me (Stanley Kauffmann, an American film critic)…with its strain to be an All-American metaphor.”

Those country musicals featuring fictional characters reflect country music’s mechanism of utopia as well. Even though the characters are fictional, the stories always focus on the realistic aspect of American experiences, and utopianily hints that all the hardships would finally work out someday. And when people retrospectively look back to their tough years in country music’s nostalgia, the hardships turn out to be no more than a temporary obstacle on the path towards today’s “all worked out” statement. Therefore, assuming this understanding, country music sings sadness with, as a matter of fact, a sense of pleasure. Although audiences in different moods or from different backgrounds may have differing understanding of whether country music sounds happy, or sad — given some may see it as a happy genre for its abundant major keys, and others may label it a sad genre for its blues gesture and struggling signifiers — country music offers a utopian meaning to the subjects its lyrics depict. No matter the subjects are surrounded by identities like a singer, a husband, a wife, a mother, a manager, a fan, a working class salaryman, an American dream realizer, or simply an American citizen, for audiences, to listen to country music is to have a journey to search for the utopian meanings of daily experiences. The country musical *Pure Country* clearly summarizes many of the themes of my thesis, and I would mainly detail it in chapter 3 by illustrating how *Pure Country* provides a utopian journey of country music.

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Authenticity and Community in Country Music and the Country Musical

A frequent line in country musicals, specifically as a provocative greeting between strangers is “Hey, are you a real cowboy?” To respond, one needs to do something “real country” by either knowing the compulsory knowledge on country communities or undertaking an act with a certain internal logic. Bud in Urban Cowboy (1980) proves his country professionalism to the honky tonk girl Sissy by dancing “two-steps” with her, and Charlie in Sweet Dreams (1985), despite being rejected by Patsy Cline several times, still chauvinistically chases her until his masculinity and aggressive self-confidence accepted by his future wife. Being a cue to the issue of authenticity, “you a real cowboy?” expresses a certain cultural taste and confirms a focus on identity defined by some certain social-cultural rules within the country community. Another example would be Pure Country (1992), “whose name indicates the theme of affirming the enduring power of country music’s authenticity and purity.”

What happens below the surface of “Are you a real cowboy?” is what makes country music special for American society, because this seemingly simple greeting not only represents a certain sense of authenticity associated with an ideal and dignified American identity, but also reveals a longing for a cultural community and an emphasis on collectivism.

Authenticity, Reality, and Affection of Country Music

Being massively discussed, authenticity manifest itself a matter of controversy not exclusively to country music, but to popular music in general, especially to those genres established in a commercial context. Theodor W. Adorno asserted that no music can be “genuine” if its purpose is to be accessible as a commodity for the largest possible number of consumers, on the contrary, multiple music genres claim themselves to be authentic such as rock, hip-hop, and country mostly in the sense that an individual needs to be true to oneself even as one grows up and takes place in society. Furthermore, many country musicals appear to be designed to restore the arena of authenticity for country music, such as Pure Country which would be detailed in Chapter 3. In fact, discussions about country music (not exclusively from academic works) have long been a territory where authenticity is repeatedly examined, and the different attitudes upon this issue is huge and obvious:

All you need to write a country song is three chords and the truth.

Harlan Howard

The genre of commercial country music as we recognized today, was created for commercial success…the authenticity was fabricated.

Richard A. Peterson

Creating Country Music: Fabricating

Authenticity

[Hank] Williams once said, “You have to plough a lot of ground and look at the backside of a mule for a lot of years to sing a country song,” a real country sort of thing to say. As it happens, Williams did not live on a farm, learned music from a black street singer, and was so sickly he couldn’t have ploughed even if there had been ploughing to do. He meant it in the figurative sense, knowing that country could always use another touch of poetry. He also knew, by instinct, that there’s not much difference between authenticity and mythology.

Robert Fulford

What is Real Country Music: It’s often Whatever the Latest Musical Generation Says It Is

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In spite of their explicit disagreement, the two sets of quotations suggest clearly that within the mass perception and the study of country music culture, the legitimization of authenticity is a (perhaps the) fundamental issue. And it appears that the core attraction of country music lies in its nature/control of being authentic. Harlan Howard, a prolific country music icon clearly affirm the importance of “truth” to country music, and assert that the nature of this music lies in its perseverance to authenticity. While the others assume that many devices are being employed to manipulatively shape and renew country music’s claim to authenticity in favor of a distinction from other genres in the music market.

Before proceeding, it should be clarified that authenticity does exist in the core of country music, but it is not about a 1-1 correspondence with reality, rather, it is on a linguistic and philosophical level. Listening to country music in any culture in the world is an English experience of a certain lyrical form, poetics, and musical expression. In other words, the lyrical authenticity (a documentary of experience) matters less than how the documentary is expressed, in which language, and in what way of thinking in music. Bonnie Wade articulated the relationship between language, music, and authenticity,

Language makes humans human, but it must be learned socially, in a community. Since thought is based on language, human thought is a community product. Each language manifests unique values and ideas. When the concept of language was extended to learned behavior or expressive culture—customs, music, and so on—they too were seen as essential constituents of a precious collective spirit. Expression of the collective spirit became an explicit goal of the arts. Distinctive culture could serve both as a marker of difference in external relations and a symbol behind which the citizenry could rally as a community. Thus was born the concept of authenticity as faithfulness to one’s essential nature. 34

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For example, if a homecoming, nature-loving, past-oriented, emotion-displaying, truth telling and maybe a little patriotic song written in Japanese, French, or German, would it be credited as a country song? I would doubt it. The pun of country as a nation and also a pastoral place is an English expression. The fact that pianists from counties other than Poland who probably do not speak Polish at all can win the International Chopin Piano Competition, but a foreign songwriter cannot exemplify a standard country musician leads me to think language as a more powerful and fundamental influence for us to understand and appreciate music.

Besides the fundamental assumption of country music being an American expression, another underlying assumption is that a real country song has to be written in the language of English (even the modern Japanese country songs are in English). Not only, historically, the root forms of country music such as Gaelic fiddle tunes, old English ballads, hymns, and minstrel songs are fundamentally English traditions brought to the American land, but also the development of country music precludes other languages from interpreting the meaning of country. Although American culture is adept in creating pop music genres, and its genres like rock, hip-hop, or jazz, can now be written and heard in many other languages, country music is still a purely English expression, and it is hard to find another linguistically exclusive popular music genre like country music, which even requires a non-English native and foreign singer to sing in English. If a non-American musician wants to be credited as a country singer, one needs to learn how to write songs in a certain form of English before riding a tractor, growing on a farm, feeding cows or playing mandolin (even for Hank Williams according to Robert’s quotation). Therefore, regardless of whether authenticity lies in the core of country music or not, one should admit that a standard country song has no other language than English. Thus, the fact that what we feel in country music solely take place in the linguistic and cultural framework of
English give us reasons to presume this linguistic dominance determines country’s distinctive means, beauty, and attraction in its linguistic, sonic and musical expressing. To understand country music, thereby as I suppose, requires external knowledge as to what influenced the language of English in its historical and philosophical development, and we might as well trace back to the western ideas and philosophies which historically influenced and imprinted on the language of English for fully understanding how country music’s attraction of authenticity is established when a song is sung and heard within the structure of English.

As mentioned, many believe the nature of country music lies in its perseverance to authenticity and assume that the lyrical correspondence to reality stands for country singers’ sincerity and authenticity. However, can the lyrical accuracy and trustworthiness fully represent the wholesomeness of authenticity? I argue authenticity, above all, cannot be oversimplified and measured by the representations of authenticity (the absolute, accurate description of an experience or emotion). Admittedly, for many listeners and music fans, being attracted by the music’s authenticity usually means being touched by the honesty and sincerity implied in the heart-felt lyrics (content), and so the audiences can relate themselves to the personal emotions and experiences in lyrics. However, from this viewpoint of authenticity, many things in country music would be problematic, when we maintain to sing a sad song, one must have a broken heart, and for a country singer who dress like a cowboy one must have really milked a cow, or planted a farm. This sense of authenticity, being always highlighted in country music’s propaganda, gradually becomes a burden, and is occasionally suspected and even denied by real-life country singers. For instance, Coal Miner’s Daughter (1980) in a scene portrays Loretta Lynn (Sissy Spacek) being confessed by the audiences in the backstage that “You are singing my life!” But Lynn herself once admitted in interviews that “Everyone says all my songs are about
myself. That is not completely true, because if I did all the things I write about, I wouldn’t be here. I’d be all worn out in some old people’s home.”\textsuperscript{35} Clearly, Lynn’s denial to the assumption that her songs are totally from real life demonstrates that, what the audience feel by authenticity sometimes is not a 1-1 correspondence with reality, but a felt truth for listeners, in other words, it is not her music that is fully real, rather, it is the fans who feel and label it real.

