GREEN GRASS AND DIRTY OLD SIDEWALKS: EVOLVING IMAGES OF THE RURAL AND URBAN IN HONKY-TONK COUNTRY MUSIC

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

A common theme prevails in country music that explores the antagonist relationship between the country and the city. This rural vs. urban theme is very often used as a backdrop for not only espousing the genre’s idealizations of its imagined rural roots, but also serves as a backdrop for exploring a number of other important and constantly evolving concerns in country including gender relations, politics, modernity, and technology. In this paper, I have analyzed five songs from the country subgenre of honky-tonk in terms of lyrical content, style, and sound in an effort to show how the rural vs. urban dichotomy is constructed and also how it has evolved in light of shifting socio-cultural influences and changes brought by modernity. These analyses show that while the core idealizations of the rural and urban are retained, the rural vs. urban theme is often presented in a way that reflects the reality of an increasingly modern and urbanized world. The larger implications of these analyses ultimately help us to understand what the “country” is and stands for to country music culture.

Significantly, this study uses a holistic analytical approach that aims to interpret and understand the non-musical and musical elements of each song as meaningfully interconnected. Counter to earlier academic explorations of country music that only investigated non-musical elements such as lyrics and audience demographics, I integrate musical analysis into my approach to better understand how particular sounds and styles contribute to reinforcing and interacting with not only lyrical content, but also artistic individualism and country’s core concerns, particularly divisions between the rural and urban.
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INTRODUCTION

Country music historian Bill Malone once observed, “the tension that gives country music its power and that defines the stylistic essence of such great singers as Hank Williams, Sr., George Jones, and Merle Haggard, arises from the struggle to voice the contending and irresolvable impulses of the human heart” (Malone 2002:14). Indeed, behind a veneer of easy listening and simple language country music explores warring impulses such as longing for home and rambling, rugged individualism and communal patriotism, enduring love and sexual freedom, and feelings of nostalgia and reality of change. This paper considers another common theme in country music: the struggle to reconcile romanticized visions of rural life with the reality of urbanization and the changes brought by modernity. An analysis of country music’s idealized rural and urban illuminates not only the way that words and music construct the rural-urban dichotomy, but also the way that these idealizations provide a flexible backdrop for addressing a number of other important subthemes and ideologies.

It is worth noting that academic inquiry into country music is a relatively recent phenomenon. While American genres such as blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, and even rock and roll have all proved appealing and worthy of study by intellectuals, country music has, until somewhat recently, been largely ignored by academics. Sociologists such as Richard Peterson and historians such as Bill Malone began to pave the way for country music scholarship with publications in the late 1960s and 1970s, but not until the 1990s did country music begin to attract serious attention from the academy. Significantly, this new scholarly attention emerged as country music flooded American airwaves. As scholar Cecelia Tichi asks in her introduction to the 1998 volume Reading Country Music,
Does it take media popularity to attract analytical attention? Probably. By 1994, there were nearly 2,500 country music radio stations in the United States, and between 1990 and 1993, country music record sales increased from $664 million to $1.7 billion. In any given week, according to industry figures, 72 percent of the American public listens to country music on the radio… (Tichi 1998:2)

Tichi, a literary scholar, was just one of many scholars approaching country through a non-musical lens. In fact, scholarly writing on country since the 1990s has been dominated by scholars from a wide range of fields outside of music including sociology, literary criticism, history, American studies, and communications. For many of the scholars working in these fields, inquiries are often concerned less with specific musical elements and more with elements tied to history and broader social experiences, such as lyrics and audience demographics. Yet, the work of non-musical academics such as Richard Peterson, George Lewis, Joli Jensen, and Curtis Ellison has been pioneering in providing some of the groundwork for the musicological work now being done in the twenty-first century.

A small group of music scholars have actively turned to the music’s distinctive sounds and styles as a way to understand this complex genre, because as music theorist Jocelyn Neal writes, “country music is after all music, and scholarship in the field would be remiss not to address the musical aspects of the genre in a thorough and formal analytical manner” (in Tichi 1998:322). Musical explorations such as ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox’s investigation of country music and working-class culture in Real Country (2004), Neal’s examinations of “hypermeter” in Jimmie Rodgers’s music (2009), and David Brackett’s interpretation of Hank Williams’s music in Interpreting Popular Music (1995), have begun to integrate musical analysis into the cultural studies approaches to the music.

It is with a thoroughly musicological, yet multi-disciplinary approach that this study examines the rural vs. urban dichotomy present in five commercially popular country songs
dating from the early 1960s through the 1990s. Supporting musical analyses with a wide range of musical and non-musical secondary sources, Bobby Bare’s “Detroit City (1963),” Gram Parsons’s “Streets of Baltimore” (1973), Buck Owens’s “I Wouldn’t Live in New York City” (1970), Merle Haggard’s “Big City” (1981), and Randy Travis’s “Better Class of Losers” (1991) are discussed in terms of lyrical content, musical style and sound. Each of these lyrical and musical analyses are framed by a brief biography of each song’s performer(s) as a way to illustrate the importance of individual style and influence on each song’s particular thematic constructions. Included in several of the analyses are a number of musical transcriptions, and while these transcriptions can offer only partial visual representations of rich auditory phenomena, they are included, nonetheless, to illustrate not only elements of basic structural importance, but also sonic points of comparison and contrast between artists and styles.

The structure of this paper is built on illuminating evolving idealizations of the rural and urban in the context of regionalism. In presenting the rural vs. theme, the lyrics and musical elements of these songs often allude to specific geographic locales, and in turn, create complex oppositions between real and sometimes imagined sites that reflect history and significant cultural shifts. Chapter 1 investigates two honky-tonk songs that use opposition between the American North and South as a way to contrast the rural and urban. In these songs, the North becomes the alienating urban, while the South remains the pristine, uncorrupted, and often imagined rural. Whether only suggested or explicitly referred to, the South, as a mythologized rural site, is imagined in light of the great migrations of Southerners that took place in America in the early part of the twentieth century, and in turn, offers a nostalgic vision of a fabled (rural) Southern past. The songs analyzed in Chapter 2 place the idealized rural in the American West as opposed to the South. We find that the Western origins of the artists discussed in the chapter
have significant impact on their lyrical and musical constructions of the rural-urban dichotomy and their visions of the idealized rural and its qualities. The West, in these tunes, becomes less a place of nostalgia or an embodiment of the past, but more a place of freedom and an expansive embodiment of an imagined rural present. Chapter 3 explores a tune that suggests no specific regional connections to the rural and urban, but rather re-envisions the rural vs. theme in the context of a transregional America at the end of the twentieth century. Reflecting the mobility and multi-regional identities of the country music audience in the 1990s, the tune eschews references to particular regions as a way to avoid attaching meanings to idealizations of the rural and urban that might be informed by the histories and cultural climates of actual places. The paper’s conclusion, through a “neo-rural” lens, briefly revisits a specific urban locale previously discussed in chapter 1. Through this “neo-rural” re-envisioning, we find that the rural in country music today, is capable of transcending physical locality and is more connected with qualities of personal identities that are based in country music’s historically idealized rural rather than actual rural locations. In the end, though each of the songs discussed are treated as distinct products of a specific geographical, historical, and cultural context, it will become evident that they are all connected by a rural-based ideology that is central to country music’s core concerns and values.

**Country Music and Honky-Tonk**

Country music’s celebration of the rural comes as little surprise when we consider the term *country* itself. Replacing a number of other rural-rooted designations including “hillbilly,” “rustic,” and “folk,” in 1953, “country” became the term used nearly universally by the trade press to describe the music that was associated with primarily rural, white, and often Southern musicians (Peterson 1997, Malone 2002). Ironically, despite the fact that the music developed
during, and became a product of, a period of intense urbanization and modernization in the early twentieth century, the popular culture community of the music today retains and celebrates idealizations that function in transcending and, in some cases, chastising the urban influence that originally produced it. In other words, “country” is still imagined as “of the country” despite significant and necessary modern urban impact. Curtis Ellison illustrates this point: “the image of a lonesome cowboy, homesick Appalachian migrant, or displaced farmer who can’t cope with city life, big business, the boss, the wife, or the girlfriend—that is, the traditional rural American male suffering from negative effects of social change—is probably the most pervasive stereotype the uninitiated see in country music” (Ellison 1995:xvii). Thus, country music often centers on a number of antagonistic relationships—male vs. female, individual vs. community, rich vs. poor—that are built on and informed by the genre’s idealized depictions of the country and the city.

Although country is sometimes thought of as a monolithic style, it encompasses several subgenres each addressing country’s broader concerns. This discussion will focus on tunes from the honky-tonk subgenre. As I will demonstrate, in light of the rural vs. urban theme, the lyrics and musical style of honky-tonk are highly important for they not only resonate with a distinctive rural-based ideology, but also on a larger scale, they most clearly reflect what is thought to be truly authentic country music.

Bill Malone asserts that honky-tonk music’s early development took place in Texas taverns and roadhouses following the end of the Prohibition (Malone 2002:153). On the outskirts of Texas towns, honky-tonks became sites of refuge for laborers and displaced country people to relax and drink and express their frustration with change. Yet Texas did not remain the only locale to harbor honky-tonkers. Following WWII and continuing through 1960, the great
migrations of white Southern laborers to industrial centers like Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Baltimore, and Detroit, led to the emergence of many urban taverns for former rural dwellers, and these bars became convivial, communal downhome havens for displaced workers (Jensen 1998:23, 25). An “us” versus “them” dichotomy was forged in which the communal inside of the honky-tonk came to represent the imagined communal rural home, and the outside stood for the impersonal lonely urban world. Joli Jensen writes,

The neon-lit, smoke-filled bar is the antithesis of the mythological hills of home. But the honky-tonk always invokes those hills—it is structured by their absence. What defines the honky-tonk world is the loss of Eden, the absence of the hills and hollers. The honky-tonk genre is about living in a city, cut off from the solace of home (1998:24).

In an effort to show why honky-tonk music is deemed “real” and authentic, Jenson claims that the “honky-tonk genre is self-referential; the music endlessly describes its own setting” (1998:27). Songs like Joe Maphis’s “Dim Lights, Thick Smoke (and Loud, Loud Music)” (1959) and Webb Pierce’s “There Stands the Glass” (1953) illustrate this point in that their lyrics describe not only the place where the song would usually be played but also the real experiences of the patrons inside the honky-tonk. Being self-referential, honky-tonk music connects itself to the “true” felt experiences of individuals seeking sanctuary from the harsh outside world. The subjects and stories told by honky-tonk lyrics are often heard as reflecting specific beliefs that are both deeply personal, and commonly held among “dedicated” honky-tonk patrons.

Jensen writes that honky-tonk’s belief system depends on “deep oppositions that construct the country music genre as whole,” and perhaps no opposition in honky-tonk goes deeper than its reiterations of the contrast between the idealized rural home and its gritty, corrupting urban foil (1998: 29). In the rowdy loud atmosphere of the honky-tonk, the older pastoral songs about “poor old mother” and “the old country church” did not survive, and
instead, songs contrasting the rural and urban were updated to focus more on the problems and changing social status of the ex-rural dweller in his new uptown setting (Malone 2002:154).

Honky-tonk lyrics invariably portray home as rural, organic, and welcoming, yet inaccessible to the new urbanite. Protagonists yearn for home, but seemingly can never fully return, as they have been tainted by the alienating, corrupting city. The honky-tonk bar offers temporary solace from the harsh city outside, but is an illusion, a mirage. The neon-lit downhome haven can offer momentary solitude but cannot offer a honky-tonker the comfort of the old home place in the hills. Ultimately, the invocation of the unresolved tensions about urban life by honky-tonk lyrics serves as a central reason for why honky-tonk is often deemed “real” country music. By reflecting the urban struggle, honky-tonk functions as a voice of reality not only connecting site and subgenre, but also people and their lived experience.

Honky-tonk lyrics also make it very clear that the honky-tonk is a man’s world. With the exception of the groundbreaking Kitty Wells, males dominated early honky-tonk and have endured as the voices of the genre. Reflecting the largely male clientele in honky-tonks, male musicians describe life almost exclusively from a man’s point of view. Women, when they appear in the honky-tonk world, are often cast as corruptible, weak-minded, and in some cases, as fallen angels. They are tempted by the bright lights of the city and often fall for its illusory traps, much to the dismay of their hard-working boyfriends and husbands. Thus, in the context of the rural vs. urban theme, this paper investigates themes of masculinity in songs performed by men in order to flesh out the implications of strictly male-centered constructions of gender relations.

While honky-tonk lyrics often reflect specific idealizations, the honky-tonk sound and musical style relies on a number of crucial auditory ingredients: electric instruments, particularly
the steel guitar, and direct, unadorned singing. Malone writes that “country instrumentation changed significantly within the honky-tonk atmosphere. In the honky-tonk, with its laughter and merriment, clinking of glasses, and shuffling of dancing feet, instrumentation changed to accommodate the environment” (Malone 2002: 154). Though honky-tonk beliefs favor organic rusticity over technological advancement, electricity became an integral part of the honky-tonk sound and a means to amplify honky-tonk’s longing for the lost rustic rural. In the decades since the “electric revolution” in honky-tonk, electric guitars, electrified fiddles, and pedal steel guitars have remained essential ingredients in the genre’s sound, adding dazzling and piercing licks that as Malone says, “both attract and repel” (Malone 1982:127).

