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Brandy Clark: Country Music as an Avenue for Social Change

In a song written by Shane McAnally and Brandy Clark and performed by Wade Bowen, the singer laments the current state of American country music for consisting solely of “songs about trucks” (Bowen, 1:14-16). This frustration with the genre is felt by many. Even though country music is one of the most popular genres in the United States, a recent study found that 35% of college-educated young adults have a propensity to reject or avoid listening to it (Lizardo and Skiles). This is not surprising, considering that younger generations “stand out from [their elders] in their views of family and societal change” (Parker and Igielnik). Country music is associated with more conservative values such as patriotism, nationalism, and strict conceptions of gender roles. However, there are a number of artists, particularly women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, who are challenging the conventions of the genre and pushing back against the notion that country music is just about beer, trucks, and hot women. Brandy Clark is an openly lesbian country artist who explores progressive and feminist themes throughout her work, including constraints of domestic life, socioeconomic stratification, and acceptance of members of the LGBTQ+ community. Clark’s music—specifically songs such as “Crazy Women” and “Pray to Jesus”—demonstrates how the story-telling nature of country music and its implicit claims of authenticity can make it a useful vehicle for advocating social change. However, the conservative or traditional values embedded in the country music industry often make it difficult for progressive artists such as Clark to achieve mainstream status.

Before discussing the ways in which Brandy Clark and others challenge the common perception of country music, it is first necessary to understand how it has become so strongly

associated with conservatism. History professor Eric Stein describes the relationship between American conservatism and country music as a reactionary response to the rise of folk and rock music in the sixties and seventies. He explains, as “while folk, rock, and soul came to symbolize the anti-establishment politics of the New Left, the counterculture, and American blacks, respectively, country music produced artists who defended traditional American values” (4). As younger generations became more socially aware and politically involved in progressive causes such as the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, those resistant to change clung to their conceptions of the nuclear family, heteronormativity, patriotism, and the so-called honest American way of life. As conservative politicians such as George Wallace drew working-class whites away from the Democratic party by appealing to class consciousness and racism, it is unsurprising that “country music stars flocked to the conservative cause, given that country music in the 50s and 60s was largely dominated by blue-collar workers (Stein 31). President Nixon strengthened this association: he “did not miss [a] chance to identify himself with the good-old fashioned, southern virtues of country music” (Stein 32). In other words, the relationship between country music and politics was mutually beneficial; conservative politicians benefited from endorsements by popular names in the industry, while fans and country music artists found their values espoused by the Republican party.

In country music today, a growing number of country artists such as Tim McGraw, Loretta Lynn, and Willie Nelson tend to support more liberal causes (Beaudoin). However, the conservative themes and values expressed in the country music of the 1960s continued well into the 2010s with the emergence of a subgenre referred to as “bro country.” The term was defined by Jody Rosen in *New York Magazine* as “music by and of the tatted, gym-toned, party-hearty young American white dude” (Rosen). This marks a departure from the genre’s tendency to focus on the working-class values of rugged individualism and traditional family. Although Rosen claims that bro country “doesn’t bother with politics,” gender is a constant theme. Characterized by perceptions of masculinity and often objectification of women, the subgenre perpetuates conventional

understandings of gender and the role of women in society. Although country music as a whole has progressed to include more open discussions of alcohol and sex, the core values associated with the genre have remained consistent from the growth of the relationship between country music and conservative politicians in the 1960s to the more recent phenomenon of bro country.

Although the country music industry is largely dominated by male artists, there have been brief periods in which female artists achieved massive commercial success. Yet they often found it necessary to embody the conservative themes so commonly linked to country. In the 1980s, the “unprecedented success” of women in the genre was “due to their abilities to mold their images to mirror American norms” (Wiggins 1). This was often linked to perceptions of authenticity, a concept that gender and sexuality scholar Tara Tuttle describes as the “painstakingly cultivated attribute key to the construction of country music artist identity” (1). In order to appear authentic to their audience, country music artists often project aspects of their identity that fit a specific template. However, that template, which “exhibited unobtainable idyllic versions of womanhood” was “never [entirely] fixed” (Wiggins 23). As country music became more closely aligned with conservatism, successful perceptions of authenticity reflected conservative values, particularly regarding the role of women in the South. Even though women in country music more often express progressive values than their male counterparts, selling records required performing an image of authenticity that conformed to conservative values, regardless of whether or not they actually espoused them. In the 1980s, those values included “backlashes against feminism and the civil rights movement, celebrations of working and middle-class life, and the rise of the South” (Wiggins 1). The 1982 song “It Ain’t Easy Being Easy” by Jane Fricke exemplifies the passive and submissive nature that was expected of women at the time. She writes about returning to a relationship with a man that caused her pain because he needs her and she needs him. This “stand by your man” mentality reflects the commonly held conservative idea that women are dependent on their

husbands, but should also assume a caretaker role in the relationship. Whether or not Fricke personally held these values, the song experienced immense commercial success.