Therefore, to estimate country music’s authenticity upon its lyrical content as to whether the story is truly happened or fictionally fabricated, is in some cases pointless in comprehending country music’s attraction. It is not to deny the heart-felt lyrics and the storytelling expressions being a vital part of country music’s “authenticity halo”, but rather to suggest that, if a skeptical listener approaches this definition of authenticity in a critical way, one would easily find out that many songs and things in country music are problematic. Another example is the song “Luckenbach, Texas.” As depicted in this Waylon Jennings’s hit song,

This coat and tie is choking me in your high society you cry all day  
We’ve been so busy keepin’ up with the Jones, four car garage and we’re still building on  
Maybe it’s time we got back to the basics of love,  
Let’s sell your diamond ring, buy some boots and faded jeans and go away…  
Let’s go to Luckenbach, Texas… out in Luckenbach, Texas ain’t nobody feelin’ no pain.

Is it really that Luckenbach, Texas is a utopian, “feeling no pain”, arcadia for urbanite refugees? The fact is, despite Luckenbach’s motto sounding utopian, “Everybody is somebody in Luckenbach,” the place now is a ghost-town feel with extremely small populations.\textsuperscript{36} And what is more, in a 2000 book \textit{Are You Ready for the Country}, author Peter Doggett recalls that Jennings once told audiences that “he hated the song and [had] admitted ‘The guys that wrote the

thing have never been to Luckenbach. Neither have I.”\textsuperscript{37} As classic as “Luckenbach, Texas” is in a genre which claims to be real and authentic, the content of the song turns out by no means authentic to reality.

An extremely critical and provoking insistence among many philosophers and linguists is that any verbal copy of an experience is somewhat fictional and re-created compared to the real event in history. It has been well noted by art historian Michael Baxandall that language essentially is a conspiracy against experience in the sense of being a collective attempt to simplify and arrange experience into manageable parcels.\textsuperscript{38} In other words, as a tool for mutual understanding, language is essentially anti-experience, and therefore could shape our thoughts and trap us at the bottom of deeply engraved valleys of thinking, which predisposes and determines our perception of experience. In this respect, the lyrical content of country music, as a manageable form of language, is far away from the reality of experience. However, ruling out the abstract approaches, country music does attract, please, and affect generations of audiences with its distinct charms. The straightforward, truthful, and inornate lyrical sketch of an experience or emotion is one vitally recognizable charm. If this charm cannot be easily defined as authenticity, then what possible answers can it be? In other words, since authenticity in country music could not elicit a 1-1 correspondence to reality, what we feel by authenticity has to signify something else.

As mentioned before, our concept of authenticity lies in dual settings of reality and abstract aesthetics, the latter one is on a linguistic and philosophical level. And I contend the latter notion of authenticity, a higher level compared to a 1-1 correspondence to reality, is to


\textsuperscript{38} Micheal Baxandall, \textit{Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition} (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 44.
which degree a song or a music genre fits our sonic, musical and cultural taste shaped by the linguistic and philosophical preoccupations. Linguistically, what separates country music from other pop music genres is its hyper verbal exclusiveness, and if this means some certain cultural taste and focus in a music has to be expressed in English, then what are they? Are they, or, is the higher level of authenticity, exclusively English, western, or globally enjoyable?

My answer to this proposal so far benefits with linking country music to metaphysics, “a traditional branch of philosophy concerned with explaining the fundamental nature of being and the world that encompasses it,”\(^{39}\) which historically had a profound influence among English speaking lands, and also keeps flickering in the texts as I scrutinize in country music literatures. In analyzing *The Searchers* (1956), Kathryn Kalinak claims that the title song, lyrically depicting the male character’s searching for the West, actually provide “a metaphysical search for what can never be found”\(^{40}\) so as to creating a mysterious and profound atmosphere for John Wayne’s character. This notion catches my eye because the frequent topics I, as a fan, have come across in a great amount of country songs such as memory, trauma, or past, are also an absent existence being “metaphysically” searched, remembered, and eulogized. Then I realized even though metaphysics can at first glance appear a highly abstract theory term alienated to country music, its application to country music’s lyrical content and form can have productive and enlightening consequences for our understanding of country music.

Generally speaking, the fundamental concerns of a metaphysicist is to search and describe the “ultimately there,” something that might exist somewhere, shocking and alluring us with its ineffable ultimate meaning, but absolutely absent in presence. Is it not the mechanism of


country music? When a country song brings its listeners into its nostalgic remembrance and meditation on memory, lost love, purity, is it not the space of the country song directs people into its sentimental searching for some certain ultimate meaning? The meaning of “Country Road” is it can “Take Me Home,” the meaning of “The House” is it ever “Built Me,” the meaning of “Luckenbach, Texas” signifies “the basics of love” where “nobody feelin’ no pain.” The daily mundane as concrete as the road, house, and other trivial elements in life can always successfully signify some abstract, profound, ultimate, and exclusive meaning as to “take me home” or “built me” for individuals either singing a country song, or listening to a country song, namely, to the “me” in an American social-cultural context. In other words, the small things in daily reality (functioning as an appearance of authenticity) sung in country music generates a personal and individual association to the absent things (past, memory, regret, hope, etc.), which can signify ultimate and profound meanings for audience. Those frequent topics in country music like past trauma, regret, memory, past-relationship, and lost love, usually viewed as nostalgia, being an absent existence in the current time and space, carry people away from here and now, into a metaphysical searching for some ultimate and utopian meaning in the cultural imagination.

For example, what separates a recognizable country song such as “Luckenbach, Texas” is not a lyrical correspondence to reality, rather, a metaphysical construction of an absent place for our cultural imagination by describing what it feels like of going to Luckenbach, and what this not-yet happened (absent) journey means to the middle class and urban American people. The lyric tells us that going to Luckenbach, “back to the basics of love” where “nobody feeling no pain,” is something worth for the American people to “sell your diamond ring…buy some boots and faded jeans and go away [to].” “Luckenbach, Texas” thereby bridges the urban middle class

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and an alleged ultimate meaning of love and hope with a lyrical searching for an alternative lifestyle which would hardly happen in modern cities and American reality. The only thing materially real in this formula is the negative aspects of the urban life, and neither the feeling of hope and love nor the place is concrete or tangible. Due to the fact that the singer-songwriter of “Luckenbach, Texas” has never been to Luckenbach in reality, and neither have its most audience, we can deem that the description and enjoyment of “Luckenbach, Texas” is a fake, illusory, at least absent experience. But the absent experience indeed triggers the need for authenticity, and engages its audience with a confirmation of something ostensibly absent but actually real, ultimate, absolute, different, and utopian. Luckenbach, as well as many places sung in country songs (hometowns, mountains, etc.), may have less joy and satisfaction than we sentimentally attribute to it, but a metaphysical approach diminishes many discomforts associated with a realistic experience in such places, times, and memories by bridging people with a more profound, painless, and absolute atmosphere and meaning which could hardly found in the ambivalent and fragmented reality.

Additionally, music in general is a tool of providing continuity in a period of time, and “point[ing] in the direction of what is not yet in its ultimate space,”42 and country music, with its stable structure of rhythm, predictable and repetitive harmony, and decorative riffs between the lines (reinforcing continuity), cooperates with and reinforces the metaphysical mechanism of continuity, absolution, ultimate, and utopianism. The absent can be an illusory travel to Luckenbach in this case, while in other cases it can also be a musical and lyrical reoccurrence of a good ol’ time, lost love, innocence, virginity, memory, hometown and childhood. In sum, when we firmly feel something “absent” in the space of a country song ghostly haunting our attention

in its creation of nostalgia, what we are experiencing is a metaphysics-alike means of search in understanding past, life, and self in a profound, ultimate, and utopian image. While the timbre of roughness indicates struggling and a tough sense of reality, the meaning it signifies is nonetheless opposed to the anxieties in the current space, and thus peaceful and painless. In this light, despite country music usually engages its people with a realistic documentary of many trivia, mundane, and small things in life, which appears authentic, this music genre actually makes dreaming, fantasizing, and hope possible with its metaphysical searching for a bigger, nicer, and utopian image to which people can relate.

The public demand for authenticity is noted by country music scholar Joli Jenson as a response to modern society filled of fragmentation, coldness, and mendacity. She wrote:

I believe that we ratify the conflicts of modernity by ascribing to country music the authenticity we see evaporating in the present…Country music, and its burden of maintained authenticity, is a way to address, obliquely but intensely, unresolvable conflicts in modern life…Various markers designate country music’s “realness”: natural origins, spontaneous production, communal performance, heart-felt lyrics, sincere performers, and loyal fans are among the aspects invoked to prove that country music is more real than other forms.  

According to this argument, authenticity in country music can be seen as playing a contributing role in reminding people of what has been forgotten and missing in the hurrying currents of life and also in alleviating the personal and communal anxieties engendered in American society. Likewise, Bill Malone noted, the birth of country music comes “in the context of a national hunger and nostalgia for a simpler time and simpler society.”