The steel guitar, as a key ingredient in the honky-tonk sound, signifies the emotional intensity of the genre. Capable of imitating the sound of crying, the steel guitar for honky-tonk aficionados not only sounds like but also feels like the direct and true experience of physical emotional response. Thus, the emotional directness of the steel guitar stands as another crucial marker of the “realness” of honky-tonk.

Honky-tonk vocals often aim at communicating directly and honestly, but this is not to say that they are plain and unornamented. From the slightly off-kilter, yet neighborly voice of Ernest Tubb to the velvety melismas of George Jones, honky-tonk vocalists work to capture the elemental impulses and emotions implicit in lyrics while voicing the feelings in the hearts and minds of their audiences. Similar to the steel guitar, they work to echo the sounds of “real” life in order to make their listeners feel the experiences that they are voicing. When Hank Williams plaintively yet excitedly sings of leaving his “home out on the rural route…to go stepping out…and get the honky-tonk blues,” we are meant to believe him because we have heard that plaintive excitement before.
In the end, for country music culture, the honky-tonk subgenre stands as truly authentic—it is considered real music about real life for real people. Malone eloquently speaks to this point:

To many of us, the whine of the pedal steel guitar and bounce of the shuffle beat evoke elemental, and often cathartic, impulses and emotions…The lyrics and instrumentation of honky-tonk music combine to evoke a side of human nature that we do not always like to see, or at least do not like to recognize: the vision of emotional pain and isolation and human weakness that we have all shared. (Malone 1982:128)

Considering the rural vs. urban dichotomy that underlies honky-tonk, Malone’s words are significant, for they connect the feelings of ex-rural dwellers to elements of the music that are perceived as embodying the world around them. Thus, the authenticity of honky-tonk is grounded in its sounding of real experience. Importantly, the subgenre has continually employed many of the idealizations central in defining what, where, and who the “country” is amidst increasing urban influence and change. As we will see in the analyses below, through framing the songs as part of the honky-tonk tradition, the rural vs. urban theme, and the “country” in them can be more meaningfully examined.
CHAPTER 1
SOUTHERN NOSTALGIA

“Oh, How I Want To Go Home”

In his discussion of the American South and country music, historian Melton McLaurin describes Bobby Bare’s “Detroit City” as a country “exile song.” He observes, “during the late fifties and throughout the sixties, large numbers of southern whites, unable to find employment in their local economy, migrated northward seeking jobs, especially to the industrial centers of the Midwest” (1992:21). These Midwestern locales such as Detroit, Baltimore, and Cincinnati, became harsh and alien environments for many displaced ex-rural dwellers, creating a sense of isolation and loneliness. Thus, it comes as no surprise that displaced southerners longed for home and sought comfort in honky-tonks and in music that spoke to their feelings. As close analysis reveals, “Detroit City” is indeed an “exile song” that explores the tension between rural roots and urban realities and gives voice to the struggle of ex-rural dwellers.

Hailing from Ironton, Ohio, Bobby Bare\(^1\) was born on 7 April 1935 to an impoverished family. He began learning to play music in his teens and by the late fifties, had moved to Los Angeles where he officially began his musical career. Bare’s first big hit was “Detroit City,” composed by Danny Dill and Mel Tillis and recorded for RCA in Nashville in 1963. The song effectively launched Bare’s career and became the first of many charting songs. Often blurring the line between honky-tonk country and the music of the 1960s urban folk revival, which was rediscovering and reinventing older American musical traditions, Bare’s down-home demeanor

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and pure vocal quality in his most popular recordings struck a chord with country and pop listeners, making him an important icon in both genres in the early sixties. Bill Malone calls Bare “the most successful” of all the country musicians “who experimented with the urban folk genre in the early sixties” (2002:283). Considering his crossover success, Bare may be seen as an artistic embodiment of the rural vs. urban dichotomy. On one hand, he is an authentic country artist, reinvigorating the story-telling tradition of earlier hillbilly and old-time music, and on the other, an important link to the intellectual urbanites and proponents of the folk revival. While “Detroit City” stands as work firmly situated in the honky-tonk country tradition, Bare’s plainly recited narrative would have appealed to urban revivalists interested in discovering the roots of country music.

While many elements of the honky-tonk world are explored, the major theme implicit in “Detroit City’s” lyrics is the contrast between the country and the city:

Chorus:
I want to go home, I want to go home,
Oh, how I want to go home,

Verse 1:
Last night I went to sleep in Detroit city,
And I dreamed about those cotton fields and home,
I dreamed about my mother,
dear old papa, sister and brother,
I dreamed about that girl,
whose been waitin' for so long,

Chorus:
I want to go home, I want to go home,
Oh, how I want to go home,

Verse 2:
Home folks think I'm big in Detroit city,
From the letters that I write they think I'm fine,
But by day I make the cars,
by night I make the bars,
If only they could read between the lines,
Verse 3 (spoken):
*Cause you know, I rode a freight train north to Detroit city,*  
*and after all these years I find I've just been wasting my time,*  
*So I just think I'll take my foolish pride,*  
*And put it on a southbound freight and ride,*  
*Go on back to the loved ones,*  
*The ones that I left waitin' so far behind,*

Chorus:
*I want to go home, I want to go home,*  
*Oh, how I want to go home.*  

The lyrics contain honky-tonk’s signifiers: home, work, memories, loneliness, escapism, and several dichotomies that contribute to the anxiety of the song’s protagonist. Ultimately, this anxiety is a result of the alienation and loneliness he feels in the urban North, knowing that the warmth of family, girl, and love are available in the “cotton fields and home.”

In each of the subsequent choruses, following verses, the speaker’s “home” takes on more specific meanings, and in the end becomes the romanticized and idealized place very often alluded to in country music. Already, in verse one, “home” begins to be clearly defined. It is a place in the speaker’s dreams, a place of “cotton fields,” family, and patient love. Although the “home” remains unspecified, the phrase “cotton fields” make clear that home is in the American South. Matching the rural vs. urban theme with an opposition between the North and South, this North-South contrast speaks to the results of social changes that took place in America when poor rural Southerners migrated North, but also evokes an intense nostalgia that reaches back to a time when “cotton fields” were a common feature of the Southern landscape and great contributor to its sociopolitical economy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Verse two is particularly rich, for it not only adds meaning to “home,” but also speaks to the nature of work in an industrial center and to the speaker’s ego conflict and escapist practices. The verse’s first two lines let on that the song’s protagonist is fooling his people back home.
Afraid to admit his unhappiness and alienation, he leads his family to believe that he is a great success and is “fine.” The verse’s next two lines express the reality of the speaker’s situation. He is doing factory work by day in the Motor City and escaping to the sanctuary of the honky-tonk at night. Interestingly, in *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy*, Danny Dill, one of “Detroit City’s” writers, lends authenticity to these lyrics. Recalling his contact with displaced southerners and inspiration for the song he remarks, “They did go north. I sat there and talked to these people. They were from Alabama, West Tennessee, Kentucky, and they’d go to Detroit and work in the car factories. And to keep from being so lonely they’d go sit in a bar and drink” (Horstman 1975:9-10). The verse’s last line expresses the speaker’s anxiety and ultimate hope: he wishes his family knew the truth, so that they might understand the conflict he faces and the social pressure and unhappiness it creates. He wishes they could recognize his lies and simply accept his lack of success without thinking him a “failure.” Importantly, this line tells us a number of things. First, the speaker’s people at home are unaware of the alienation and loneliness that the city creates. Second, they value economic prosperity and believe it can more easily be achieved in the urban North. And third, people at home in rural settings might deem a new urbanite’s return as something negative. In short, while the singer longs for his Southern rural home, his family appears to idealize the city.

Verse three offers a sort of resolution for our disillusioned ex-rural dweller and can be interpreted in two ways. In the first interpretation, the song’s speaker is giving up whatever quest drove him north to Detroit and his mindless factory job, and is actually returning to his rural home. In this scenario his loved ones will never know the truth of his unhappiness and failure. He will return home a success to everyone but himself. He will return home to the South, changed by his time in the city, remembering the misery and failure that plagued him in
the Detroit. This interpretation is less than optimistic for the future emotional well being of our protagonist, even if he has returned to his idealized home. In a second interpretation, the outlook may be more promising for the speaker, but nonetheless uncertain. In this interpretation, he again comes to terms with his failure, but rather than actually returning home, decides to reveal his unhappiness and lack of success to the ones he left behind at home. Metaphorically, the protagonist is sending his true situation home “on a southbound freight,” freeing himself from the confines of his lies and the misery they create. Inevitably, in this scenario, the effects of the city, through the speaker, will taint the perspectives and pride of his rural family. But, perhaps more positively, our new urbanite, though still longing for home, is relieved of some of his inner turmoil through his admission. Certainly both interpretations speak to the interaction between the rural and urban. Does a dislocated, unhappy ex-rural dweller return home and sacrifice his happiness and pride to preserve the purity of his rural home and family, or does the alienated laborer admit the loneliness and struggle caused by the city and hurt his loved ones? Having to choose between these equally distressing alternatives illustrates precisely the conflicts raised by the urban vs. rural theme.

The song’s last chorus is an interesting one, because in light of the third verse, it can also be interpreted in a number of ways. If we understand the third verse to mean that the speaker is actually returning home, the chorus does not make as much sense and is less impacting. Perhaps, if the last chorus was changed and the words were, “I’m-a going home,” it might be more believable, but also a bit too resolute given the ambiguity in the third verse. Now if the third verse is interpreted as the speaker admitting his urban defeat, the last chorus is, I believe, highly effective and satisfying to the song’s aesthetic. In this case, the protagonist’s desire to return home is pure nostalgia. After making his rural family, perhaps, painfully aware of his
unhappiness, the protagonist achingly and desperately wants his old rural life back, though he knows he cannot escape the city. He yearns to return to the home he remembers it as before he left for Detroit, before the city tainted the purity and sanctity of his original rural existence and idealization. It is this interpretation that I believe is the most meaningful because “home” has become the mythic site of the past—a green, welcoming place, with loved ones waiting. This image of “home” is the one that Cecelia Tichi describes as the “authentic center of American life,” a center that “stirs yearnings that occupy a tremendously powerful place in the imagination” (1994:39). Thus, we find that through the speaker’s struggles with reconciling his present urban experience with his longing for an idealized rural past, the meaning of “home” in “Detroit City” becomes country music’s fabled home, an imagined and romanticized image of rural purity.

While the lyrics of “Detroit City” clearly illustrate the rural vs. urban theme, the music that delivers them adds another dimension. “Detroit City” contains meaningful sound elements and timbres that not only signify “real” honky-tonk country, but also the slick, uptown Nashville sound.

The sound of Bobby Bare’s voice in “Detroit City” is direct and unadorned. In what Malone describes as “as an unalloyed rural voice… that could be alternately mournful or raucous,” Bare plainly recites the song’s narrative with sincerity and finesse and voices honky-tonk authenticity (my emphasis, 2002:283). But interestingly, Bare talks the third verse instead of singing it. This phenomenon happens often in country music when the performer seeks to connect directly with his or her listener. Much like George Jones in “He Stopped Loving Her Today” (1980), Bare moves away from the lush lyricism of song and simply talks to his audience. It sounds as if some of the echo on Bare’s voice has been taken away, leaving a dryer,
more unmediated sound which allows him to step out of the song to reveal himself very humbly and very personally. Significantly, it is in the third verse that the speaker confides in his audience, cluing them into something his family doesn’t even know: *you know, I rode a freight train North to Detroit City/and after all these years I find I’ve just been wasting my time*… The listener is intended to not only hear, but also feel the sincerity and immediacy in Bare’s voice when he shares the truth to them.

Although the tune lacks the “real” and crucial instrument of honky-tonk—the steel guitar—the electric guitar nonetheless evokes emotional intensity and the feeling of emotional response. I am speaking here specifically of the opening electric guitar figure and its two recurrences throughout the song. While the timbre of each of these figures is similar, the melodic content of each interacts with the song’s structure in very specific ways, directing the song’s harmonic content while voicing the lament implicit in the song’s narrative. Reminiscent of a steel guitar, the electric guitar figures in “Detroit City,” rely on sliding up and down against a drone. As seen in Example 1, each of the three guitar figures is comprised of chromatic steps upward and downward against a drone on B. By turning the tunings pegs of the guitar to raise and lower the moving line, the figures take on a seamless quality that sounds like a bar moving across the strings of a steel guitar. So, although the steel guitar is not present, the sound created by the six-string electric resembles its sound. Through that resemblance, the electric guitar becomes the honky-tonk instrument, signifying honky-tonk authenticity.
Example 1: “Detroit City” electric guitar figures

While evoking the steel guitar, the guitar’s sound is washed with reverb and grumbles with warmth and focus. Exploring the instrument’s lower, more guttural register, the chromatic guitar figure may even aim to evoke the monotony and dullness of the protagonist’s factory work. In its first instance in the song’s opening, the figure slowly climbs and droops back down, expressing melodically, a musical sigh or lament (1a). It effectively introduces the longing implicit in the song’s chorus and song in general. In the figure’s second recurrence, it functions as a pivot to a new harmonic area, but more importantly, introduces the narrative’s most telling verses (1b). Still sounding the low, chromatic, rumble of the protagonist’s dull factory work, the figure’s second instance does not droop or sigh. Rather, it rises and propels the song into its secondary key area, suspending the lament. It is in the figure’s last instance, after the last chorus, that the lament is completed (1c). The figure begins where it left off in its second
instance, and then solemnly droops back down to the song’s original key area, completing the chromatic musical sigh.