This trend of performed authenticity continues today, even as the social and political makeup of American society has changed. According to a 2014 study by Eric Rasmussen and Rebecca Densley, lyrics in country songs with female singers were more likely to “portray women as empowered,” but also more likely to portray them as “dependent on a man, and as distrustful or cheating” (193). No song embodies this trend better than RaeLynn’s “God Made Girls,” released in 2018. The lyrics claim that women were created to “wear a pretty skirt,” “hold his hand,” and “give him a reason to wash that truck” (RaeLynn, 0:13-31). This reduces the value of women to their appearance and what they provide for men. Like “It Ain’t Easy Being Easy” by Janie Fricke, this song achieved mainstream popularity and even trended on the popular video-sharing app TikTok, despite its anti-feminist message. It is important to note that the Rasmussen and Densley based their study on the top 50 songs from the Billboard Top Country Hits list (192). If commercial success is typically dependent on adherence to conservative values, it makes sense that a study consisting of the most popular songs would reflect those values. Ultimately, the notion of authenticity and its association with conservatism makes it difficult for women to achieve mainstream success unless they are willing to conform to a very specific image of femininity.

Despite the conservative leanings of many female country artists, many—including Brandy Clark—have challenged these values by incorporating feminist themes into their work, thereby using the genre as a tool for social advocacy. During the 1990s, the increase in feminist perspectives occurred at the same time as the advent of the “third wave” of feminism. Given that music is very often influenced by social and political circumstances, it is reasonable to assume that this new wave of feminism impacted the way that feminist country artists wrote and shared their music. A major component of third-wave feminism is that it rejected the typical second-wave claim that all women are connected by a “common gender identity and set of experiences” (Snyder 183). This made room

for female country artists to address their own personal experiences with sexism in their music without feeling as though they were making a generalized statement about feminism. In the 1990s, some of these artists began to participate in a discourse of “hillbilly feminism” (Haynes 316), even though it decreased their chances of achieving commercial success. This represented a challenge to the hyper-masculine, bro-country presentation of gender. Hillbilly feminism invoked “sisterhood” and discussed “the prevalence . . . of violence against women, especially domestic violence and sexual harassment” (Haynes 316-317). “Is There Life Out There” by Reba McEntire tells the story of a woman who married very young and is tired of living her life for other people, wondering if there might be something more “beyond her family and her home” (McEntire 0:41-45). At the time, the idea that there is more to life than being a housewife challenged the Southern-Lady stereotype that prevailed in country music in the 1980s. Although this song presents a narrow view of feminism that lacks the confrontational nature necessary to make real political change, it represents an important first step in integrating feminist values into the genre.

Brandy Clark addresses these issues in her music, and she is a prime example of an artist who uses country music as a vehicle for social commentary. An article from *Elle* magazine that includes Clark’s music on a list of feminist country songs quotes her as claiming, “I don’t necessarily set out to write feminist songs, but I sure would hate it if I wrote something that was anti-feminist” (Mooney). This means that there are strong feminist themes present in her work even if they are not always intentional, which serves as an example of how third-wave feminism has made it more possible for women to tell their stories. Clark is a storyteller; rather than performing her identity in ways that align with the genre’s standards for authenticity, she writes about what she knows, weaving tales that inevitably reflect her values and her experiences with sexism.