To add to Jenson’s argument, country music adapts to modernity and at the same time supplies a utopian, care-free place from conflicts engendered in modernity by relating to its

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listeners with its huge metaphysical power. In other words, the authenticity in county music is established by the appearances of authenticity being sung in a metaphysical manner. Country music is hence a reminder that the currents of private life, however diverted, twisted, or fractured by a modern fashion of life, retain their hold on individuals lyrically recording and metaphysically searching their meanings to modern people. So that, our quest to authenticity in country music is a social response to modernity, and a philosophical reoccurrence of metaphysics.

Consider country music a means of escaping from accelerated races and upheaval conflicts in modern life, we can furthermore audaciously deem that, the lyrical highways, roads, boots, trucks, an idealized destination of a place or a period of time, metaphorically stands for the desire of leaving reality in daily life via an open road. The escape could be embodied in the desire to be “on the road again”, “homeward bound”, or “country road, [which] takes me home.” Namely, to search some certain ultimate meaning in its absolute absence in modern life. The transportation elements make continuity possible not only for vehicle movement and scenery movement for our visual experience (road movie), but also, on a metaphorical level, for the psychological “the grass is always greener over the next hilltop” pursuit for something known and yet absent. So that, when we link country music to authenticity, what we really call for is the music form’s power to meet the cultural taste predetermined and preoccupied by modernity and, more deep-seated, a traditional and metaphysical way of thinking.

Hence, it is so far safe to say that the material sources in country music lyrical texts — a real story, an artificial story, a real emotion, a pretentious emotion — do not build up country music’s aura of authenticity, or less provocatively put, they contribute in constituting a low level of authenticity, while a higher level of authenticity is established in country music since its birth.
with its lyrical adaption to the cultural and socio psychology in searching for an escape from daily conflicts in modernity, therefore partly signifying the cultural imagination for a care-free, utopian and un-modernized elsewhere. “Luckenbach, Texas”, being an absent place for all the listeners outside the real Luckenbach, Texas, simply embodies this utopian impulse for elsewhere, and therefore becomes a recognizable country song. Apart from the actual, yet remote and little-inhabited locations embodying the absent, other nostalgic themes such as memory, lost-love, or homecoming aspiration can also do the job because they, as an absent existence in the current time and space, are out of daily mundane and conflicts, “feeling no pain.” Being metaphysically searchable, these matters therefore become qualified topics for country music.

In sum, the high level of authenticity does not simply mean an authentic expression of an emotion or experience, but signifies “a momentary pleasure” embodied in the metaphysical search for the absent, which may be located spiritually as a spirit, a memory, an ineffable atmosphere, or lively as a Luckenbach, Texas, or a hometown honky tonk bar. Yes, they do exist as a real place or location, but they exist, both in a country song and in our cultural imagination, as a utopian and idyllic land, an absent elsewhere which can never be found in daily lives, and as an shelter, a last oasis of inspirations for country music culture. Therefore, in Pure Country, when Grandma Ivy being asked where to find Dusty, the authenticity seeker, her answer is remarkable, and highly applicable to our address on metaphysics and authenticity, “if you follow the roots, you’ll find him……and there are no answers. Only the search.”

Country Music and Its Community

Country music not only internally provides a utopian space for its listeners to envision themselves in a profound and care-free picture on an individual level, but also externally
separates itself from the rest of the world and clearly strikes out the boundary of a country music community, to which individuals (singers, songwriters, fans, etc.) can relate emotionally with a strong sense of belongingness. Vince Gill once noted, “People call the Grand Ole Opry a ‘family show’, and that is exactly what it is.” Curtis Ellison, a country music historian, also asserted, “The Grand Ole Opry is the mother church... The contemporary performers and the late legendary performers are evangelicals and saints... spreading the country music gospel of salvation.”

A music genre has in its nature the power of forming a sociological relationship. When audiences feel a sense of having shared a same experience with the performers in the space of a song, a connection can space out and expand in real social relationships, such as in Coal Miner’s Daughter an audience excitedly confesses to Loretta Lynn “You are singing my life!” Music’s power of forming a social relationship is well noted by Ray Pratt, The music of a people is a social relationship...Music, in its function as an ‘impulse of opposition’ to existing conventions, generates a rich variety of enclaves of autonomy in the world through creation and maintenance of an alternative psychological reality which becomes a different kind of public space, a new little world within the old.

In country music, the community can be created, maintained, and reinforced by various ways: the authenticity-implied texts (lyrics, stories, interviews, autobiographies, and bio-pics) express sincerity, openness, and equality; tough, rustic and sometimes broken voice represents a struggling working-class identity, for “the sharing of hardship and struggle enhanced the level of

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commitment;"^48 “personal appearance concerts and informal relationships among fans and artists built a sense of trust and shared values,"^49 and also the excessive lyrical references about places (Nashville, Texas, and the South in general) extensively bonds the community.

Country music also has a special means of enclaving and reinforcing its community, which is to constantly reference country musicians, song titles, and country music itself in lyrics. It not only anchors our understanding of this genre to the late singers, songwriters, and traditions but also stabilizes its cultural community upon the past and around those pivotal figures. For example, a country artist Billy Yates named his 2013 album as *Only One George Jones*, and George Jones also appears in the “neo-traditionalist” singer/songwriter Alan Jackson’s “Just Playin’ Possum” as a healing mentor. The lyric goes,

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I've been right here
Since you've been gone,
Belly-up at the bottom of a bottle
Listening to George Jones . . .
I'll keep old George on the turntable
Til I'm over you.
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Likewise, “Luckenbach, Texas” employs a whole verse to referencing several songwriters and their songs,

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Let’s go to Luckenbach, Texas
With Waylon and Willie and the boys
This successful life we’re livin’
Got us feuding like the Hatfields and McCoys
Between Hank Williams’ pain songs and
Newberry’s train songs and Blue Eyes Cryin’ in the Rain
Out in Luckenbach, Texas ain’t nobody feelin’ no pain.
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The awareness of those predecessor country singers and their songs frequently flickering in their descendants’ country songs is well articulated and explained by Crispin Sartwell,

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Another constant theme of country music is... country music. Among the most frequent references in country music are references to country performers, particularly Hank Williams, George Jones, and Patsy Cline. These figures are particularly important because they are exemplars of the tradition, and by appealing to them, country music singers attempt both to establish explicitly their credentials as representatives of an ongoing practice, and to celebrate the validity of that practice by virtue of the fact that it is traditional... A country music artist who rejected the heritage of Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, George Jones, and so forth would not even be a performer of country music, much less a successful one.  

It seems paradoxical that born in American culture largely emphasizing individuality and being an agent of that culture, country music has a constant focus on its community and tradition. Although the United States is usually known for its individuality, originality, and creativity in its pop culture, such rock and roll, super hero films, etc., country music is in fact a converse expression heavily emphasizing a collective space by lyrically sharing the mutually understandable experiences, referencing other artists, and relying on the changeless semiotics such as cowboy, farm, truck, etc. Indeed, the country politics does not encourage a critical, rejective or overturning approach to its own philosophy of the past or the tradition, instead, it demands a confirmation, a nostalgia, and even a ritual to the tradition for an eligible (authentic) identity within the community. Correspondently, certain themes in country music, once written by the past figures, become historically lasting and indelible, such as country road, trucks, farms, divorce and infidelity. Also, indirectly but relevantly, “instrumentation, including guitars, steel guitars, mandolins, fiddles, and banjos, has remained extremely consistent, even as it has adapted to changes in musical technology.”  

An example would be how the country musical *Pure Country* demonstrates to restore the pleasure of playing and performing country music is largely credited to jettison the amplifiers and stage smokes.

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51 Ibid., 255.
This ageless pattern of country music is sometimes criticized as repeated, repetitive, and “sounds all the same”. Sartwell’s take to this phenomenon is that, American culture, compared to other western cultures, has an underemphasized trait of traditionalism and is less individuality-centered than we assume. By juxtaposing Confucianism and country music and exploring the similarities between the two far-fetched topics, he argued that,

American culture is more traditional than we might think, and hence that a Confucian approach to that culture is not as alien as it might at first glance appear to be…Western philosophy seems to proceed largely by a series of overturning, and modern art is in fact constantly engaged in a wholesale rejection of the past. Also, a great philosopher in Western culture is often to be a revolutionary thinker… making sense of their own culture in historical terms, to explain modern Western history as a series of overturning… [Meanwhile] Confucianism cultures always start from a presumption of continuity with the past; [and] a work of art is authentic by virtue of its connection with the tradition. The authenticity of an artist or a thinker cannot be conceptualized in terms of sheer originality or an overcoming of the weight of the past… Country music constantly and explicitly addresses, emphasizes and celebrates tradition in its lyric content, represents an element of continuity over a considerable stretch of American cultural history… instantiates perfectly the pattern [of Confucianism culture]…[and therefore becomes] a particularly clear illustration of the thesis that a distinctively considerable continuity and tradition is pervasive in American artistic activities.