**Example 2**: Harmonic sketch of “Detroit City”

**Guitar figure 1**: E major: I-V-I →

Chorus 1: I-IV-I-V-I →

Verse 1: I-IV-V-17-IV-I-V7/V-V-I →

Chorus 2: I-IV-I-V-I →

**Guitar figure 2**: I-V

B major: /I

Verse 2: B major: I-IV-V-17-IV-I-V7/V-V-I →

Verse 3: I-IV-V-17-IV-I-V7/V-V-I →

Chorus 3: I-IV-I-V-I →

**Guitar figure 3**: B major: I-IV

E major: /I

Fade out in E major

If the guitar figure and Bare’s voice function as honky-tonk elements, or markers of “real” country music, two other musical features conjure the commercialized and pop-oriented Nashville sound of the early 1960s. The heavy use of background vocals in “Detroit City” as well as the lush string section creates a conflict when pitted against the song’s honky-tonk elements. Importantly, this intersection between the downhome aspects of the honky-tonk and the uptown aspects of the Nashville Sound echoes and reinforces the rural vs. urban dichotomy that underlies “Detroit City,” and creates yet another opposition predicated on the song’s core theme.
In his characterization of the Nashville sound, Wolff writes that “the Nashville Sound took country music beyond the rustic image it had earlier held since its commercial start four decades earlier, giving it a strong and decidedly contemporary edge intended to help it compete in the fast world of pop and rock’n’roll. In the process it became more geared toward middle-class listeners who lived in the suburbs” (2000:288). Replacing the fiddles and steel guitars with lush strings and choruses, the Nashville Sound sought to connect to an audience far removed from the dim lights and thick smoke of the downhome tavern, which could not even physically accommodate a chorus or orchestra. This intended audience was not one of ex-rural dwellers facing alienation is an alien urban environment, but rather one that could not and would not relate to the rural “hayseed” aura that honky-tonk evoked. Exhibiting elements of both pop and country music, the Nashville Sound was justified as a defensive strategy, necessary for the genre’s survival in light of rock and roll’s arrival. Regardless of its defense strategies, the Nashville Sound stood in stark contrast to honky-tonk music.

A chorus forms a key aspect of that sound. Jensen writes that “[a] key element of the Nashville Sound is the heavy use of background vocals—the harmonious ‘oooohs and aaaaahs’” (1998:79). Indeed, in addition to harmonizing the choruses’ melodic lines sung by Bare, the vocalists add oooohs and aaaaahs in the verses. The combination of Bare’s “unalloyed rural voice” with the lush sounds of the background singers presents a conflict. On one hand, Bare evokes a sort of rural advocacy through the timbre of his voice and the lyrics; on the other hand, we have the rich, yet distant and seemingly detached sound of the chorus. Thus, the message conveyed through the sound of Bare’s voice clashes with the slick, polished quality of the chorus. While in the end, one could interpret the intersection between Bare’s voice and the chorus as an effective blend of styles, I would argue that the junction has the potential to create a
an aural struggle for listeners, sonically reinforcing the rural vs. urban dialectic implicit in the ideological conflict between the aesthetic of honky-tonk and the Nashville Sound.

Strings also evoke the Nashville Sound while clashing with Bare’s honky-tonk “authenticity.” As Bare reverently speaks the meaningful lyrics in the third verse, evoking honesty, the strings play the melody. Another key aspect of the Nashville Sound, strings were used to “de-countrify” and appeal to the pop audience. This element is similar in function to the chorus, contrasting with Bare’s vocals and creating a sonic tension that points to the conflict between honky-tonk and the Nashville sound.

Somewhat ironically, the use of the Nashville Sound elements and the contradictions they create embody the conflict between the rural and urban that underlies honky-tonk ideology. While I am not arguing that every country song that features a steel guitar and string section is by default a honky-tonk song, I am arguing that when paired with “Detroit City’s” lyrical content, the song’s diverse musical elements create the conflicted world of the honky-tonk.

By describing and invoking a particular world filled with particular people for whom the rural vs. urban dialectic is of central concern, “Detroit City” seems to grow directly out of the experiences of the people and places it reflexively describes—lonely and disillusioned honky-tonkers in a downhome urban tavern. While “Detroit City” creates a very particular honky-tonk world, Bobby Bare would go on to record a number of other honky-tonk songs that evoke similar concerns with the rural vs. urban dichotomy.

“I Sold the Farm to Take My Woman Where She Longed To Be”

“Streets of Baltimore,” written by Harlan Howard and Tompall Glaser, not only expresses some of the same conflicts implicit in “Detroit City,” but also provides a window into
the nature of gender relations within the patriarchal honky-tonk world. In what follows, a later recording of “Streets of Baltimore” from 1973 by country-rock pioneer Gram Parsons will be explored to show how the rural vs. urban theme resonates in a different kind of honky-tonk soundworld informed not only by lyrics, but also by the unique musical lineage and aesthetic of Parsons himself.

Gram Parsons, known by many as “the father of country rock,” found his creative musical strength through a mix of contradictory forces. Born on 5 November 1946 and growing up in Winter Haven, Florida, Parsons’s early musical trajectory resembled that of many youths in the 1960s. Enamored with Elvis Presley and his performance style, Parsons listened to and played all sorts of music as a teen, and by high school had organized an urban folk group. By 1965, Parsons began to gravitate both to the rock sounds of the Rolling Stones and to country music while attending college at Harvard. After leaving Harvard (without his degree), Parsons moved to New York and formed the International Submarine Band, a rock band with a significant difference: it included the pedal steel guitar playing of J.D. Maness, who Malone points to as “one of the pioneers of the instrument in rock music” (2002:387). While visiting California with the Submarine Band in 1966, Parsons decided that Los Angeles would be a better place to launch his music career. The city provided Parsons with an open-minded atmosphere where he could experiment with his fusion of country and rock styles. Later joining the Byrds, Parsons urged the group to combine country and rock, which ultimately led to the group’s seminal 1968 release, Sweetheart of the Rodeo. Following his stint with the Byrds, Parsons and another ex-Byrd, Chris Hillman, formed the Flying Burrito Brothers. Featuring rock

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instrumentation augmented again by the pedal steel guitar, the Burritos vividly illustrated a fusion of country music and hippie youth-culture motifs (Malone 2002:388). The group even dressed in sequined Nudie suits\(^3\) that bore marijuana leaves instead of the traditional country and western imagery favored by most country singers. While many of their tunes were highly rock-flavored (“Devil in Disguise” (1969), “Hot Burrito #2” (1969)), the group also borrowed songs from honky-tonk artists like George Jones, and Merle Haggard, and very often featured the pedal steel guitar stylings of bandmember “Sneaky” Pete Kleinow.

After he left the Burritos, Parsons continued to campaign for his fusion of country and rock, or what Parsons biographer David Meyer describes as “a holy intersection of unpolished American expression” (2007:xi). Teaming up with Emmylou Harris, Parsons released two solo albums, *GP* and *Grievous Angel* in 1973 and 1974 respectively. These recordings stand as the creative pinnacle of Parsons’s career and are closest to what he had envisioned as his own “cosmic American music.” Parsons died of a drug overdose on 19 September 1973, prior to the release of *Grievous Angel*. Although his contributions to country music may not have been universally welcomed, or perhaps fully understood in his time, Parsons’s legacy endured and continued to grow more appealing and influential to both rock and country musicians and audiences. In a brief, but poignant characterization of Parsons, Wolff writes, “to look at him, he was obviously a rock’n’roller; yet to hear him sing, his love for country music was honest and

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\(^3\) Beginning in the 1940s, Nudie Cohn, founder of Nudie’s Rodeo Tailors, capitalized on country music’s preference for western attire by providing country performers with flamboyant, western theme-embroidered suits that often pushed the boundaries of taste and extravagance. Full of bright colors, ornate decorations, fringe, and rhinestones, the fully customizable Nudie suits became integral to the stage personas and images of numerous country performers including Hank Williams, Porter Wagoner, and The Flying Burrito Brothers. At one point, Malone writes that “success for country musicians became almost defined by the number of Nudie suits in the wardrobe” (Malone 2002:203).
Parsons created music that breathed with grace, sadness, beauty, and wonder” (2000:415).

Parsons stands as an embodiment of a number of intersecting and often conflicting musical ideologies. On one hand, Parsons was a rich radical hippie cutting his teeth in the city that was built on rock and roll—Los Angeles. On another, he was a Southern boy longing for his music to be respected on its home ground—the rural country. But Parsons is perhaps best viewed as a pioneering hybrid figure, as Patrick Carr views him: “another Jimmie Rodgers—a new creative bridge between urban-rural and folk-pop musical forms, an edge dweller, an artist intimately familiar with the prodigal son themes of loss and longing and infinitely skilled in their expression” (1994:352-353). He understood the lines he was straddling and attempting to blur, and in contrast to the ideologies of rock and country, Parsons worked to create reciprocity between idioms instead of reinforcing their differences. Unfortunately, during his lifetime, Parsons’s rock image boxed him in and hindered the fusion he was working to create. As Carr writes, “the image that brought him acceptance by the hippies condemned him in the country” (ibid.:352). Remaining conscious of the important markers that solidified barriers between rock and country, Parsons created complex works such as “Streets of Baltimore” that imbued honky-tonk’s core concerns with his unique musical aesthetic.

In contrast to “Detroit City,” “Streets of Baltimore’s” lyrics do not construct “home,” but rather, offer us a glimpse into another of honky-tonk’s concerns: gender relations. In this case, we have a man’s view of a selfish woman that provides a window into the male-centered honky-tonk world:

Verse 1a:
*Well I sold the farm to take my woman where she longed to be*
*We left our kin and all our friends back there in Tennessee*
*Then I bought those one way tickets she had often begged me for*
And they took us to the streets of Baltimore

Verse 1b:
Well her heart was filled with gladness when she saw those city lights
She said the prettiest place on earth was Baltimore at night
Well a man feels proud to give his woman what she's longing for
And I kinda like the streets of Baltimore

Verse 2a:
Then I got myself a factory job, I ran an old machine
And I bought a little cottage in a neighborhood serene
Then every night when I'd come home with every muscle sore
She'd drag me through the streets of Baltimore

Verse 2b:
Well I did my best to bring her back to what she used to be
Then I soon learned she loved those bright lights more than she loved me
Now I'm a going back on that same train that brought me here before
While my baby walks the streets of Baltimore
While my baby walks the streets of Baltimore

In narrating his experiences in Baltimore, the song’s speaker highlights the dynamic nature of male-female relations in the face of the rural-to-urban move. Considering his companion’s happiness, the male speaker is initially optimistic about his new urban surroundings. But as his story unfolds, his urban optimism disintegrates as Baltimore begins to taint his only tangible connection to his rural home—his “baby.”

Verse 1a tells us a number of significant things and immediately establishes the rural vs. urban theme. We are informed that the song’s speaker is male and at the request of his woman, has given up the couples’ rural Southern home, family, and friends in Tennessee for the Northern “streets of Baltimore.” Interestingly, the “one-way tickets” that the speaker buys in the third line are central to the verse, for they tell us that the woman has continually begged for a move to the city with no thoughts of returning. Even more significant is the fact that the speaker has acquiesced to this request, completely severing his ties to home and the actual possession of rural property. It appears that the speaker’s love for his woman and wish to please her outweighs any
internal misgivings he may have about leaving the comfort and safety of his rural home to pursue city life. This situation, as it is created in 1a, seems at once plausible and suspect, and thus, evokes a sense of foreboding. Furthering this suspicion, we are not aware of the protagonist’s feelings, only the unsatisfied feelings of his woman.

The lyrics of verse 1b intensify and prolong the tension created by the previous lines. The speaker immediately tells us how his partner feels about Baltimore: she is satisfied, happy, and filled with wonder. It is meaningful that “Baltimore at night” is prettier to her than the often idealized, pristine rural world from which she presumably came because it presents a reversal of the traditional idealizations of the rural and urban. Perhaps she might feel that new urban opportunity will give her the independence and fulfillment that was missing “back there in Tennessee,” and offer her a new gender role in the new environment. In the last two lines of the verse, we hear the speaker’s feelings. He is proud of himself for making her happy and is seemingly starting to accept his new city life. But, he could be a fool, blinded by his desire for love and devotion from his woman. He evidently does not see that the city is what is filling her with “gladness,” and that he was merely the one-way ticket there. He “kinda likes the streets of Baltimore” because they are providing him with the illusion of love and gratitude.