In addition to the ways in which country music can be a useful tool for feminist advocacy, its story-telling nature also deeply resonates with the LGBTQ+ community. Queer artists struggle to break through into the mainstream country scene because of homophobia and religious

conservatism. Yet queer musicians and audiences relate to the genre. In *Queering Country*, Shana Goldin-Perschbacher explains how this can be so. Country music “truthfully and simply explore[s] the lives of ordinary working-class people,” expresses “their pride about a set of values different from that of middle or upper-class people,” and is often “funny and over-the-top . . . spin[ning] tall tales” that can be turned to different agendas (13). Chely Wright, one of the first openly queer country artists, came out after establishing the country-compatible persona of someone with “small town rural roots,” a “working class childhood” and a “Protestant Christian upbringing.” She wrote about relationships with men and queer women “passing” as straight. When she finally revealed to her fans that she was a lesbian, Wright faced a significant backlash, having disrupted the heteronormativity that was assumed in country artists’ usual claims of authenticity (Tuttle 67). When country artists come out, they make the audience aware that the identities of their favorite country artists might have been a performance all along, considering the entrenched homophobia in the country music industry. As a result of the homosexual panic that Wright experienced, Tara Tuttle questions “whether the construct of country music authenticity is compatible with a visible lesbian identity” (1). The authenticity claim that requires artists to perform their gender and sexuality as adhering to conservative values is certainly not. Yet Wright demonstrated that a country artist’s “visible lesbian identity”—having the courage to openly explore their queer identity through their music—is as close as one can possibly get to true and genuine authenticity.

The work of Brandy Clark exemplifies both feminist and queer subversions of entrenched conservative values. In her song “Crazy Women,” she confronts common misogynistic perceptions of women. The lyrics tell the fictional story of a woman who is arrested for starting a fire in her ex-boyfriend’s car after finding out that he has cheated on her. This directly contrasts with the traditional notion of authenticity, which required female artists to portray themselves as a complacent, sweet, “white southern lady” who could “be sexual and successful, but only if their power was contained” (Wiggins 43). The subject of “Crazy Women” is the opposite of complacent

and sweet; she is angry and willing to get revenge on a man who has treated her poorly. The ex-boyfriend proceeds to tell his friends that “she was [a] depressed / Borderline bi-polar, bitch with PMS” (1:22-28). This is a common trope; over 16% of songs written by female country artists refer to women as distrustful, crazy, or breaking the law (Rasmussen and Densley 194). Clark challenges the stereotype. Specifically, she criticizes the way that the word “bitch” has been weaponized against women for expressing their emotions, and she rejects the common claim that acting “crazy” must be a sign that a woman is on her period. These are all ways that society has prevented women from expressing their feelings, forcing them to become complacent with frustrating circumstances out of fear of being seen as “crazy women.” Clark turns this trope upside down, claiming that if a woman is acting in a way that is perceived as crazy, it is because of something that a man has done, because “crazy women are made by crazy men” (Clark, “Crazy Women” 1:10-17).

In “Three Kids No Husband,” Clark criticizes the traditional domestic role of women. She details the struggles of a single mother who works a difficult job in order to support her family because her ex-husband does not pay child support, and then comes home to her second job—running a home. Because this song critiques the “concept of the domestic sphere,” it serves as an example of the “hillbilly feminism” (Haynes 316) that became prominent in the 1990s. Although the lyrics specifically refer to a single mother, it could also apply to any partnership in which a woman is expected to perform domestic labor while also working a demanding job. Clark writes, “it’s been a 40 hour week and it’s only Tuesday / And there’s homework and dinner to make” (“Three Kids No Husband” 0:50-1:01). In other words, she never stops working. Clark uses the story-telling nature of country music to paint a vivid picture of the exhaustion and frustration women face in a patriarchal society that revolves around unpaid domestic labor. She does not offer a solution or rallying call to action; she simply brings awareness to a problem that often goes unnoticed. This is a common practice in most of her protest songs.

Clark's songs "Love Can Go to Hell" and "Pray to Jesus" demonstrate the delicate balance that queer artists must find between maintaining their authenticity and using country music as the vehicle of storytelling that LGBTQ+ audiences find so meaningful. Clark alternates between writing songs that tell stories of imaginary characters and writing songs that are personal to her life and her relationships. None of her songs are explicitly queer, and many of them even talk about having romantic relationships with men. Nevertheless, the songs with ambiguous pronoun usage—such as those that use the second person pronoun "you"—can be interpreted through a queer lens and resonate with an audience that knows the singer is open about her sexuality. "Love Can Go to Hell" is one such song. As Clark writes about a failed relationship, she determines that she does not blame her partner but rather places the blame on love itself because it will always be painful. She sings "Heaven knows, I only wish you well / Oh, but love, yeah, love can go to hell" (1:17-27). In these lyrics, she invokes imagery of heaven and hell, which are strongly associated with Christianity, to express her experience. However, many members of the LGBTQ+ community feel isolated by the homophobia associated with Christianity. Invoking these themes could therefore provide a double meaning for the phrase "love can go to hell." On a surface level, it represents Clark's frustration with the pain that failed relationships have caused her. With the lens of queer storytelling as suggested by Goldin-Perschbacher, these lyrics may refer to the fact that gay couples are often told by religious people that they are going to hell. Therefore, the pain that Clark has experienced from relationships is augmented by society's lack of acceptance. This understanding is supported by the lyric "I don't blame you at all" (2:41-44). Regardless of whether or not her relationships are successful, she will always be forced to endure the pain that comes with knowing that society will never accept her for who she is. The raw honesty that can be found through this interpretation of the song might not portray Clark as the perfect image of a white southern country star, but it is significantly more authentic than any straight performance of her identity would be.