While Sartwell links country music’s attention on community to a traditionalism aspect of American culture, my viewpoint to this phenomenon is that country music’s emphasis on community precisely shows an important dimension of utopia, that a utopia firstly and fundamentally demands a community. As the term coined by Thomas More to fantasize a flawless society so as to satirize the uprising but morally-disordered Great Britain around the 16th century, utopia was initially to signify an ideal social relationship in our cultural imagination. Recent scholars on utopia studies confirmed, “The utopian…as a moral agent, attempts to create a rationality of the whole community, superseding that of the individual.” In country music, it

54 Goodwin and Taylor, The Politics of Utopia, 236.
is through the constant referencing the exemplary country singers, their influence, and their
music and through the successors in each generation following a certain rule for connecting with
the old time performers that a solid community can be reinforced. And this community plays a
utopian role in providing a “greater collective entity, to which the individual could relate
emotionally,”\textsuperscript{55} for this collective entity, by orienting upon the traditions and nostalgia,
solidarizes generations of artists over time, and eliminates many anxieties engendered in the
American mode of modernity. The collective territory across time and space, or simply put, the
community required by the utopian aspect of country music — let it be a “church”, “family”,
“enclaves of autonomy”, or a “new world within the old” — is not about individual concerns or a
better self, but about a recreated community, a reality in a cultural imagination, where one could
feel a long-lost belonging, a conversant identity, and a strong association. Even though the
reality of the American life can be extremely non-utopian, the recognition of an identity in the
communal picture filled with exemplary figures can be greatly encouraging, glorious, and
utopian.

The utopia of the community of country music, as I will argue, spreads to that of
individuals by blurring the boundaries between private life and public life, and specifically, by
intensifying the daily small things in an American life. Sometimes the small things in a Southern
life just as \textit{Urban Cowboy} portrayed in its panoramic opening scene of those Southern elements
— gravy, biscuits, field peas mentioned in the dialogue; cowboy hat, jeans, truck, tractors, and a
wide area of farmland. These humble materials of daily domestic life remark hometown
experiences for an individual American and mark off the specificity of country music versus
other popular music genres that also celebrate their own specific small things. Even though small

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 208.
things, usually those involved in love and romance — such as a “kiss,” “whisper” or “holding hands” — are commonly celebrated in popular music, the small things in country music are purely American (sometimes Southern), purely rustic, and purely humble. Therefore it is easy to understand why these small things can evoke a collective nostalgia for hometown America in country music.

Country music excels in collecting daily dribs and drabs to use as lyrics, and when the bits and pieces of the daily mundane and stories in an American life become a subject matter for the physical act of sentimentality and emotional expression, “the individual’s behavior [as well as the small things in one’s private life] is a group concern.” Therefore the lonesomeness, alienation, and isolation conceived in the capitalist modernity can be released and replaced with a sense of belongingness, collectivity, and affiliation. To realize this function is to recognize how an identity of country music comes with a hard and troubled life, unyieldingly confronts those hardships and publicizes them in songs. In other words, by being a constituent part in the community of country, the anxiety and alienation engendered in an American mode of socio-cultural structure and its derived and deep-seated individuality are to some degree alleviated because the intensification of the small things in life by an “expression of emotion” in lyrical content legitimizes the private activities on the level of the communal standards, and therefore makes individuals feel belonged and needed in a social-cultural organization. Therefore, in Brad Paisley’s hit “This is Country Music,” many definitive lines about country music can be seen as intensifying the mundane, for country music allows people to “say the word ‘cancer’ in a song, tell folks Jesus is the answer in a song,” and country music encourages people to “drink a cold one on the weekend and get a little loud,” and have “the nerve to tell that stupid boss of yours to

56 Ibid., 208.
shove it next time he yells at you.” While these lines depicts the living in an American life, other lines serve to highlight the community,

This is real; this is your life in a song
Just like a road that takes you home
Yeah this is right where you belong.

In addition, country music also forms a foreign community, or we should put, the value of country music is accepted in other cultures because some traits of country music accord with some other regional and historical aesthetics. For example, by quoting from Confucius’ masterpiece book Lun Yu,

The Master said, “As far as the rites and music are concerned, the disciples who were the first to come to me were rustics while those who came to me afterwards were gentlemen. When it comes to putting the rites and music to use, I follow the former.”

Sartwell playfully assumed that “Confucius respected the musical tastes of the rustics, or as we would put it, that Confucius enjoyed country music.” Indeed, this playful assumption has its point, because the pun of “country” music as an ideological agent for the South, or an American identity is easily dismissed in the translating, broadcasting, and marketing process as the literary interpretation of country music in Chinese and Japanese is “pastoral or countryside music”, and it is understandable that in those countries with thousands of years of agrarian traditions, country music may seem familiar at the first glance due to the recognizable rustic and pastoral image. The image of a wild and free cowboy could be furthermore emotionally accelerating due to its wrapping so many traits from western cultures, such as a conquering spirit, a heroic and chivalry tradition, and a respect and protest for private property (especially to the Eastern-Asian peasants

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who conventionally and even today do not own the land they farm on). Also, the unaggressive\textsuperscript{59}, heart-felt, harmonious (highly dependent on major chords) storytelling manners in country music implies an assumption of openness and, more importantly, a latent sense of equality between speaker and listener, which is novel and provokingly utopian to the audiences exposed in the long term hierarchical cultures. As a result, even though almost all the country music are written in English, the language barrier does not prevent those people from falling in love with it, instead, the lyrical content of country music become a means to learn Western stories, language, and culture. Consequently, despite the linguistic barrier to perceive the “authentic” story, the seemingly “authentic” sound embodied in the country aesthetics can still be attractive enough for pastoral/countryside music finding its attentive ears and overseas followers.

Besides, country music’s past orientation has a representation in sentimentally glorifying the past, which can also emotionally resonate to the East-Asian audiences when their ever-prosperous civilizations and cultures staggered into modernity. As known, Asia has some flourishing civilizations in its many regions and histories, but many East-Asian countries (and Asia in general) in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century were passively involved in the wave of the globalized modernity, therefore a musical expression, though extraneous and foreign, would soulfully articulates a sense of nostalgia for the audiences in Asia. From this light, country music, being a remembrance to the yesterday’s glory, is a human legacy and “represents us all.”\textsuperscript{60}

Also, when Asian cultures were not equipped with the relevant and homogenous entertainments and arts to modernity, the introduction of country music can enlighten the Asian

\textsuperscript{59} It has been recently noted by many musicologists and musicians that the singing of some local music and opera forms in China is quite similar with rock and roll, and hence I claim that country music’s un-aggressiveness is refreshing for many East-Asian audiences. Seen, Jia Ying. “秦腔是中国最古老的摇滚,(Shaanxi Opera is the most ancient rock and roll in China)” Sinablog. Sinablog, 19 Feb. 2009. http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_517ee61d0100cyq5.html. 17 Apr. 2015.

\textsuperscript{60} Ching, Wrong’s What I Do Best, 4.
artists in exploring and discovering an appropriate expression to mirror their societies and cultures. Because country music can be regarded as a model of popular music in its ability to keep relevant in the face of changing circumstances in the American social developments from feeding the national hunger for nostalgia in 1930s\footnote{As Bill Malone noted, country music came into being “roughly from 1880 to 1910, [when] cowboys, mountaineers and their music were discovered and memorialized in the context of a national hunger and nostalgia for simpler times and a simpler society.” Malone, \textit{Country Music, USA}, 73.} to re-adapting itself to the urban cowboy movement in the 1980s. As a music genre engendered in modernity, country music, being traditional, autonomous, and lasting, is in many ways enlightening for and have inspired artists and scholars in other modernity-experiencing regions. This viewpoint may motive future scholarships to investigate American folk/country music’s East Asian influence in affecting, for example, Taiwan’s School Campus-Folk Music movement in 1970s and China’s folk movement in 1990s. The end result, going back this thesis, is country music culture nurtures its sub-communities worldwide, even in culturally remote regions.

Country music’s community in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century has manifested a multi-cultural and international tendency. Many country music dynamics and bands have popped out in the United Kingdom such as Red Dirt Skinners and Mojave 3,\footnote{David Basham, “Mojave 3 Makes No ‘Excuses’ For Alt-Country Twang,” \textit{MTV News}. Oct. 5\textsuperscript{th} 2000. http://www.mtv.com/news/1432235/mojave-3-makes-no-excuses-for-alt-country-twang/. Jan. 17\textsuperscript{th} 2015.} an annual country music festival “Country Gold” takes place in Japan since 1989,\footnote{The annual Country Gold Music Festival held on every October by Charlie Nagatani in Kumamoto, Japan. (http://www.countrygold.net/us/)} plus a Belgium country musical named \textit{The Broken Circle Breakdown} (2012), and a Japan produced country music biopic \textit{Made in Japan} (2014). Furthermore, a Japanese songwriter (born and grew up in Japan) who moved to Nashville when he was more than 40 years old in the 1980s, has successfully released a country music album,
and in a song articulating his motive of playing country music titled “Tennessee Moon”, he wrote,

I left home and family to follow a dream,
With hundreds of long lonely nights in between.
I swore when I left home I would be coming back soon,
But I fell in love with the Tennessee moon.