Verse 2a is one of the most telling in “Streets of Baltimore.” Its first two lines echo the previous verse in that they reinforce and prolong the speaker’s illusions of serenity and happiness in the city and the tone implies that he is somewhat enthused and even fascinated by his new work—he “kinda likes” it. But in the verse’s last two lines we begin to sense his desperation. Despite the exhaustion caused by the speaker’s factory job, his woman forces him to re-confront the city that is not only causing his pain, but is also threatening to ruin his relationship. Clearly, the speaker’s partner is pulling away from him, but interestingly, she seems to still be dependent
on him. Thus, we see that she has not yet fully become urban and able to independently exist apart from her rural-embodving male partner. At this point, we sense a resolution coming and a pull toward some sort of impending transformation.

Indeed, in the song’s last verse, a resolution and transformation do take place. The first two lines show the speaker attempting to reason with his woman. But his futile attempts at returning “her to what she used to be” are pointless—she has always loved the city more than him, needing him only as a ticket to her transformation and realization of her “true” urban self. This is the ultimate tragedy of the song. The speaker believed his woman was something she never was and that he could solidify their love through leaving his “true” rural home for the city. Sadly, our protagonist was simply being used. The tense of our tale shifts in the verse’s third line and we have our resolution. The speaker is leaving alone and returning home on the train that brought him there. He is returning changed by his urban experience, leaving because his woman’s transformation to urbanite is complete. He is no longer necessary. “Walking the streets of Baltimore,” his “baby” has become all that is feared by rural males: a fallen angel roaming the city streets, completely devoid of any connection or pull toward her rural origins.

The lyrics of “Streets of Baltimore” provide us with a complex, and somewhat ambiguous text full of insight and meaning on a number of levels, but in what specific ways are men and women constructed in this particular honky-tonk world? Joli Jensen helps answer this question:

Women are especially susceptible to the lure of urban life. They are either angels (waiting at home, patient and loving) or fallen angels (sitting in honky-tonks with tinted hair and painted lips). They succumb to the glamour of city nightlife even though their men beg them to stay home. The rural-urban tension, then, is played out as a tension between purity and corruption, and between fellowship and estrangement. (1998:30)
Jensen’s characterization certainly describes the relationship between the speaker and his woman in “Streets of Baltimore.” The woman has clearly succumbed to the bright lights of the city, but what is particularly interesting about her is the fact that she longed for the urban life before she even experienced it. She felt the lure of the city while situated in the rural. Thus, “Streets of Baltimore’s” female appears as innately corrupt. In contrast, the song idealizes the male not only as good-hearted and self-sacrificing, but also, in the end, a fool. We find after coming to this realization, that the relationship was doomed from the outset in the first verse. With the male protagonist as the embodiment of the good-natured purity of the rural and his woman as the embodiment of the corrupt urban the relationship could not survive.

While the central concern of the lyrics in “Streets of Baltimore” are male-female relations, what adds to the richness of the song are other lyrical signifiers that connect to the real experiences of displaced ex-rural dwellers and honky-tonk angels. For example, like Detroit, Baltimore was a Northern urban-industrial center that many southern country people migrated to. Also, in speaking to the blue-collar labor done by many displaced southerners, the song’s reference to factory work is not unlike “Detroit City.” Further, the bright city lights of Baltimore mentioned in the lyrics may refer simply to bright lights in general, and to the neon lights of honky-tonks in particular. If we interpret them as such, the lyrics can be read as self-referential. These subtle references are important signifiers in the song that meaningfully solidify the narrative as a honky-tonk text.

In order to fully interpret the music of Parsons’s “Streets of Baltimore,” it is important to understand it in the context of *GP*, the album on which it appeared. Parsons employed producers and musicians that, like him, were experienced in the worlds of both country and rock and familiar with the sonic markers of each idiom. At its inception, Parsons approached country
legend Merle Haggard to produce *GP*. Though initial talks seemed promising, Haggard eventually refused, dismissing Parsons as “just a long-haired kid” (in Meyer 2007:358). As an alternative way to capture some semblance of the missing “Haggard-ness,” Parsons hired Haggard’s longtime recording engineer and mixer Hugh Davies for the sessions. Along with Davies, Parsons also hired some of honky-tonk’s best musicians, including pedal steels legends, Al Perkins and Buddy Emmons and fiddler Byron Berline. Equally significant, Parsons also instructed his manager to hire members of Elvis Presley’s Takin’ Care of Business band, a group of professional musicians who formed Presley’s core rhythm section. All experienced in rock and roll, these musicians included guitarist James Burton, arranger and pianist Glen D. Hardin, and drummer Ronnie Tutt. Their own individual rock styles, when coupled with the styles of the more traditional country musicians, helped create the hybrid soundworld of *GP* that Parsons had envisioned. Hugh Davies recalls, “I really looked forward to each session and working with Gram…he was interested in getting it recorded with the flavor and style that he wanted” and further, “I could enjoy myself. It was sort of funky country. Not quite rock, but beyond traditional country” (in Delgatto 1990:9).

While many of the songs on *GP* contain musical signifiers of both rock and country, “Streets of Baltimore” stands as a particularly interesting example. The song’s instrumental arrangement creates a honky-tonk sound complex with some interesting peculiarities, most notably the interaction between the pedal steel guitar and Burton’s electric guitar as they accompany the vocals.

The first sound we hear in “Streets of Baltimore” is the sound of the steel guitar, which is quickly joined by the loping two-step beat of the drums and the rhythm guitar. Parsons’s voice then enters and the pedal steel is replaced by the electric guitar, which employs string bends and
smooth slides as a means to echo the sound and style of the pedal steel that preceded it. This leads us to question why the pedal steel was replaced at all. Why substitute the authentic honky-tonk pedal steel for an imitation? The answer, I believe, is in the lyrics and what the instruments, in turn, come to represent. By imitating the “safe” sounds of the honky-tonk pedal steel, sounds that represent the downhome rural within the corrupt city, the electric guitar comes to suggest a sort of “false” purity. This representation is meaningful on a number of levels. Considering the opening verse’s lyrics, the imitative electric guitar can be heard first, as representative of the protagonist’s woman and her fascination with and yearning for the city, and second, as representative of the falseness of the couple’s relationship. Thus, the electric guitar sonically echoes and reinforces the sense of foreboding and inevitable doom implicit in the lyrics of the verse.

The electric guitar can also be heard as representative of the city when put in dialogue with the “real” honky-tonk sounds of the pedal steel that open the song. In contrast to the emotional expressiveness and immediacy of the wailing pedal steel that opens the tune, the electric guitar sounds somewhat impersonal and detached. The timbre of the electric guitar is thinner and dryer and lacks the richness and warmth of the opening pedal steel sounds. While the pedal steel sounds warm and inviting like the imagined rural, the electric guitar sounds cold like the imagined city.

The pedal steel enters again on the last two lines of verse 1b, and significantly, it is in these two lines that our speaker fills with pride and confesses to “kinda” liking the streets of Baltimore. If we recall that at this point the protagonist is filled with a sort of blind happiness, the pedal steel accompaniment is meaningful because it evokes a sense of rural security that contrasts with the sense of urban security that the speaker ostensibly feels. Immediately
following this short pedal steel accompaniment section is the song’s instrumental break played by James Burton on the electric guitar. Since instrumental breaks often provide an instrument an opportunity to be directly expressive, it initially seems odd that the pedal steel guitar, the authentic honky-tonk instrument, is not employed. But, upon reflection it is fitting that the electric guitar is used instead, because in playing the solo break and imitating the pedal steel, the electric guitar again connotes the sense of false purity implicit the lyrics.

In the context of the song’s narrative, the electric guitar solo also functions as an important pivot point for it is after the break that the song’s narrative begins to turn unambiguously negative. Thus, if we again hear the electric guitar as representative of the city, the break stands as a catalyst for the woman’s complete urban transformation and the disintegration of the couple’s relationship that takes place in the second half of the song. After the break, it seems that there is no turning away from the doom that awaits the man and his “baby.”

Burton’s guitar solo’s musical style is particularly significant in the context of his musical artistry. As a highly influential and revered guitarist, Burton was a seasoned veteran of rock and roll. He played and recorded with artists such as Ricky Nelson, The Everly Brothers, and Presley prior to recording with Parsons in 1973, and was known for a distinctive style of playing that employed string bending and a style of picking that became known as “chicken pickin’.” Before Burton, string bending had been prominent in the playing styles of blues and rock artists such as B. B. King and Chuck Berry, but “chicken pickin’” was Burton’s signature move. When “chicken pickin’,” Burton used a regular pick between his thumb and forefinger and a fingerpick on his middle finger which allowed him to pluck multiple strings simultaneously. What is distinct about chicken pickin’ is that after a note is played it is
immediately dampened to produce a sort of sharp, muted staccato sound. As is evident in the phrase “chicken pickin’” the sound produced is thought to resemble the quick pecks of the barnyard animal. This style has become a distinctly country style and continues to be prominent in the playing of country guitarists today. Producing a meaningful sonic tension between techniques, Burton’s solo in “Streets of Baltimore” contains both the rock style string bends and countrified chicken pickin.’

The electric guitar then disappears from the song, but not the pedal steel. In accompanying the last three lines of the song—*Now I'm a going back on that same train that brought me here before/ While my baby walks the streets of Baltimore/ While my baby walks the streets of Baltimore*—and the song’s outro, the instrument reinforces the speaker’s return to his rural home. It brings the song full circle in accompanying these lines because they and the song’s first two in verse 1a are ones that most directly allude to the rural home. Thus, the pedal steel in combination with these lyrics, functions as a sort of rural frame for the entire song, sonically returning the protagonist to the comfort and security of the rural life that he left in the song’s beginning.

Parsons’s vocals are another important musical element in “Streets of Baltimore.” In examining two specific instances in the tune it is shown that, as Olivia Carter Mather writes, “Parsons’ work… is a rock musician’s reading of the country style, an intercultural translation that resorts the list of country’s musical priorities to conform to his concerns” (2008:164). Much of Parsons’s vocal in “Streets of Baltimore” is clearly delivered in terms of pitch, vibrato, and timbre control, but on the words “me” in verse 1b and the word “night” in 2b, his singing goes sharp and the timbre grows thinner and more nasal. While these “mistakes” might be heard as a kind of vocal failure or weakness, I believe that it is precisely these expressions that echo and
reinforce Parsons’s musical development and his self-conscious straddling of contrasting genres. Considering what Mather’s calls Parsons’s “regressive” version of country music, we can situate these inflections in the context of his willingness to take vocal risks as a way to validate his desire as an “outsider” to sing country on his own terms (2008:170). Thus, the “mistakes” become what Lipsitz calls “creative expression(s) of cultural hybridity” (Lipsitz 1994:160). The sharp pitches meaningfully connect Parsons to the soundworld of the song through sounding both his self-conscious status as a country outsider and desire for insider authenticity.

In the end, “Streets of Baltimore” stands as a complex honky-tonk work that explores and illuminates the dynamic nature of gender relations within the honky-tonk world. The song’s music compounds the richness of the lyrics, echoing the aesthetic of its performers and producers and providing insight into the way that musicians’ backgrounds and musical approaches can reinforce and meaningfully impact a song’s central thematic concern. This interaction between performer(s) and theme is significant because, as we will see in another tune that examines the rural and urban, it creates a depth of meaning that draws its power from emotional sincerity and expression.
CHAPTER 2
WESTERN FREEDOM

“It Ain’t Nothin’ But A Concrete Jungle”

Buck Owens’s “I Wouldn’t Live In New York City (If They Gave Me The Whole Dang Town)” constructs the imagined rural through its opposite. In contrast to “Detroit City” and “Streets of Baltimore,” the tune does not overtly articulate North-South oppositions or gender relations within the honky-tonk world, but instead offers a critique of life in one of America’s largest and most well known urban centers and only alludes to the qualities of the rural. Before delving into the lyrics and music of the song though, it will be useful to briefly sketch Buck Owens’s biography in order to understand how his musical aesthetic and unique situation in country music informs it.

Alvis Edgar “Buck” Owens was born in Sherman, Texas in 1929, but grew up in Mesa, Arizona, where he began his musical career. Later moving to Bakersfield, California, in 1951, Owens became a session musician for Capitol Records—an important independent label in Los Angeles—and eventually joined the label as a solo artist. Owen continually created hit records throughout the late 1950s and sixties and forged a distinctive sound that had the hard edge of honky-tonk and the infectious bounce of rockabilly. Often coupled with Owens’s pleading tenor voice were energetic shuffle beats, and the sharp, piercing sounds of a twangy, electric guitar. Together, these elements helped forge what came to be known as the “Bakersfield Sound,” named after Owens’s hometown. Owens’s brand of that sound, exemplified by hit songs such as “Act Naturally” (1963) and “I’ve Got A Tiger By the Tail” (1964), provided honky-tonk fans

with a refreshing contrast to the more polished and lush sounds coming out of Nashville at the
time. Malone writes that, “for several years during the sixties the music of Buck Owens and the
Buckaroos blew like a breath of sparkling fresh air over the country music landscape,
reinvigorating hard country enthusiasts with its sharp clearly delineated string band sound, its
high-hard harmony, and the absence of vocal choruses” (2002:292). While Owens would go on
to branch out of his winning honky-tonk formula and distinctive hard-edged sound in the mid-
1970s, the honky-tonk legacy he built in the early part of career would serve as the foundation
for country music’s neo-traditional resurgence in the late 1980s and nineties.