In addition to this song, “Pray to Jesus” exemplifies the story-telling nature that queer audiences find so compelling, and also serves as a prime example of how country music can be used to discuss prevalent social issues. Tuttle theorizes that “queer and trans musicians and listeners [could] relate to country” through its tales of “ordinary working-class people” (Tuttle 13). By expressing the frustration felt by the working class, “Pray to Jesus” resonates with members of the LGBTQ+ community who are familiar with a lack of governmental resources for disadvantaged people. In this song, Brandy Clark leans into the traditional form of authenticity that often includes working-class sentiments, demonstrating the balance that must be struck between appearing “authentic” to her audience and also exploring true and genuine topics that she finds important.

In an article for *Wide Open Country*, Jeremy Burchard describes “Pray to Jesus” as an “onslaught against the American way of life in general” for the way that Clark critiques socioeconomic stratification in the United States (Burchard). Clark addresses this topic with the lyrics “We hate sleeping alone so we get married again / Don’t wanna be buried in debt or in sin / So we pray to Jesus and we play the lotto” (0:23-38). This can be understood as a harsh critique of conditions that make people feel as though they have no way to improve their economic situation other than to play the lottery and pray. There is also a juxtaposition between the purity of prayer and the vice of gambling. A devout Christian might pray to Jesus in hopes of bettering their circumstances, but would not turn to gambling unless it was completely necessary. This further reinforces the sense of desperation that the narrator of the song is experiencing. Burchard also hears the reference to getting married as ironic for Clark as a lesbian, noting that in 2012 when the song was written, same-sex marriage was not legal.

As one solution to the queer artist’s dilemma of balancing authenticity and commercial success, Clark writes songs to be performed by more popular artists who have already established themselves as authentic. In an article for *HoustonPress*, Amy McCarthy writes that although Brandy Clark’s second album *Big Day in a Small Town* reached number eight on the Country Albums Chart,

the main country radio stations often failed to play its tracks—even the songs least offensive to traditional country values, such as “Girl Next Door” (McCarthy). However, Clark’s messages about acceptance and social change reached a wider audience through collaboration. In 2013, she co-wrote the song “Follow Your Arrow” with Kacey Musgraves, one of the most popular country music artists and a self-proclaimed ally to the LGBTQ+ community. This song is one of the first mainstream country songs with a progressive message about acceptance, as it encourages listeners to:

Make lots of noise

Kiss lots of boys

Or kiss lots of girls

If that’s something you’re into (0:48-58)

The song reached the Billboard Hot Country Songs Top 10 (Moore). Despite the conservative leanings of country music, the success of this song showed that the genre can produce protest songs, even if queer artists aren’t the ones performing them. Brandy Clark made an impact on the country music scene without having to conform to a traditional perception of what it means to be an authentic country star. However, this also reveals the limitations of country music as a vehicle for social advocacy, because one of the only avenues to reach a wider audience is to write for allied straight artists.

Ultimately, the story-telling nature of country music lends itself well to artists who are looking to break down stereotypes and the assumption that authenticity must convey traditional country values. These musicians create art — beyond “songs about trucks” (Bowen) — that reflects their beliefs about real social change. Women and queer country artists have been making small strides toward challenging the conservatism of country music, writing songs that resonate with a more progressive audience. Yet the limitations of sexism and homophobia still make it difficult for them to achieve mainstream success. For this reason, artists looking to write protest songs and

make an impact with their music might find themselves better suited to folk or rock, genres where social and political messages are generally more accepted at the present time.

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