These dynamics of country music’s international interactions and global influence all challenged the traditionally prevailing idea of country music being a purely Southern and white culture, which as Bill Malone asserted in his groundbreaking book *Country Music U.S.A.* that the voice of country music is Southern. And Geoff Mann added to Malone’s point by literally claiming country music “shapes, makes and expresses the sound of a certain group of people,” in an article titled “Why Does Country Music Sound Write?” Even though the authenticity of a music usually connects with the starched discussions around race and ethnicity, given almost all the marketable music could be consumed in nearly all the nations, cultures, and groups when the goal of the industry is to sell the genre to the largest possible number of buyers in a capitalist and globalized mode, nowadays the foreign fascination of a music genre in the global interactions encourages us to consider its representation, meaning, and enigma by treating the music not as a national, ethnical inheritance but an art form concerned with human existence and reflecting universal humanities. A beneficial end result of this proposal is that, the reception of country music in a certain culture could reflect some concealed and under-investigated aspects of this American music expression.

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65 For example, blues seems to be initially categorized with black music; heavy metal music is linked to white community; and a folk song would sound more authentic, or folksier when performed by a person in a local vernacular and an ethnic costume.
For example, Crispin Sartwell’s notion, “the continuity of American popular music does an admirable job of satisfying non-Western expectations for art, especially those articulated in Asian traditions infused with Confucianism,” concludes with a discrimination between European and American cultures. For Sartwell, the developments of western arts manifest a lack of continuity, and usually proceed largely by a series of overturning and rejections to the past, which was once articulated by Karl Marx,

Men make their own history…in present circumstances, given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. However, “changes [in country music] always supervene on an overriding continuity,” and,

Country music represents an element of continuity over a considerable stretch of American cultural history, one extending back at least a hundred years… And this tradition itself emerged organically out of European and African musical antecedents. For example, the traditional fiddle playing that continues today in country music is closely related to Irish reels. And much country music employs a “blues” tonality that derives from African music such as that of the Yoruba.

It might give us another insight to decipher country’s myth of utopia. Many country songs may be sad and mournful because the early forms of country music essentially carries a melancholy of leaving homelands of Europe and Africa, but it also sounds hopeful, joyful, thoughtful and prayerful, because this music form represents the most ancient aspiration of utopia the early immigration wave brought with them from the European nations to the American land.

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66 “The Aesthetics of Popular Music.”
69 Ibid., 249.
Pure Country (1992)

*Pure Country* (1992), directed by Christopher Cain, is a very special country musical among all the relevant films. On the one hand, *Pure Country* may not be artistically or commercially qualified as a great film, for the predictable plot, ambivalent and mixed reviews, and the fact that it was considered as a box office bomb for grossing just over 15 million dollars. On the other hand, however, it subtly indicates the social-cultural changes and dynamics of the United States in its time, reflects almost all the concerns and issues country music had confronted at the early 1990s in a transparent way, and therefore is regarded as a classic and remarkable movie by enthusiastic fans and country music researchers. The *Pure Country* soundtrack, furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter 1, claimed a sub-genre country music named as neo-traditionalism, which spearheaded the development of country music in the 1990s and still maintain mainstream popularity in the mid-2010s. Consequently, the *Pure Country* album turns out to be a huge success and is still the best-selling album of the main character George Strait, who is a real-life country musician being known for his neo-traditionalism style, and he is third only to Elvis Presley and The Beatles with the most gold and platinum albums in the history of popular music.\(^{70}\)

The story features George Strait as “Dusty Chandler”, a burned-out country music superstar whose manager (Lesley Ann Warren) stages all his tours with smoke, strobe lights, and really loud music to where no one can even see or hear the “real” singing voice and acoustic guitar. When he purposely forgets several bars of a chart-topping hit in a concert, his fans don’t even notice, and also, along with an argument with his manager, Dusty decides to “just take a little walk,” without saying to his band where he’s going or for how long. After shaving his beard and cutting off his ponytail, Dusty returns to his old hometown, and tries to get back to his down-

home country roots. He visits his wise Grandma Ivy, a sibyl like character (“there are no answers, only the search,” “if you follow the roots, you will find him,” “without the lyrics, there is no song,” “…when the tree grows too fast and the roots don't develop…you have to chop off the top of that tree to let the roots catch up.”) After the inspired homecoming journey, Dusty returns to the bar where he once grew up playing, and gets involved in a bar fight, and then ends up at the ranch of the Tucker family, where nobody recognizes him. At the ranch, he takes roping lessons, and falls in love with the young rancher Harley (Isabel Glasser), a woman determined to save the struggling spread with victory in a Las Vegas rodeo.

After Dusty leaves town, Lula tries to keep his show going at all costs. She hires Buddy (Kyle Chandler), a member of Dusty’s road crew, to lip-synch his songs in a Las Vegas concert against all the doubts from the band members. When Dusty learns the stunt-performer situation, he returns to his band and demands that his stage shows be toned down, and removes all the hoopla effects. Since his first appearance after his “walk” is in Las Vegas at the same time as the rodeo Harley Tucker is competing in, he arranges for her and her family to have front row seats in the concert. True to his wishes, he sits on the edge of the stage, playing and singing “I Cross My Heart,” particularly written for Harley, which wins him Harley’s love.

Before proceeding, it should be noted that, many mainstream Hollywood films in 1990s had a similar manipulation of emphasizing and enlarging the influence of white culture. Consider Forrest Gump (1995), not only it introduces its main character’s family name “Gump” as a name from the originator of the first Ku Klux Klan movement (1865-1870), but also Forrest Gump, being congenitally deficient and not aware of what he is doing for most of the time, always turns out to be a mainstream hero in each field: college football star, decorated veteran, shareholder of Apple, and a man of faith to his love. So is Dusty in Pure Country, for Dusty, after cutting his
ponytail and exchanging his fancy boots with a working class boots, uses a pseudonym “Mr. Wyatt” (sounds like Mr. White) to introduce himself to the ranch family. Dusty is also established as a definitive figure of interpreting the authentic meaning of country while the black music influence as part of the sonic origin of country music is simply ignored. In the real history of country music, black music influence is an unneglectable force, as Shusterman articulated,

The image of country’s all-white and noncommercial origin is pure myth. Malone and other scholars document how it always “borrowed heavily from the black” music culture. The banjo came from Africa, and black blues was such a strong influence on some country songs that they were sometimes falsely catalogued as “race” music.”...[And] a twelve-year old boy, Hank Williams learned guitar and singing techniques from a black street singer called Tee-Tot.71

However, in Pure Country, “the only nonwhite (briefly shown and laughed at) is a pigmy-sized black valet who (with exaggerated breakdance movements) opens limousine doors at the Las Vegas Mirage Hotel, where Dusty makes his climactic return to performance and to the traditionalist ‘pure country’ style.”72 Moreover, Pure Country (1991) even problematizes the meaning of the sonically “authentic” country music which it tries to restore, for the songs, which the film tries to critique as “non-pure country music” are also ironically included in George Strait’s Pure Country album.

Another similar theme in the 1990s Hollywood mainstream films, specifically in Pure Country and Forrest Gump, is that the main characters are bound to retain success and recognition of the mainstream society after self-struggling. Consider Lieutenant Dan in Forrest Gump, despite having a personal hard time of great depression and loss due to his bodily disability and his bedashed patriotic dream of dying for his country after the Vietnam war, he still claims his revitalization and success in involving in shrimp business and investing Apple,

72 Ibid., 224.
a “some kind of fruit company” in Gump’s words. Dusty, too, is re-accepted by the mainstream country music industry and audiences.

In my viewpoint, this phenomenon signifies a turnaround to the American mainstream value after the countercultural era. Firstly, Forrest Gump and Dusty, as two main characters in two 1990s films, both symbolize a brief history of the United States by starting with a traumatic childhood, working hard, reaching stardom, becoming an idol of the mainstream American society, feeling lost, and then returning to the ranch family root/Alabama home. These steps reflect some pivotal points in the development of the United States from its founding to the early 1990s: a traumatic early history of being a British colony, an uphill American Revolutionary War, a roaring crescendo of national and industrial competitiveness during and after two world wars, being accepted by the world as the first power, and then the loss and suspicion exploded in the counterculture movements. Just as Forrest Gump and Pure Country gave their main characters a homecoming plot, both films were implying an ideological return at its historical time to the traditional American values.

Secondly, both characters (Dan, Dusty, as well as Forrest) are programmed to fulfilling a standard American dream set by the mainstream value, and in spite of some certain critically traumatic experiences, they would always be back to the mainstream fame and success under public attention instead of fading away in the middle of nowhere or realistically inhabiting as a hermit in the rural root of country music. The audiences know that pattern too well because as the exemplary models in the mainstream American society, these characters not only embody our requirements for an American hero, but also subtly personify the image of the United States, which should be accepted by the world.
In addition, as Barbara Ching noted, when Dusty (George Strait) shears his stardom ponytail, he waves goodbye to the popularized spectacle trend emerging in country music, which reflects “many of the conservative ideals that were just beginning to surface in American life.”\(^\text{73}\) From this light, Pure Country fulfills the job of re-popularizing country music, and country music, as a traditional music type, enjoys a roaring public appreciation in the 1990s. Noted by journalist Bruce Feiler, “by 1993, 42 percent of Americans were listening to country radio every week, twice the number of a decade earlier.”\(^\text{74}\) And also drawn from many data by Shusterman, the country music radio stations in the United States has rocketed from 2200 in 1992 to 2600 at the end of 1996.\(^\text{75}\) And the neo-traditionalism country music proclaimed by Pure Country becomes a dominating fashion in country music industry until today. All these facts add to the specialty of Pure Country.