Even before Owens’s arrival on the scene, the Golden state had become a hotbed for
country music. Owing much to the influx of Oklahomans, Midwesterners, and Southerners that
brought with them their love of hillbilly, honky-tonk, and Texas-style swing dance music as they
migrated to California during the Depression and Dust Bowl, the state had a large market for
country music of all kinds. This bustling country music scene centered primarily in Los Angeles
rivaled Nashville as a geographical haven for the genre.

Although Los Angeles, because of its powerful radio stations, active club scene, and the
presence of Capitol Records, played the most important role in formulating and disseminating
the West Coast country sound, Bakersfield challenged its leadership. As an oil and cotton center
in the San Joaquin Valley, Bakersfield was a blue-collar city littered with honky-tonks. As
Wolff writes, “while the clubs and clientele in LA were often urban and swanky, Bakersfield’s
crowds appreciated things a little more raw and gritty” (Wolff 2000:166). Importantly though,
the relationship between Bakersfield and Los Angeles was one of reciprocity, not rivalry, and
owed much to the freedom that Capitol Records allowed its Bakersfield artists. Artists such as
Owens were encouraged to follow their own artistic visions, and were allowed to use their own
road bands. Thus, the “Bakersfield Sound,” though recorded and disseminated by a label in Los Angeles, retained its own particular sonic identity. However, attempting to make distinctions between a West Coast country sound and the “Bakersfield Sound” is unnecessary. What is important is recognition that Bakersfield natives such as Owens and Merle Haggard combined musical elements that not only reflected the musical demands of their blue-collar hometown, but also came to reflect the West Coast country music aesthetic and style in general.

Given their geographical position many West Coast country artists and writers were disinclined to represent the South as the idealized rural home. Artists like Owens and Haggard, though concerned with addressing the rural and urban in songs like “I Wouldn’t Live in New York City” (1970) and “Big City” (1981), did not voice the North-South oppositions heard in the songs of Nashville country artists and writers. In other words, home was still green and mama was still waiting on the front porch for you to return from that dirty ol’ city, though home was not necessarily south of the Mason Dixon Line. For native West Coast artists such as Owens and Haggard, who wrote many of their own songs, deemphasizing regional contrasts did not diminish the impulse to explore tensions between the rural and urban.

That Owens avoids rural and Southern references is notable for two reasons. First, I contend that Owens’s musical individualism and West Coast country aesthetic was built on distancing himself from the Nashville’s rural-based ideology. Staying true to his more urban roots and their influence, Owens situated himself apart from the more conservative, rural ethos of his Nashville (South-based) contemporaries. Second, taking into account country music’s concern with honesty and the realness of its performers, audiences who knew anything about Owens and the “Bakersfield Sound” might have considered him a sort of fake if he were to write songs that placed his home in the rural South. Nonetheless, Owens’s did write material
addressing the rural, and in songs like “I Wouldn’t Live In New York City,” we find these compositions informed heavily by his unique musical aesthetic and position within country.

The lyrics of “I Wouldn’t Live In New York City,” were inspired by Owens’s real experiences in New York. Owens and his band, The Buckaroos, sometimes traveled to New York City for concerts and network television appearances and as Rich Kienzle notes, Owens was often “rankled by the city’s high-pressure atmosphere, expensive cab fares and hotel bills, and the surly cab drivers and bellhops demanding big tips” (Keinzle 1992:65). As a way to vent his anxiety, Owens used “I Wouldn’t Live In New York City” as a way to both chastise New York City in particular and attack the urban experience in general. While the lyrics of the song very clearly speak to the immorality and alienation experienced by those just “trying to survive” in the city, by idealizing and defining only the city, Owens invites the listener to infer its opposite: the warm, communal rural:

Verse 1:
It ain't nothin' but a concrete jungle with people packed like sardines
Where everybody's tryin' to live beyond their means
Where all the natives hurry and scurry to and fro
And like a fleas on a puppy dog they got no place to go

Chorus:
I wouldn't live in New York City if they gave me the whole dang town
Talk about a bummer it's the biggest one around
Sodom and Gomorrah was tame to what I found
I wouldn't live in New York City if they gave me the whole dang town

Verse 2:
Well I ain't seen the sunshine since the day that I arrived
‘Cause brother I've been busy a-tryin' to survive
Nobody knows you've been here till you’re six feet under ground
Then you become a statistic if they remember to write you down

Chorus:
I wouldn't live in New York City if they gave me the whole dang town
Talk about a bummer it's the biggest one around
Sodom and Gomorrah was tame to what I found
In the first verse, Owens uses metaphorical language to characterize an undefined urban locale with the phrase “concrete jungle,” and continues in the third line by referring to its inhabitants as “natives.” Significantly, the language in this first verse is in the subjective third person. By setting up a narrator vs. them relationship with the urban dwellers with this tense, Owens establishes the speaker as different—as one who doesn’t try to live “beyond his means” and doesn’t “hurry and scurry with no place to go.” Presumably, he is true to himself and doesn’t feel trapped by his surroundings. The idea that urbanites try “to live beyond their means” is crucial to this verse, for it presents the urban “natives” as false or unreal.

The song’s chorus shifts into first-person and very clearly defines the urban locale. It also implies that the speaker is not a “native” of New York City, but has been there or may currently be there with the phrase “tame to what I found.” This is interesting considering the first verse because it lends a sort of credibility to the characterization of the “concrete jungle”—the speaker has, himself, seen the “natives” and their lifestyle. The Biblical allusion in the chorus’s third line is also particularly strong. Describing the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as “tame” in comparison to New York City is powerful given that they were said to have been destroyed by God because of the wickedness and vice of their inhabitants. Using the cities as points of contrast, not only does the song’s protagonist show his tremendous contempt for New York City, but also connects to God-fearing listeners.

The lyrics of verse two tell us that the speaker has or is, in fact, living in New York City. Simply “trying to survive,” the protagonist voices his lament over not being able to see the sunshine while trapped inside the confines of the dark city. Metaphorically, in just “a-trying to survive” and live within his means in the “concrete jungle,” the speaker is unable to live
naturally as he might in a less demanding environment. A question is raised here: why is the speaker subjecting himself to the urban environment? It seems obvious that if he had a choice, he would leave the city he detests, but yet he stays, knowing he is at best, a “statistic.”

The word “brother” in the second verse also suggests a number of things. In using the word, the speaker might be read as being in dialogue with someone back home, with a fellow survivor in the “concrete jungle,” or with his listening audience as a whole. Significantly, what is implied in each of these dialogues is different. If the protagonist is speaking to someone back home, we could read the song as a sort of warning aimed at deterring that person from moving to New York City. If the protagonist is speaking to another New York survivor, the dialogue suggests that there may be a community of alienated survivors. In this reading we find the us vs. them relationship that is constructed in many honky-tonk narratives. Finally, if the speaker is read as speaking to his listening audience as a whole, we find him personally addressing and confiding in his audience much in the same way that the speaker of “Detroit City” does. He appeals to an audience that is presumed as being held together by its morality and rural-based value system.

A repeat of the chorus ends the song and creates a sort of thematic ambiguity through its shift in tense. While the speaker establishes New York City as his home through a first-person delivery in the second verse, he shifts to past tense in the last chorus indicating that he has since left the city. Was the speaker ultimately unable to survive in the alienating city? Has he returned to a natural, more welcoming environment? While these questions remain unanswered, it is clear that the speaker retains contempt for the urban in general.

As in many honky-tonk songs, the lyrics of “I Wouldn’t Live In New York City” construct an urban locale. But uniquely in Owens’s tune, the song’s speaker implicitly conjures
an idealized rural through his characterizations of the city. In other words, he tells us what the
country is by telling us precisely what it is not. Thus, as New York City’s foil, the rural is open
and spacious, filled with sunshine and real people who acknowledge you as an individual within
a warm, communal atmosphere. Comprised of a number of diverse sonic markers, the music of
“I Wouldn’t Live In New York City” too evokes the conflict between the rural and urban, but
also illuminates competing approaches to signifying honky-tonk authenticity and the way that
Owens’s West Coast aesthetic informed his creative approach. Significantly, the tune stands in
sharp contrast to his usual “Bakersfield Sound.” Gone are the steel guitar, the twang of the band
member Don Rich’s guitar, the bouncing shuffle beat, and Owens and Rich’s signature high
harmonies. Instead, what we hear immediately are street noises accompanying a strummed
acoustic guitar, a plodding bass guitar, a slow shuffle beat from the drums, and Owens’s lone
voice. While initially jarring considering Owens’s usual output, these sounds become
increasingly meaningful when combined with the lyrics.

Certainly, the recording process for the song aimed at capturing the anxiety and chaos
that Owens experienced in his trips to New York City. Thus, after recording the song’s backing
tracks in his studio in Bakersfield, Owens traveled to Manhattan to record a live vocal track in
front of the building housing Capitol Record’s Manhattan offices (Kienzle 1992:65). As the two
most prominent sounds on the recording, Owens’s voice and the street noises accompanying it
are highly affective authenticity markers that together stand as an intersection between disparate
approaches to honky-tonk authenticity. On one hand, the live vocal and “natural” urban sounds
accompanying it could be interpreted as deemphasizing the mediation between Owens and the
listener. By emphasizing organic “liveness,” the track reinforces the lyrics’ confided message to
its audience, appealing to honky-tonk’s values in general. But on the other hand, in the context
of honky-tonk’s emphasis on rusticity, Owens’s track could be heard as experimental and somewhat shocking in its quest for realness. Despite the implications of these disparate interpretations of the track, the tension created between them is precisely what gives the track much of its power and helps us to understand Owens’s creative processes and multi-faceted musical aesthetic.

Barbara Ching’s characterization of Owens in Wrong’s What I Do Best presents him as a country artist concerned with expanding the borders of “hard country” music, writing that “country songs, in Owens’s mind, seem to work best when they step out of line, when they create a scandal, when they redefine country” (2001: 89,91). Further, Ching writes that “Owens’s songs usually work by both evoking and altering country’s codes” (ibid.: 93). Certainly, Owens’s vocal track in “I Wouldn’t Live In New York City” worked to redefine ways of musically approaching honky-tonk, and if we consider Owens’s musical individualism, we can hear it as an expression of himself and his musical values.

While much meaning resides in Owens’s live vocal track, there are a number of more specific musical elements that express the rural vs. urban theme and reinforce the lyrics. In spite of the chaotic streets noises taking place around it, Owens’s vocal delivery remains relatively calm. Lacking the anxiousness and exhilarating quality that pervades tunes like “(I’ve Got a) Tiger By The Tail” (1964), and “Hello Trouble” (1964), Owens sounds more reflective and resolute. This delivery reinforces the looking-back reflection expressed in the song’s choruses, evoking an image of the song’s speaker coolly recollecting his urban experience. In the context of the song’s present tense verses, the delivery takes on different meaning. Sounding calm while packed-in “natives” scurry to and fro, the vocal delivery suggests that the speaker has perhaps accepted his present New York City surroundings, or because of his implied rural roots is by
nature less anxious despite the intensity of the city.

The harmonica’s function supports the vocal’s contemplative tone. Played only during choruses, the harmonica enters into a call-and-response pattern with Owens’s vocal. In directly accompanying the speaker in the chorus, the harmonica might be heard as echoing the idea of brotherhood survival alluded to in the second verse. In this interpretation, we might imagine two New York survivors expressing their urban plight together, connected through music and common urban anxiety.

On a large scale, the entire sound complex of “I Wouldn’t Live In New York City” helps to conjure the rural vs. urban theme through pitting traditional country music sound and style elements against a backdrop of chaotic city street noise. And the affect produced by these opposing rural and urban sonic markers can be heard in a number of important ways. If we hear the convergence of markers as the rural meeting or entering the city, we find what would be open sonic spaces of the rural immediately filled by the city, packing the soundspace like a “can of sardines.” The song’s sparse musical introduction, for example, is layered with sounds of car horns, mufflers, and whistles, and further, immediately following the first chorus, we hear a loud exhaust pipe over the modulation that takes place leading to the second verse.

If we hear the convergence as the city entering the rural or perhaps, more appropriately the honky-tonk, again we find sonic spaces being filled. The difference in this case though is that the city interruptions disturb the communal release of tension that ordinarily takes place in the honky-tonk. For example, at the end of the line talk about a bummer it’s the biggest one around in the last chorus, a siren interrupts the speaker’s expression of (collective, rural) anxiety over the very thing that interrupts him. In other words, the city sounds invade the rural honky-tonk soundspace, denying the temporary escape it ordinarily grants.
Even though “I Wouldn’t Live In New York City” does not initially reflect Buck Owens’s typical “Bakersfield Sound,” it does reflect his musical aesthetic and concern with “both evoking and altering country’s codes” (Ching 2001:93). He embraced musical elements that signified honky-tonk authenticity non-traditionally and meaningfully expressed rural and urban distinctions in a way that was informed by his West Coast origins and situation outside of the Nashville mainstream. Though the rural was only alluded to in Owens’s tune, we find that other West Coast artists such as Merle Haggard were much more specific in their rural designations.