**Pure Country’s Historical Context: the 1990s Country Music**

Country music is an “increasingly developed branch in this decade.”\(^\text{76}\) As Robert Oermann has observed, “Between 1989 and 1991, the country music business doubled from 500 million dollars annually to a billion. By 1995, the industry had doubled again to over 2 billion dollars. By the dawn of 1996, two-thirds of the albums on the country charts had been declared gold, platinum or multi-platinum for their sales accomplishments.”\(^\text{77}\) And also as Thomas Harrison noted, “The most successful singles in the 1990s [in country music] were performed

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73 Bruce Feiler, *Dreaming Out Loud*, 38.
74 Ibid., 37.
with a style that included an infusion of pop and rock music.”\textsuperscript{78} Although “pop music’s infiltration of traditional country has caused endless consternation among critics, performers and listeners,”\textsuperscript{79} the fact is, “Country [music] had finally merged with elements of pop and rock, which had made the genre more commercial than ever before.”\textsuperscript{80}

*Pure Country* indicates this pop/rock fusion and transition in country music, and also self-consciously reflects the consternation among performers and listeners that the tradition, the “pure country” could be lost in the pursuit for more younger audiences and more technologies in instrument improvements and concert applications. *Pure Country* presents this dilemma which most pop artists confronted all the time since at least 1950s—to hold on to tradition (roots), or to embrace more pop? Pop infusion seems to be able to bring more audiences for record sales, but would that destroy the musical and aesthetical continuity country music maintains since its birth? In other words, the deeper conflict *Pure Country* depicts is a disparity on the taste of country music between the elder community and the younger community, as well as between the rural community and the urban community. This conflict is marked to the audience through the sibyl-like character Grandma Ivy’s comments to Dusty when he visited her rural house (Objectively, Dusty’s departure from the stage tour and visit to Grandma Ivy is in some degree to ingratiate himself with the older community).

Ivy, “I hardly recognized you without all that hair…So did you quit?”
Dusty, “No, just a short pause. It is just getting bigger and bigger, starting to look like a circus.” Ivy, “I saw you over in Dallas. That was quite an extravaganza. I love to hear you singing. But it was loud, and I couldn’t hear the words. Without the words, there is no song! And I could have done without the smoke and the lights. But…the kids liked it.”
Dusty, “No smoke. No lights, no amplifiers. No big stage production. Just me and my guitar. You think anybody would buy that?”
Ivy, “I would.”

\textsuperscript{78} Harrison, *Music in the 1990s*, 136.
\textsuperscript{80} Harrison, *Music in the 1990s*, 109.
Ivy’s comments speak for themselves. The “kids” revel in the pop music fashions such as smoke, lights, amplifiers, while the older audiences have a focus on lyric, acoustic guitar, and the “tranquility” aspect of country music. Their different taste on country music stands for two communities, and the music industry, as well as Dusty, could not afford to lose contact with either one of them. Throwing off the shackles of tradition might nurture a much younger fan base for country music, but it would totally break the connection with the audiences who concentrate more on tradition, and more importantly, it would weaken the arena of country music as the music of America, because the music of “country”, as a cultural association being important to the ideology of the United States demands a community of consistency, continuity and stability over time.

Consequently, the commercialization of country music in 1990s came along with the emergence of a breed called neo-traditionalist country artists, whose music later became the mainstream of the Nashville Sound by the 2000s. This sub-genre, compared to other musicians who completely reject pop/rock influence and hold firm to the old time music, features a traditional approach through a cowboy appearance that an older audience could appreciate, yet infused with a 1990s sense of modernization that could be understood by a younger one.81 The male musicians in the neo-traditionalist trend were described by P. Kingsbury as,

Good looking males who could learn to sing mournfully while slurring their syllables were instructed to repeat the ‘Haggard-n-Jones’ password in interviews. They were topped with a wide-brimmed hat, even if they didn’t know a Resistol from a Stetson, before posing for the covers of the debut albums. For the most part, these neo-traditionalists wore hats; their pop-country brethren did not.82

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81 Harrison, *Music in the 1990s*, 113
George Strait, despite having already made himself an icon for country music by the end of 1980s, is successfully accepted by both the old time country music community and the younger generation as one of the top male performers in the neo-traditionalist category in the 1990s. He is well known for bringing country back to its roots (largely credited to *Pure Country*), and also accommodates his music to fit the shift in audience preferences toward more pop-based country. Not only country music is popularized and increasingly enjoyed and consumed by wider audience range in the 1990s, but also Strait’s popularity in the coming decades were greatly maintained, for he “amassed a total of 60 number-one hits…more than any other artist in any genre of music.” Compared to Dweight Yoakam, the rebellious and confrontational outsider musician to the mainstream commercialized country music, or the earlier Outlaw Country Movement, who was to boycott the popularized Nashville Sound, George Strait, as well as the neo-traditionalism movement, seems to give a quite ambiguous answer to country music’s tradition/pop crisis, or it could be safer to say, at least *Pure Country* avoided cracking this hard nut and buttered the bread on both sides—Dusty in the last scene sings a song which he writes from his ranch experience (an appearance of authenticity) with an acoustic guitar and less spectacle hoopla effects in his mournful singing tone. Although the song “I Cross My Heart” does not sound like the early rustic country music which the old time country listeners would be more familiar with, this song is after all accepted by film audience, music fans in the 1990s, and succeeding generations as a revival of the traditional country music. The reason, as I will argue, is less about music itself, but more about the fact that *Pure Country* successfully intensifies the small things in daily lives, blurs the boundary of the private life and public life,

and reconciles the two communities with “I Cross My Heart” as a musical number in its last scene. I will elaborate these notions in the next two sections.

**To Reconcile the Communities in Pure Country**

As mentioned, to reconcile the communities (urban vs. rural, elderly vs. younger audiences) with different music tastes on country music is not only a matter of stabilizing a wide fan base, but also a matter of maintaining the continuity, stability, and consistency of the image of America demanded by country music’s ideological role. Another way of articulating this importance in a utopia language would be, the utopia of any category, being a perfection existence in our mental perception, allows no impurity to demolish the continuity, stability and consistency of its community over time, space, or reality.

As a film designated for country’s ideological ideas, *Pure Country*, provides a mediation between the two generational communities, and its main character Dusty stands for the major mediator of the different tastes on country music. Friended with both communities, which are primarily embodied in Dusty’s career manager Lula (Lesley Ann Warren), Grandma Ivy, and the ranch owner Ernest (Rory Calhoun), Dusty has a way of communicate with both sides. Ivy and Ernest both separately express to Dusty their nostalgia to their good old days: Ivy thinks Dusty’s show is “quite an extravaganza…loud…can’t hear the song…could have done without the smoke and the lights,” and Ernest keeps telling Dusty his ranch’s yesterday glory and hints that he is not fond of today’s business and value. To quote Ernest’s line, “The funny thing about that little white speck on the top of chicken shit… That little white speck is chicken shit too.” By telling Dusty this, Ernest makes a point that the present world (filled with popularization and commercialization in music and other social elements) is a “shitty” disgrace and Dusty is the
“best” among the “chicken shit”. Meanwhile, Lula stands for the other music taste which she, as a hard working manager, actually creates by popularizing Dusty’s concert with smoke, strobe lights, and loud music for the younger audiences. Lula also presents a debatable flexibility in business by controversially hiring a stunt-singer to lip-synch Dusty’s songs in a concert when Dusty abandons the band in tour.

As Pure Country suggests, it is Dusty who bears the mission to mediate the two sides, and Dusty, against all odds, is in the end successfully accepted by both sides in the last music number by Ivy and Ernest being invited to Dusty’s concert, sitting in the front row, and satisfactorily listening to Dusty’s freshened, “neo-traditionalism” style. And it is Dusty’s music that claims the power to reconcile the older generation who experienced and favored the old time glory and the younger generation who were nurtured in Rock culture since birth. For the older community, Dusty is authentic due to his rejuvenating the traditional country music, because the song “I Cross My Heart”, as indicated by the narrative, is a music result of Dusty’s rustic ranch experience and Ivy’s inspiration, Dusty’s cracked voice in this song also represents a struggling working class identity which would be favored by older audience, plus this song, in the end, is performed in a less-spectacle fashion; for the younger community with more urban, rock-influenced audiences, Dusty is also authentic in the sense that he is true to himself even as he grows up and takes his place in society, because he shares his real private life with public by proposing to who he loves with a song on stage. In addition, for Dusty himself, the career crisis is solved by simply sitting at the edge of the stage to make sure his lyric is heard, his face is seen, and his (real) emotion is tangible; the identity crisis is solved by him stopping being the ambiguous and mysterious “Mr. Wyatt” to the Ernest family, and the fact that this new Dusty as
a singer is still emotionally expressive enough to bring tears to Harley’s eyes (Dusty’s beloved one and Ernest’s granddaughter) in the space of a country song.

**To Intensify the Mundane as an Internal Rhythm in *Pure Country***

As argued in Chapter 1, country music is good at intensifying the American daily small things, namely, the mundane in its language (lyrics, interviews, singer-fan interactions, and concert monologues) to blur the boundary of private life and public life. *Pure Country* illustrates to us mostly in its music numbers how that language can also signify a sense of hope for its audience. Among these music numbers, I would mainly focus on three of them because of their different clarifications on utopian, which are the “worked-out hardships” in “Last in Love,” the “pleasure of sadness” in “King of Broken Hearts,” and “I Cross My Heart”.

“Last in Love” greatly demonstrates to us how hardships could all work out, and how every being has a positive becoming. To understand the meaning of Dusty’s hardships, we do not even have to look at the lyric; the mournful tone tells it all. And as this number starting from being diegetic (Dusty singing in Ivy’s living room) turns into a non-diegetic score, the cinematic images gives us more information about Dusty’s past adversity and trauma. As he visits a tomb of “Chandler”, what we see on the tombstone is “Theo Dusty 1941-1970” and “Ella Lucille 1943-1970”. If they are Dusty’s parents, then Dusty’s father died at the age of 29 and his mum at 27, and little Dusty lost his parents within one year, and very likely was brought up by his Grandma Ivy. As the lonely Dusty proceeds his rural journey in a cloudy and gloomy weather, we come to the bar where the young hard-working Dusty used to play. This bar, as the only building in its environment, locates in a seemingly deserted area and to quote Dusty, this bar “hasn’t changed much”. When he puts down an aged black and white framed photograph of him
and his youthful friends on a table and gazes at the empty hall of the honky tonk bar, it is not hard for us to sympathize his bottled up emotion of woe and mournfulness.

However, this delicate moment of nostalgia profoundly expresses a sense of confidence and painlessness, simply because of the fact that Dusty is now a successful music star, which indicates that the past hardships are beatable, temporary, and bygone. As a paradigm of success, Dusty returns to his root with a series of heroic honors, and therefore his retrospection on his traumatic past is more of a self-relief rather than self-pity, and consequently we are actually confirmed of his successful music career by being shown Dusty’s departed hardships. The music anchors this confirmation by creating an emotional atmosphere in which, although the notes and words are being constantly beaten by the mournful singing tone, the major chords of “Last in Love” reinforces the painlessness and even leaks a dose of positivism. As a result, when the ingenuous bartender offers Dusty a free beer, “well if you played (music) here, you earned this. It’s on the house,” and then looks at Dusty as if looks at a hero, it is all natural, affective, and utopian to the audiences. So that it is not surprising to see that on the very first night during Dusty’s stay in that honky tonk bar, the drunk Dusty meet and is saved by a local Cinderella-like cowgirl and is even brought to her ranch house and finally falls in love with her. The unbelievably pleasant drama appears so reasonable when the emotionally charged audience is touched by Dusty’s nostalgia in the moment of feeling utopian.

The exquisite portrayal of Dusty’s youth and the rural local environment (the bar, Grandma Ivy’s house, countryside road, hardworking adversities, and trauma) connects the successful music star and the audiences, and also leads its audiences in the direction of sensing the future version of daily trivia with Dusty’s all-worked-out hardships being contemplated in his latent yet massive confidence. Dusty’s healing, harmonious, and peaceful nostalgia on these small things
profoundly suggest that, any hardship is nothing but a trace toward a state of transcendental perfection in its ultimate time and space. “Last in Love,” being a musical and sonic expression of that nostalgia, reveals us the function of country music in generating the perception of perfection, and helping us to realize the utopian aspect of every working class small thing in life.

“The King of Broken Hearts” demonstrates the reasons for the pleasure in singing a sad country song. Psychologically speaking, to physically, verbally, or musically release negative emotions (sadness, frustration, woe) could be vital for one’s health, and we also know the common knowledge that, to share such emotions to other people usually means a deep level of trust and an enhancement of a social relationship. Since a genre of a music is a “social relationship” as well, it is not hard to understand the importance of maintaining that generic enclave by individuals (songwriter, singer, performer) musically, emotionally, and verbally confessing their sadness in country politics. For audiences, the sharing of sadness means a commitment to the fan/singer relationship, and for singers, to express their sadness means a willing to embrace the public attention and to define his/her own sense of authenticity in music.

In the performance of “The King of Broken Hearts,” Dusty associates himself with “pure country” not only by his display of emotion, but also by the musical mise-en-scene of a rustic and ranch locality. Being performed by Dusty in a ranch balcony with his band member Earl hitting an iron can as a drum, and Harley’s brother hitting his cheeks with two ladles as another drum, this musical number hence hints to its audiences that Dusty is picking up the old time fashion country music. It might be simple, unrefined, or primitive, but it is pure fun, resonant, and entertaining for the struggling ranchers. It is when Dusty’s guitar becomes acoustic, the venue becomes less swanky, and his language is heard, understood, and emotionally related by

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the working class ranch folks (Ernest sitting nearby and tapping the ground rhythmically to the
tempo of Dusty’s song), that Dusty is realistically and mentally re-connected with the old
fashioned country community, and *Pure Country* hence elicits its opinion on the issue of
authenticity as opposed to the on-going flamboyant spectacle concert of country music which
Dusty leaves in the previous plot. When, in the opening sequence, Dusty performs “Where the
Sidewalk Ends” in his concert, *Pure Country* gives us a concept on how rock-fashioned and
inauthentic country music can be by the high-angle shot from the stage showing the performers
and the audiences are distantly blocked by the fireworks, iron- railings, and the security guards,
and the audience crowd do not even notice when Dusty purposely forgets several bars of the
song. However, in the performance of “King of the Broken Hearts,” Dusty is heard again. Even
though “King of Broken Hearts” sounds sad, Dusty, by performing this song acoustically in a
rustic ranch, has enough reasons to feel pleasure because of his long lost old time identity being
re-discovered and his association with the generational community being strengthened. So that
when Harley comments on Dusty’s performance, “That was quite a show you two put on back at
the ranch,” Dusty replies, “It was fun. It was more fun than I’ve had in a long time.”

“I Cross My Heart” brings its audience to *Pure Country*’s grand finale, and like the
“everything problem will be solved in the space of a song” utopian scenario in many Hollywood
film musicals, all the issues hooked up in *Pure Country*’s previous narrative become all clear and
solved in the space of this country song. Dusty reconciles the generational gap by having the
Ernest family and Grandma Ivy sit in the front row among the younger audiences, and he revives
the old time country music tradition by sitting at the edge of the stage and playing acoustic
guitar, and his country music star identity is re-established by his refreshed stage style and not
being the mysterious “Mr. Wyatt” to Harley anymore. The heartfelt lyric of “I Cross My Heart”
expresses Dusty’s love to Harley and brings tears to the ranch girl’s eyes. The cowgirl Cinderella Harley is proposed in front of thousands of concert audiences, and they hug as a sign of getting back together after the song ends.

Not only the narrative space in “I Cross My Heart” appears utopian since many issues are surreally fixed synchronously, but also this proposal song itself is a clear illustration of how country music blurs the boundary of private life and public life, and how “music points in the direction of what is not yet in its ultimate space.”86 This proposal song, being a ritual in Dusty and Harley’s relationship in the narrative, is also a ceremony for showcasing country music’s function in an American life, as a truth spokesman, past glorifier, storyteller, and a visionary provider. It is common to think an act of proposal as a personal matter, but Dusty’s proposal in Pure Country is obviously shown as a group concern. Not only Harley’s family members are present on this emotional occasion, but also Dusty’s manager Lula, Grandma Ivy, and the concert audience are all witnesses and boosters of this country music star and cowgirl Cinderella match. The fact that every witness on this occasion, as Pure Country suggests, approves Dusty’s proposal to Harley, indicates a communal standard of a private activity, and plus the fact that the concert audiences are part of Dusty’s personal historical event, Pure Country is clearly giving country music fans a strong association and belongingness to the “greater collective entity, to which the individual could relate emotionally.”87 Although country music is constantly sharing personal issues to the public listeners, it is the country musicals like Pure Country that propagates the mechanism of country’s utopia through its art of storytelling by visualizing and cinematizing the intensifications of personal issues, traumas, emotions, memories and activities

86 Siebers, “The Utopian Function of Film Music,” 55.
and hence reinforces the ideological idea of country’s American working class identity and authenticity.