“Big City Turn Me Loose and Set Me Free”

Merle Haggard, like Buck Owens, was a Bakersfield native and influential West Coast country artist who was seminal in establishing the West Coast as an important country music locale and in creating the “Bakersfield Sound.” Often called the “poet of the common man,” Haggard is widely known for chronicling the lives of working-class men and women (Cusic 2002). Haggard’s simple and direct language and homey metaphors treat a wide variety of topics, and his preoccupation with the lives of plain, everyday folk have evoked comparisons with other admired American writers such as Woody Guthrie and Johnny Cash (Malone 2002:294).

Similar to “I Wouldn’t Live in New York City,” Haggard’s “Big City” of 1981 sets up the rural vs. urban theme without creating North-South oppositions or commenting on gender relations. Unlike Owens’s tune however, “Big City” speaks to class-consciousness and working-class realities. Evoking a populist ideology framed by the rural vs. urban opposition, Haggard effectively links music and message to connect emotion to hierarchical social structures and to
personalize the performer-listener relationship. Examining “Big City” in the context of Haggard’s biography it becomes evident that the tune echoes the struggles of the working-class and also reflects Haggard’s concern with connecting personally to his audience.

Haggard5 was born on 6 April 1937 in Oildale, California, a town north of Bakersfield. His father died when he was nine years old, and despite his mother’s attempts to keep her restless and rebellious son on the straight and narrow, Haggard drifted into a life of juvenile delinquency, detention homes, and finally prison in 1956. Spending his twenty-first year in San Quentin prison, Haggard began perfecting the music skills he had picked up in his teenage years, and when he emerged in 1960, supported himself by working odd jobs and performing in honky-tonks around Bakersfield. Haggard’s star rose steadily through the 1960s after winning widespread recognition with “Sing A Sad Song” (1963), a tune written by Wynn Stewart. In the transition from performer to composer, Haggard began to let his life story show in his own compositions. Capitalizing on his convict experience and his past, Haggard penned tunes such as “Branded Man” (1967) and “Mama Tried” (1968), that explored the prison and bad-guy themes tied to his experiences. Juxtaposed with these tunes were poignant love songs, working-class hero songs, beer drinking songs, and two patriotic songs that catapulted Haggard into superstardom and thrust an image on him as a “flag-waving spokesman for the hardhat generation” (Wolff 2000:181). “Okie from Muskogee” (1969) and its follow up, “The Fightin’ Side of Me” (1970) were written in the midst of the Vietnam War and stand as the most famous anti-protest songs of the period. Despite country music’s avoidance of establishing concrete political party affiliations, Haggard’s songs voiced a type of conservatism that flew in the face of hippie ideology, thus establishing him as a political voice in country music whether he wanted it

Haggard was also concerned with exploring and understanding multiple points of view and wrote songs such as “Irma Jackson” (1972), a song about an interracial love affair, and “Big Time Annie’s Square” (1971), a tune about love between an Oklahoman farm boy and a California hippie girl. The juxtaposition of the radical and somewhat transgressive subjects of these tunes with Haggard’s patriotic songs might suggest that he was working to reach a wide-ranging audience through addressing broadly appealing topics (Wolff 2000:181).

After the Vietnam War, Haggard and other country artists shifted their sights to more traditional working-class themes. Bill Malone has noted how:

Country music moved away from the endorsement of establishment values to a more comfortable, and traditional, absorption with the world of the working class. Country writers and singers became increasingly aware, however, that a message designed for plain everyday people could also be appealing to suburban commuters and even to “hippies.” While trying to be all things to all people, country music nevertheless became more self-consciously working class in image and orientation at the end of the sixties. (Malone 2002:319)

Haggard’s “Workin’ Man Blues” (1969), for example, aimed at the broad working class demographic by painting the picture of a man who is at once hard-working, individualistic, fatalistic, and opposed to welfare and handouts: Hey hey, the working man, the working man like me/ I ain’t never been on welfare, that's one place I won't be. This strain of somewhat generic working-class ethos continually surfaces throughout Haggard’s work, although as we will see in 1981’s “Big City,” he was not averse to insinuating more overt political stances.

As his debut for the Epic label, Haggard released Big City. The cover of this album featured a haggard-looking Merle reclining on his bed, wearing cowboy boots, starched jeans, and a plain white t-shirt. He is seated, holding his electric Telecaster guitar in front of a window that reveals a busy urban landscape behind him. The picture, fairly obviously, encapsulates the
rural vs. urban tension explored in the album’s title track.

Illustration 1: Album cover for *Big City*

Considering Haggard’s penchant for addressing America’s social policies, “Big City” reflects an attitude at odds with the nation’s then current political and economic aspirations, namely Ronald Reagan’s drastic economic overhaul. The lyrics speak for the working class, evoking populist sentiment and in turn, suspicion of government aid and unfair class hierarchies. In constructing the “big city” as the point of the speaker’s problems and class concerns, and “Montana” as a site for escape, we also find Haggard constructing the rural vs. urban in a way that relocates and redefines the rural:

Verse 1:
*I’m tired of this dirty old city.*
* Entirely too much work and never enough play.*
*And I’m tired of these dirty old sidewalks.*
*Think I’ll walk off my steady job today.*

Chorus:
*Turn me loose, set me free, somewhere in the middle of Montana.*
*And gimme all I got comin’ to me,*
*And keep your retirement and your so-called social security.*
*Big City turn me loose and set me free.*
Verse 2:
Been working everyday since I was twenty.
Haven't got a thing to show for anything I've done.
There's folks who never work and they've got plenty.
Think it's time some guys like me had some fun. So...

Chorus:
Turn me loose, set me free, somewhere in the middle of Montana.
And gimme all I've got comin' to me,
And keep your retirement and your so-called social security.
Big City turn me loose and set me free.
Hey Big City turn me loose and set me free.

The speaker in verse 1 is “tired” of the dirty city, his job, and his lack of freedom and fun. Joli Jensen writes that in conjunction with rural-urban tension is a tension between work and play and that honky-tonk songs such as “Big City,” “portray work (for men) as something done hard, every day…Hard daily work, for strangers, empties a man of all that makes him whole. He seeks something to fill him up again, something to call his own” (Jensen 1998:30). In most honky-tonk songs, protagonists usually seek temporary solace in the tavern, but as we find the song’s chorus, our speaker only wants the open space of the rural West.

The choruses of the song function as a plea or prayer. Asking to be let loose from the confines of the big city and his current situation, our speaker is appealing to some higher power for release. In this case, Montana becomes the place of escape and fabled rural. Unlike the mythologized South imagined by the speakers in “Detroit City” and “Streets of Baltimore,” the middle of Montana in “Big City” represents a different kind of idealized rural locale. Here, the freedom of the undeveloped West is what is sought rather than a return home or return to the past.

The chorus also expresses a sort of entitlement in that the speaker feels that he deserves something in return for his work and sacrifices. In jabbing at institutional forces and the
emptiness of their “so-called” future rewards, the speaker also expresses skepticism of governmental support and authority. However, instead of providing an economic solution to his qualms over inadequate government policy, he begs for freedom and flight to “the middle of Montana”—an escapist fantasy that working class people may have shared.

The speaker, in verse 2, again expresses a sense of entitlement. He’s been working since he was a young man and feels like he hasn’t moved forward or gained anything from what he’s done. The verse’s third line, *there’s folks who never work and they’ve got plenty*, speaks to class consciousness. The speaker is aware of his social position and believes that people above him have what he wants without having to work for it.

Sociologist Richard A. Peterson suggests that people who identify themselves as working class may fail to form the universal working-class consciousness hoped for by socialists because of two beliefs. First, in the US most working-class Americans believe in the “American dream” or the belief that through hard work and enterprise any American can rise out of the working class and second, people in the working class, in comparing life in the working class with life of the rich, often conclude that it is better to be poor than rich (Peterson 1992:48). I contend that the power of Haggard’s second verse is that it does form the universal working-class consciousness that Peterson describes. He’s been working since he was young, realizes that he still has nothing, and simply wants to have the fun that the class above him—the rich—have.

Peterson also points out that in many country songs speaking to class identities, class consciousness is “evoked and then explicitly dissipated in individual gestures of defiance and Cinderella dreams” (Peterson 1992:47). This certainly seems to hold true in “Big City’s” last chorus. As soon as the speaker becomes fully aware of his social position in the second verse, he
quickly deflects his vision and pleas for freedom and the open Montana landscape—a “Cinderella dream” that replaces the “American dream.”

In the end, the tensions between the rural and urban in “Big City’s” lyrics are intriguing in light of the speaker’s class awareness. I contend that if our speaker had been given his dues or climbed the social ladder through his years of hard work, he might not have been so chastising of the big city. If not for its rigid class structure, the city might have provided him with the freedom and fun he longed for. That is to say, the rural would be deemphasized as long as the speaker’s needs are met in the urban. Though this conceit counters the rural-urban relationships present in the songs previously examined, given “Big City’s” release date, may accurately reflect its audience.

According to Peterson and Davis in their 1974 study of “The Contemporary American Radio Audience,” “45.5 percent of country music listeners are craftsmen, skilled or semi-skilled workers,” and that unskilled workers are over represented in the rank of country fans (in Buckley 1993:205). In other words, around the time of “Big City’s” release, country music fans tended to be, as Mackay writes, “members of the classical industrial proletariat, their productive lives dependant on wage-labour, with very little hope of entering any other ‘career’” (Mackay 1993:290). DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco also framed a composite of the country audience based on statistical research done in the 1970s, and reported that country music fans are not only working-class, but are also “urban living white adults with rural roots, who are established in home, family, and job, but are content with none of these” (DiMaggio, Peterson, and Esco 1972:50). These reports give plausibility to “Big City’s” de-emphasis of the rural in the face of urban reality. The speaker is discontent with the city, and in turn, longs for his rural roots though he is thoroughly established in his job. If he were satisfied in the city, he may still long for his
rural roots, but find them not immediately necessary. Thus, the rural and urban are still typically realized, but the tension between them is uniquely defined by the class consciousness of the speaker.

“Big City’s” lyrics also contain political overtones that are difficult to categorize. This ambiguity, however, reflects the lack of political alignment in country music as a whole. While some performers such as Haggard have identified themselves with political figures, country musicians have not sought a universal monolithic political stance. Despite this fact, it is fairly safe to say that country music does voice working-class ideology, and as is present in “Big City,” a populist sentiment capable of cutting across political lines or subverting them altogether.

Despite the fact that populist ideology has intermittently served a variety of political movements, the populist mood is only reluctantly political. As John Mackay points out, “those who find themselves in populist movements would in general rather avoid politics, but the incursion of external threats has forced politics upon them” (Mackay 1993:287). “Big City’s” speaker echoes this statement when he addresses government entitlement programs after voicing class consciousness. He confronts policy only because of the external class pressure he is subjected to.

More generally though in “Big City” we find populist ideology being used as a tool to reach a working-class country audience without alienating those with more resolute political stances. Populism asserts:

a) the primacy of independent activity unencumbered by bureaucracy or interference, based primarily on “human” concerns rather than political or economic ones;
b) the sanctity of a family and community life that is familiar, informal, and beyond question—a community life whose viability is threatened by concentrated interests from away, particularly big business, impersonal government and a bureaucratized labour movement;
c) a fundamental pride in one’s homeland, usually defined in regional or linguistic terms, and in its local popular culture; and
d) a reverence for a casually natural environment which is not plundered by corporate interests. (Mackay 1993:287)

The four tenets above do not imply affiliation to any specific political movement, but rather, very broadly encompass the values and beliefs of the working-class. While populist ideology can and often does function in a wide variety of modes, its central assertions echo and speak for common people whose control of societal forces has been seemingly usurped by a metropolitan elite (Mackay 1993:287).

There are a number of ways in which the speaker in “Big City” espouses apolitical populist sentiments. Certainly, he highlights a very “human” concern in emphasizing the need for fun as an escape from work and in recognizing the negative influence of big business and a government that can only promise economic reimbursement for what he has sacrificed. Though we aren’t given a place of origin for our speaker, we can infer that it was a rural location given his plea to be “let loose in the middle of Montana”—a presumably natural, uncorrupted environment. Despite the populist sentiment in “Big City,” it is difficult to assign the song’s message any specific political leaning. This lack of a concrete political stance in “Big City” can be read as not only a reflection of country music’s anxious apoliticism, but also as a symptom of the complexity of populism itself, an ideology accessible to a myriad of sometimes conflicting political interests.