When the mise en scene of the music number “I Cross My Heart” connects the audiences, in and out of *Pure Country* with the communal spirit of country, the music itself beautifies and utopianizes the cinematic atmosphere, and claims the power in reviving country music’s authenticity and in convincing Harley into Dusty’s honesty and confidence on their romantic past. Let us not forget that Harley, feeling cheated by the mysterious “Mr. Wyatt”, is not willing to listen to Dusty’s words of explanation in the previous plot, “get away from me and I don’t want to talk to you,” but when “Mr. Wyatt” shows up as Dusty the country singer, and emotionally croons out his explanation and proposal, Harley is immediately overwhelmed with affection and adoration. *Pure Country* therefore transmits to its audiences the magic of music to words, because despite “sound [can] evoke a space in the presence of an activity, which people are programmed to respond immediately to it,”88 a monologue speech of words could be deceptive or powerless in the face of crisis, while it is the music of words that makes Dusty heard for clearing out the misunderstandings between him and Harley and also markets Dusty to Harley, and it is the powerful music that makes the words remembered, fetching, and believable, for “song words are only remembered in their melodic and rhythmic setting.”89 The proposal words (lyric) of “I Cross My Heart,”

Our love is unconditional, we see it from the start,  
I see it in your eyes, you can feel it from my heart.  
From here on after let’s stay the way we are right now,  
And share all the love and laughter that a lifetime will allow.

greatly expresses Dusty’s confirmation and confident orientation upon the past, and lyrically

88 Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance*, 22  
“points in the direction to the ultimate space” by Dusty proposing to continue and expand their relationship to the future. Especially when the lyric is locked in a music genre which Pure Country claims as a spokesman for purity and authenticity, the proposal words appears more heartfelt and utopian for Harley and for audiences when Dusty sings in the chorus part “In all the world you’ll never find a love as true as mine.” It appears that, Dusty might lie to her when he speaks, but he won’t lie to her when he sings, which is the very image of country music Pure Country tries to restore, that country music is pure and authentic, and will never lie.

Just like “I Cross My Heart,” as a piece of film music, creates an emotional and utopian atmosphere for the narrative space of Pure Country, the social-cultural American daily life could be likewise utopianized by country music for listeners. It is country music, being “a fourth dimension”90 to the diegesis of Pure Country, that symbolizes the solution to Dusty’s romance and career crisis, reconciliation for people from different generations, and intensification of small things into a public concern. Also being a “fourth dimension” to the social-cultural daily lives in an American setting, I would conclude with an argument, country music beautifies and utopianizes the individual relationship with the otherness in life, and engages its listeners a signifier of perfection in past and hope for future.

A utopian approach to arts is no novel. According to Ernst Bloch, the German philosopher in 20th century, all arts are a representation of humans’ utopian impulse. He finds utopian traces throughout the field of culture in his fundamental books of utopia theory The Principle of Hope and The Spirit of Utopia and observes that “throughout history, and in all cultures, people have dreamed of a better life and constructed various kinds of utopias, and utopian dreams are present

in art forms such as poetry, drama, music and painting, and as Bloch points out,

The here and now, repeatedly beginning in nearness, is a utopian category…and has not yet entered time and space. Great works of art essentially show a realistically related pre-appearance of their completely developed subject-matter. The glance towards a prefigured, aesthetically and religiously experimental being is variable within them, but every attempt of this kind is experimenting with something perfect, which the world has not yet seen.

Country music, in this light, is a remarkable application to this argument, and to fully reveal the utopian aspect of country music requires observations based on philosophy, history, and American studies. This thesis, to my wish, could serve as a beginning for more attentions and research to continue digging country music’s attraction with utopia theories.

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Conclusion

As cinematic texts for country music, the country musical expresses the history, tradition, and current dynamics of this American music genre, as well as its melancholy, nostalgia, joy, prayerfulness, hope, and utopia, and hence, becomes a tool for us to understanding the many concerns and issues of a music associated with the South, the rurality, and the mundane. *Pure Country* in particular, though neglects the black music influence in country music’s origin and remains ambivalent to the pop/rock fashioned country music in 1990s, nevertheless reflects the issues of authenticity and community in a transparent way, and also demonstrates the utopian aspects of individual hardships and cultural community. As Dusty steps on his journey to search for the meanings of past trauma, American rurality, and the daily trivia for himself and country music, the audiences are reminded of the daily life’s meanings under their surface of mundanity and mediocrity; as he mediates the generational country communities and hence defends the stability and continuity of an American music tradition, the audiences are offered an integral and greater entity to which one can relate emotionally. Therefore, country music, by intensifying the mundane, provides a profundity of daily things in their hurrying currents; by having its people sharing their hardships, enhances the cultural community in the fragmented and discontinuous reality. So that regardless of viewing country music in an individual or community level, this American music can offer one a different, intensified, and utopianized vision to self and reality, and it is also the sound of county music, in a country musical, that directs the consciousness of the audience into an ultimate utopian vision of space and time.
Another way to conclude my study is to show utopianism as a pattern in other country musicals. I want to talk briefly about the musical moment “Who Will Buy My Memories” from *Songwriter* (1984), an example that summarizes many of the themes of this thesis. *Songwriter* is a comedy about an artist seeking his freedom, and the story is loosely based on Willie Nelson’s own financial crisis: a country singer Doc Jenkins (Willie Nelson) employs various devious tricks to extricate himself from his legal entanglement with a Nashville gangster company which takes all the profits from his songs, and meanwhile Doc also wants to get back with his ex-wife Honey (Melinda Dillon), whom he divorced due to their disagreement on Doc’s always “on the road” lifestyle. The music number “Who Will Buy My Memories” occurs when Doc, in the time of being trapped in financial problems set by a cunning record company, goes to visit Honey, and responds to Honey’s suspicion as to whether Doc could still “pick up a guitar and write a song” when dealing with party, banker, and money all the time. Doc picks up a guitar, sits in front of Honey on a sofa, and not only spontaneously performs for her, but also sings a song about their shared memory and his regrets. Doc croons out the lyric slowly in a deep timbre,

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A past that’s sprinkled with the blues
A few old dreams that I can’t use
Who’ll buy my memories of things that used to be
There were the smiles before the tears
And with the smiles some better years
Who’ll buy my memories of things that used to be
When I remember how things were
My memories all leave with her
I’d like to start my life anew
But memories just make me blue
A cottage small just built for two
A garden wall with violets blue
Who’ll buy my memories of things that used to be.
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Right after his performance, Honey quickly replies “You show off!” Along with the obvious happiness on her face, we audience are suddenly pulled out from the shortly created nostalgia, but are more absorbed into their ambivalent, bittersweet, and complex relationships and the upcoming plots.

“Who Will Buy My Memories” not only lyrically summarizes the Doc and Honey’s history (blues, tears, better years, and smiles) as the untold plots, but also creates nostalgia for a lost, idealized past. The Greek compound of nostalgia consists of two roots: nostos means return home, and algia means longing. Svetlana Boym wrote, “Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a tie of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals.”93 In the case of “Who Will Buy My Memories,” Doc’s nostalgia can be seen as a response to his accelerating “on the road again” lifestyle, which can metaphorically represent the adventure spirit and modern development of America. The high speed of social development inevitably requires an expression of nostalgia. In this respect, what nostalgia to Doc is what country music to America, they are both means to “long for continuity in the fragmented world, and rebel against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.”94

“Nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension,” Svetlana Boym wrote, “only when it is no longer directed toward the future, nostalgia.”95 According to this argument, the past-oriented country music exemplifies a utopian art form. Paul Monaco noted nostalgia as, “a memory without pain.”96 Similarly Ray Pratt wrote, “nostalgic references and recollections respond to human longings yet mediate and manage them in ways that diminish many associated

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94 Ibid., introduction XV.
96 Paul Monaco, Ribbons in Time: Movie and Society since 1945 (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 34.
discomforts." In the case of “Who Will Buy My Memories,” therefore, when Doc generates their memory musically in the living room, he is in fact solving the historical issues and tensions between him and his ex-wife by beautifying and utopianizing the reality of trauma, trouble, and regret and offering a “fullness of experience…[and showing] an ability to return… to better, allegedly more perfect times and memories.” What Doc does to Honey is what country music and country musicals do to us — to make us temporarily forget the tensions, anxieties, and problems engendered in daily reality and history, and what Doc sings to Honey is what country music sings to us — the collective mundane which is meaningful to both parties. So that in the space of a song, we, like Honey, are attracted by the creation of nostalgia, are given a utopian meditation moment, and are reminded of the familiar emotions, people, and places, which lead to the end result — the daily mundane in memory is transcended beyond reality, and become a perfection signifier in our imagination.

Additionally, the deep timbre indicates Doc’s authentic experience and working class identity. The mutual understanding of Doc’s nostalgia between Doc and Honey establishes their high level of commitment and trust, which resembles the relationship between country music singers and audiences in the cultural community. As mentioned, utopia fundamentally requires a social relationship. It is the relationships formed in the country community that keep the utopian world of country music and country musicals meaningful, and I believe, without the vibrant relationships, there would not be questions like “hey, are you a real cowboy?” or discussions about authenticity and reality. And country music would not be as attractive and utopian as it is today.

97 Pratt, Rhythm and Resistance, 25.
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