While the lyrics of “Big City” voice class identity and populist sentiment, the music of the tune also serves to reinforce Haggard’s musical connection to his audience. Haggard’s voice and the various musical styles employed throughout “Big City” not only function as a sonic embodiment of the rural vs. urban dichotomy, but also produce a sound complex that signifies both country and working-class identity.
Exhibiting what Aaron Fox calls a “subtle and highly disciplined vocal art” that is “imagined in tandem with the origins of such voices in a local, ‘ordinary,’ working-class milieu,” Haggard’s voice, in “Big City,” sounds a social identity that breaks down barriers between himself and his listeners. His vocal delivery is direct and largely unadorned by unnecessary embellishment, and stylistically, resembles much of his output from the 1960s and seventies with its rough-edged tinge and small amount of tight vibrato. It calls to mind his other working-class anthems like “A Workingman Can’t Get Nowhere Today” (1977) and “Workin’ Man Blues.” Extending phrase lengths and smoothly sliding up to higher pitches, Haggard also sounds like one of his formative influences, Lefty Frizzell. All of these qualities combined can be heard as connections between his musical heritage, his artistry, and working-class concerns.

In addition to Haggard’s voice, other instruments function as musical signifiers in “Big City,” namely fiddles and the steel guitar. Similar in style to the earlier sounds of Texas swing bands, the two fiddles that open the song call to mind another of Haggard’s earliest influences: Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. In fact, Tiny Moore, one of the fiddlers on “Big City” was a member of the Texas Playboys in his earlier years (Malone 2002:406). Soon after their opening, the fiddles are interrupted by the steel guitar. In the context of “Big City’s” thematic content, we might hear the steel guitar and fiddles not only as honky-tonk signifiers, but also as working-class signifiers. As George Strait would sing later in his ode to the hard-working people in America’s heartland, *when you hear twin fiddles and a steel guitar/ you’re listening to the sound of the American heart* (“Heartland,” written by John Bettis and Steve Dorff 1992).

While the fiddle and steel guitar styles are largely traditional in terms of country music, the electric guitar style in “Big City” has flavors of other popular idioms, namely jazz and electric blues. This juxtaposition of country and jazz and blues styles in “Big City” is
meaningful because the different styles point not only to Haggard’s audience’s multi-regional social identity, but also to Haggard’s own multi-faceted musical aesthetic.

Roy Nichols, Haggard’s guitar player, grew up listening to gypsy jazz guitarists like Django Reindhardt and often used improvisatory, almost stream-of-consciousness creativity to give Haggard’s recordings a distinct sound. Indeed, his fills in the chorus and in the song’s instrumental break, do not simply imitate the sounds of the steel guitar, but rather poke around the song’s harmonic content, giving us a jazzy, pointilistic allusion to the song’s melodic line. In the second chorus, Nichols also plays in the pentatonic mode favored by blues guitarists and performs standard blues licks involving string bends and the flatted 3rd. A good of example of this take place after the line, *gimme all I got comin’ to me* (Example 4).

**Example 3:** “Big City” electric guitar solo in instrumental break

```
Country Shuffle  \[\begin{array}{ccccccccccc}
& \frac{1}{2} & & & & & & & & & \\
\end{array}\]  
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**Example 4:** Notation of electric guitar fill in 2nd chorus

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\[\begin{array}{ccccccccccc}
& \frac{1}{2} & & & & & & & & & \\
\end{array}\]  
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In the end, “Big City’s” musical elements when combined with the lyrics, not only create a honky-tonk soundworld, but also embody meanings tied to working-class ideology and the emotional significance of class consciousness. The tune stands as a powerful statement of not only country’s durable rural and urban idealizations, but also country’s refusal to affiliate itself
with any particular political movement while maintaining rural-based values and connections to its audience. As the next analysis will show, Haggard’s model in “Big City” endured and became particularly important to the “neo-traditionalist” honky-tonk artists of the late 1980s and nineties.
CHAPTER 3

“I’M GOING BACK TO A BETTER CLASS OF LOSERS”

Though Merle Haggard and many country artists of his generation would continue to write hard-edged honky-tonk songs, country music, from the late 1970s through the mid-eighties, trended heavily toward smoother, more contemporary pop stylings. Artists like Barbara Mandrell, Kenny Rogers, and Alabama, seeking crossover success, capitalized on the softened, yet sleek, cowboy image that became entrenched in American pop culture in 1980 through the immensely popular film, Urban Cowboy. Doing for country what Saturday Night Fever had done for disco, Urban Cowboy and its accompanying soundtrack exposed pop audiences to an accessible type of country that lacked the traditional tavern-based messages and twangy, rough-edged sounds found earlier in honky-tonk.

As a reaction to the country-pop trends of what Kurt Wolff calls, “Fifth Avenue country,” a strain of country traditionalism emerged in the mid-1980s that recaptured and reinterpreted the earlier sounds and styles of honky-tonk artists such as Lefty Frizzell, George Jones, Owens, and Haggard (Wolff 2000:457). Drawing on honky-tonk, as well as their own strong, highly individualistic visions, the “neo-traditionalists” of the 1980s and early 1990s, embraced “the sort of feet-on-the-ground, ear-to-the-past elements that had been fading from mainstream country music since the advent of the Nashville Sound” (Wolff 2000:458). Neo-traditional artists such as George Strait, Randy Travis, Lyle Lovett, Dwight Yoakam, and Keith Whitley, though refreshingly individualistic, were bound together by their unwavering devotion to traditional country music styles and influences—the voices, the instrumentation, the arrangements, the lyrics, and importantly, the rural-based idealizations of the country and the city.
Randy Travis emerged onto the country music scene in 1986 with his debut album, *Storms of Life*. Heralded as the bright new hope for traditionalism, Travis garnered critical praise and quickly rose to the top of the country charts. Unlike some of his neo-traditionalist contemporaries such as Dwight Yoakam and Steve Earle who flavored their country music with sounds that had origins in other popular music idioms, Travis presented an unadorned style firmly rooted in the traditional sounds of honky-tonk (Malone 2002:422). He became one of country music’s most lauded acts in the 1980s, appealing to older fans through his allegiance to earlier sounds, and to young fans through his powerful voice and good looks—a wide demographic of fans concerned with sincerity, directness, and authenticity.

Travis\(^6\) was born on 4 May 1959 in the small town of Marshville, North Carolina. He was encouraged early on by his father to learn music, and in the process, was imbued with a deep love for country singers like Hank Williams, Gene Autry, and Ernest Tubb. By his teens, Travis was playing music in country bands and singing solo in nightclubs, but at the same time developing a wild side that often got him into trouble with the law. After dropping out of high school in ninth grade, Travis continued his rowdy streak and might have ended up in prison had it not been for Charlotte nightclub owner, Lib Hatcher, who believed in and encouraged his musical talent. By 1981, Hatcher was managing Travis’s musical career and both she and Travis had relocated to Nashville in hopes of furthering the singer’s career. Travis found success in 1985 when he was signed to Warner Brothers records. His 1986 debut, *Storms of Life*, was the first of what has become the majority of Travis’s musical output: traditional sounding material showcasing his voice, honky-tonk instrumentation, and lyrics filled with honky-tonk imagery.

This discussion focuses on a track from Travis’s 1991 release, *High Lonesome*, another

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album that exhibits Travis’s continuing loyalty to the early sounds and styles of honky-tonk that he established by *Storms of Life*. In addition to highlighting Travis’s vocal talents and the neo-traditional style in general, “Better Class of Losers” offers an updated, neo-traditional idealization of the rural vs. urban theme that reflects pride in rural, working-class identity.

While similar to Merle Haggard’s “Big City” in light of his working-class concerns, the lyrics of “Better Class of Losers,” written by Travis and Alan Jackson, go a step further. In the context of honky-tonk’s rural and urban idealizations, Travis updates class distinctions and identities, honky-tonk’s vision of gender relations, and addresses modern technology:

Verse 1a:
*I'm getting out of this high-rise penthouse suite
Where we pretend life's rosy and sweet
I'm going back to the folks that I used to know
Where everyone is what they seems to be

Verse 1b:
*And these high-class friends that you like to hang around
When they look my way they're always looking down
I'm tired of spending every dime I make
To finance this way of life I've learned to hate

Chorus:
*I'm going back to a better class of losers
This up-town living's really got me down
I need friends who don't pay their bills on home computers
And who buy their coffee beans already ground
You think it's disgraceful that they drink three-dollar wine
But a better class of loser suits me fine

Verse 2:
*You say the grass is greener on the other side
From where I stand I can't see grass at all
And the concrete and the steel won't change the way you feel
It takes more than caviar to have a ball

Chorus:
*I'm going back to a better class of losers
This up-town living's really got me down
I need friends who don't pay their bills on home computers
And who buy their coffee beans already ground
You think it's disgraceful that they drink three-dollar wine
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Subtly introducing the rural vs. urban theme, verses 1a and 1b also allude to several secondary themes that we have encountered in tunes previously discussed—the falseness of the city, awareness of class distinctions, and importantly, the female as urban. Though the gender of the speaker or the person addressed is never assigned, it is implied in these verses that the speaker is male and that the addressee is a female companion. This inference is corroborated by the music video for the song in which Travis is pictured strolling arm-in-arm up to his female companion’s “high-class friends” who refuse to look at him. This gender assignment and recognition of class hierarchies is significant for a number of interrelated reasons. Linking the female with the city and upper class urbanites, Travis’s speaker updates honky-tonk’s idealization of women, and casts the female as not only part of the false, insincere urban, but as part of a higher class. Thus, considering the earlier gender constructions explored in Parsons’s “Streets of Baltimore,” Travis’s female can be interpreted as a neo-traditional update to Parsons’s “fallen angel.” She has not succumbed to the city streets or neon lights of the honky-tonk, but is instead inherently part of an urban world completely removed from the honky-tonk and any semblance of a rural-based, working-class identity.
The chorus of the song illuminates central concerns in Travis’s neo-traditional ideology. Updating ideas about class identities, and also the place of modern technology within them, Travis effectively “plays off and plays down the ‘oppressive confidence’ of the professional, the intellectual, and the technocrat” (in this case, urban, as well) to evoke a sense of rural, working-class pride (Ching 2001:34). In the first line of the chorus the speaker asserts that he is returning to a “better class of losers,” acknowledging these people as “losers,” but a better kind when compared to the “high-class” losers of the city. The chorus goes on to criticize “up-towners” for paying their bills using computers, using coffee grinders, and drinking expensive wine by implying that the “better class of losers” he is returning to do not. The speaker here is insinuating that the people he’s getting back to might be considered “losers” because they aren’t technologically adept or evolved, but “better” because they are nonetheless genuine and real. The real “losers” are the false, insincere urbanites that use and drink what the “better class of losers” consider unnecessarily indulgent or perhaps out of their reach, and thus, bad.
Central then to the speaker’s differentiation between the urban class of losers and the better class of losers are the use of technology and an embrace of modernity. The Luddite view from the perspective of the speaker and the “better class” is very much in line with honky-tonk’s rural-based ideology and speaks to country’s working-class fans. Reveling in the upper-class technocrats’ burlesque “loserness” allows them to laugh at what Ching calls, “the animating lie of most American popular culture: the equation of purchasing power with power” (Ching 2001: 35). Put another way, the chorus speaks to working-class people that know they are the real ones, drawing power from their sincerity, honesty, hard work, and rural roots rather than material objects. Ching further considers the “better class” characterized in Travis’s tune, writing that “it is the lack of some mysterious acculturating knowledge, some evidence of refined taste, that seems to permanently keep the ‘low other’ redneck in his alienating place” (ibid.).

While this seems plausible in other country songs speaking to class identity and technology such as George Jones’s “High-Tech Redneck” (1993), it is not the case in “Better Class of Losers,” because as we have seen, the speaker relishes in rejoining Ching’s “rednecks,” and takes pride not only their eschewing of modern technology, but also their working-class status.

Peterson addresses this trend, in country music, toward the expression of pride in possessing and maintaining a working-class, redneck identity. He observes,

The songs that redefined the word “redneck” are important not simply because a term of derision was turned positive, but because it was made into a kind of badge voluntarily worn. To call oneself a redneck is not so much to be a redneck by birth or occupational fate but rather to identify with an anti-bourgeois attitude and lifestyle. (original emphasis, Peterson 1992: 58).

Certainly, the speaker in “Better Class of Losers,” is voluntarily returning back to working-class people and in turn, re-identifying himself as such. By chastising the technologically advanced high-class urbanites, the speaker is asserting himself as Other and repudiating his support of the
bourgeois attitude and lifestyle of his female companion, her friends, and the high-classes in general. Thus, in contrast to the speakers in Haggard’s “Big City” and Bare’s “Detroit City,” who lament their working-class reality in the city, Travis’s speaker, in asserting his preference for “redneck” identities, offers an updated, neo-traditional honky-tonk ideology that celebrates and takes pride in being a “better Other” in the midst of an alienating urban environment.

In verse 2, the speaker reinforces his rural, working-class ethos and the updated gender idealizations. Responding to the female’s assertion that “the grass is greener on the other side” with “from where I stand I don’t see grass at all,” the speaker alludes both to his urban environment and also to the fact that he cannot see (or chooses not to see) the merits of a high-class existence from his perspective. And assuming that his female companion’s feelings won’t be changed by the “concrete and steel” around her, the speaker emphasizes that the lack of the rural does not upset the high-class urban female of the nineties.

Very similar to the way that the lyrics of “Better Class of Losers” update honky-tonk’s core beliefs and idealizations, a number of musical elements in the song also serve to update the genre’s traditional musical formula. Though the sound and style of “Better Class of Losers” is very firmly rooted in the honky-tonk tradition of the 1950s and sixties and maintains its core musical elements and characteristics, it increases their parameters to embrace some less traditional, more modern ones. It also becomes evident that in addition to creating a neo-traditional soundworld, the music also interacts with the song’s lyrics to sonically reinforce the rural vs. urban and pride in class themes.

Travis’s voice stands at the center of the tune’s soundworld. Highly traditional and grounded in the styles of the honky-tonk’s earlier, most influential artists, Travis’s clearly enunciated and deeply resonant baritone style shows clear indebtedness to Lefty Frizzell, Merle
Haggard, and Travis’s personal hero, George Jones. Unadorned with unnecessary ornamentation or vibrato, Travis’s voice delivers the lyrics in a way that emphasizes unmediated directness over vocal extravagance.

Travis’s vocal not only utilizes the clenched-jaw styles of Frizzell, Haggard, and Jones, but also incorporates blues inflections that were often utilized by these artists. For example, in the first line of verse 1b, on the words, “and these high class friends,” Travis emphasizes the flatted 3rd and then the 7th scale degree in G major. This instance is reminiscent of Haggard’s 1969 recording of Jimmie Rodgers’s “California Blues (Blue Yodel No.4),” in which he performs the same basic vocal lick on the words “sleep out every night.” The similarities between Travis’s vocal and earlier, groundbreaking honky-tonkers point to his allegiance to tradition, and in turn, his reverence for honky-tonk authenticity. This is important in light of country’s internal struggles between tradition and change, and pop-influenced “soft-shell” styles and “hardcore” country styles, for it emphasizes not only Travis’s position, but also by extension, neo-traditional country’s position (Peterson 1997).

**Example 5:** Travis’s blues inflection in “Better Class of Losers”

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\[\text{\Haggard, and Travis’s personal hero, George Jones. Unadorned with unnecessary ornamentation or vibrato, Travis’s voice delivers the lyrics in a way that emphasizes unmediated directness over vocal extravagance.}

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While Travis’s vocal stands as a solidly traditional, a number of other musical elements in the tune can be heard as neo-traditional. The electric guitar style, shifting instrumentation, and arrangement of the tune, in particular, not only serve neo-traditional purposes, but also reflect the song’s lyrics.

The tune begins with a short, but loud and rowdy guitar lick that utilizes double-stops, string bends, and sharp chicken-picked attacks. Creating a bright, forceful opening that brings to mind the country guitar styles of James Burton and Roy Nichols, Travis’s guitar player, Brent Mason, evokes both a sense of honky-tonk authenticity through allusion to earlier styles while signifying more modern rock styles through virtuosity, volume, and urgency. This is not to say that earlier honky-tonk guitar styles were not virtuosic or urgent, but rather that Mason’s opening lick is unabashedly and immediately forceful in a way that is not unlike Jimmy Page’s opening to Led Zeppelin’s “The Ocean” (1973). Significantly, among Mason’s influences he lists artists from a variety of popular idioms including country, jazz, rock, and funk (myspace.com/thebrentmason: 2009).

The sonic embodiment of honky-tonk and modern rock style in opening electric guitar lick can be heard in two contrasting ways. One on hand, the lick signifies neo-traditionalism in general by updating earlier honky-tonk guitar style with more modern style and technique, and on the other, signifies the intrusion of modernity and non-country styles into honky-tonk. The latter interpretation highlights, again, country’s internal struggles with modernity, but also considering “Better Class of Losers’s” lyrics, sonically embodies the song’s concern with the dialectics of past and modern, Ludditism and technological advancement, and by extension, rural and urban.
A sudden and drastic change in instrumentation and sonic texture immediately follows the opening guitar lick. Now present in the mix are a drum kit playing a shuffle beat, an electric bass guitar, a finger-picked acoustic guitar, and an acoustic dobro. Later joined by Travis’s vocals, this instrumentation continues throughout verses 1a and 1b. The electric guitar reenters in verse 1b, but unlike the opening, is much further back in the mix and much less active, very minimally reinforcing the song’s harmonic content. Considering verse 1a and 1b’s lyrical content, this largely acoustic backdrop signifies not only the organicism of the rural, but also calls to mind the imagined, presumably rural place to where the song’s speaker is “going back to.” Significantly, in the song’s opening verses the acoustic dobro serves as a replacement for the pedal steel guitar. Though not considered a neo-traditional update in the same sense that we considered modern rock influence on the opening electric guitar lick, the addition of this acoustic instrument as the lead instrument does reinforce the acoustic soundworld’s evocation of the natural rural while alluding to the electric steel guitar.

The song’s choruses provide a dramatic contrast to the acoustic environment of the verses. While the instrumentation stays very much the same, the tune becomes more energized and forward driven. Not only do the drums shift to a livelier rock-influenced beat, but Mason’s electric guitar emerges again as the lead instrument and background vocalists joins Travis’s voice. Contrasting the previous verses, the chorus sounds much more electric, urgent, and modern. We might say that if the music of the verses evokes images of acoustic music being played on a rural back porch, the music of the choruses evokes a loud, crowded honky-tonk bar that in light of the lyrics, embodies the object of the speaker’s escape—a communal, rural-based environment filled with “real” people and minimal urban influence.
Ironically though, the sound and style of the chorus is heavily indebted to modern musical practices not exclusive to honky-tonk. For example, the double-tracked electric guitar licks, similar to the opening, employs double stops, bends, and other techniques associated with modern rock and blues, and the drums provide a heavy backbeat that is not often found in country, let alone honky-tonk. While these practices might be heard as conflicting with the tune’s rural-based concerns, I contend that they are important neo-traditional updates that reflect the realities of country’s audience in the early 1990s and the influence of increasing accessibility and exposure to musics other than country. Put another way, the high energy, electric soundworld of the chorus, speaks to a neo-traditional country audience that retains its original rural-based values, but allows for more modern musical practices and influence.

The second verse is signaled when the dobro reenters the mix at the end the chorus. The sonic texture shifts dramatically again and returns to the acoustic instrumentation of verses 1a and 1b, though the dobro is replaced by a fiddle. Considering the lyrics of the second verse in which the rural is emphasized and a disdain for unnecessary extravagance is reinforced, the return of this acoustic backdrop is appropriate.

The song closes with a repeat of the chorus and a short instrumental outro played by the returning dobro and the electric guitar in unison. Considering each instrument’s signification, this outro becomes a symbolic reconciliation between the natural, acoustic soundworld and the updated, electric soundworld. Thus, through simultaneously sounding tradition and change, the closing lick can be heard not only as truly neo-traditional, but also symbolic of the tune itself.

From urban alienation to rural working-class pride to gender idealizations, “Better Class of Losers” expresses and updates honky-tonk’s complex ideology while very solidly retaining its core principles. It is a song that self-consciously blends tradition and change, on one hand
rebuking urban modernity, and on another celebrating and embracing its influence.

Significantly, the tension created by this neo-traditional blend endures as a critical barrier to defining exactly what “country” is, has been, and may become.
CONCLUSION

REVISITING DETROIT

Each of the songs explored above offers a unique and distinctive presentation of and perspective on the rural vs. urban theme, and while each of these tunes certainly is a product and reflection of a specific historical climate, they are bound together by their adherence to honky-tonk’s core concerns and values. Much in the same way that honky-tonk idealizes itself and works to define itself as “real” country music in the midst of country’s ever-expanding musical sphere, these tunes work to reinforce, through lyrical content, musical styles and sounds, exactly what, where, and who the “real” rural country is in relation to increasing urban influence and modernity.

In each of the songs, the lyrics often emerged as the critical foundation on which further interpretations of musical style and sound could be anchored. In viewing the lyrics of each tune as autonomous texts, it is clear that they are certainly capable of standing on their own in order to offer a clear window into the rural vs. urban theme, but as shown, the musical deployment of these texts and the positions of the artists singing them was equally significant in reinforcing the theme and establishing the position of the songs within country music. Thus, the tunes are the sum of not only their aesthetic and musical elements, but also the social and historical world that they and their singers grew out of.

Despite their varying backgrounds and musical approaches, all of the artists discussed asserted some sense of individualism and concern for genuineness and authenticity. From Bobby Bare’s storytelling and appeals to urban folk revivalism to Gram Parsons’s work to create an “American Cosmic Music,” from Buck Owens’s West Coast aesthetic to Merle Haggard’s
working-class songwriting and defiant social voice, and finally to Randy Travis’s allegiance to tradition and earlier styles, these artists embody the honky-tonk ethos and one of its idealized conceptions of authenticity—rugged individualism in a world that is increasingly complacent and homogenized. These artists and their aesthetics also come to stand as symbolic of the very rural-ness or country-ness celebrated in their tunes. In adamantly lamenting and chastising the urban and its world of insincerity in the context of the honky-tonk, these artists solidify their positions as authentically “rural” and on the fringes of the increasingly urban-influenced country mainstream.

In the hands of country artists who work to construct an idealized rural through both lyrics and music, “country” takes on a meaning that evokes the genre’s imagined roots and a nostalgic vision of an American landscape free of urban interference and influence, mechanization and to some degree, progress. At the center of that landscape stands “home.” As Cecelia Tichi writes, country music insists that “home is more than a locale and site of family and friends—is actually the essence of the natural world. It is made up of hills and mountains, sunlight and flowers, and cabins hewn from wood and forest.” (Tichi 1994:25). It is this vision of the imagined natural rural setting that was alluded to throughout my analyses, because for all of the speakers, Tichi’s romanticized and somewhat mythical scene became the image of their true home, an escape from the chaos and alienation of the city and more broadly, the chaos and alienation caused by change. But change is inevitable and, as we have seen, visions and definitions of the “country” continually shift and are re-idealized and modified to reflect the changing landscape that surrounds it.

Today, in 2009, at a time when commercial country music appears to willingly embrace influence, practices, and ideologies from the entire spectrum of popular music, some of which
were previously considered antithetical to the romanticized visions of the past and country’s rural “roots,” does the essence of the imagined true, rural home still endure? Is it still conjured by those who embody the idealized “country”? One recent song might provide a tentative answer to these questions: John Rich’s “Shuttin’ Detroit Down” (2009).

In the tradition of Haggard’s “Big City,” Rich’s tune is an ostensibly apolitical look into the dynamics of class and social injustice, framed by an opposition between two forces: the motor industry of Detroit and the bankers of Wall Street. Responding to recent financial bailouts and the nation’s failing economy, Rich uses honky-tonk’s rural-based concerns as a template for creating a complex, updated vision of the real world of the working-class and the fantasy world of the elite. In looking at the song’s chorus, we find Rich retaining the aura of sincerity and realness implicit in working-class life, but updating it with a “neo-rural” locale that is perhaps more connected to our current socio-cultural climate:

‘Cause in the real world their shuttin’ Detroit down  
While the boss man takes his bonus paid jets on out of town  
DC’s bailing out them bankers as the farmers auction ground  
Yeah, while there living up on Wall Street in that New York City town  
Here in the real world their shuttin’ Detroit down

Significantly, the lyrics of Rich’s chorus celebrate Detroit. What was characterized earlier as an alienating urban setting filled with monotonous labor and homesickness is reconstructed as a symbolic “real world” home to working-class laborers who are being shut down by the elite that are “living it up on Wall Street.” The reality of Northern industrialization lamented over in Bare’s “Detroit City” is now a reality which has come to manifest the organic and sincere qualities of Bare’s (and the others discussed) idealized rural. In other words, a kind of translation has taken place. In the face of economic hardship in the twenty-first century,
Rich’s Detroit stands as a symbolic working-class “rural” pitted against the greed and corruption of New York City.

While Rich’s translation does meaningfully update the rural vs. urban theme, he does not fully discard the rural as an imagined locale. In line three of the chorus, Rich sets up another dialectic that contrasts bankers with farmers amidst the backdrop of government aid. In Rich’s scenario, America’s government becomes the corrupted and greedy urban while the farmers suffering at the hands of economic hardship and helplessness become the rural. Aligning “DC’s” aid with the bankers while the farmers lose their land, Rich reflects on the current complex American reality, echoing the nostalgic voices encountered above.

In the end, Rich’s tune provides an interesting example of yet another rural vs. urban construction, but does it evoke the essence of the historically imagined rural home? I would argue that in redefining the rural as Detroit City, Rich is also working to redefine the “country” as less connected to an imagined locality, but more as a set of qualities or characteristics thought to have roots in the imagined rural. For Rich, “country” connotes “underdog,” “hard-working,” “stepped-on,” and above all, “real,” and home can be anywhere, rural or urban, that these qualities are manifested and exhibited. Thus, as a sort of answer to Bare, Rich updates Detroit City to reflect the city’s changed social landscape. A town filled with what once were alienated and displaced rural dwellers is now a “neo-rural” home in danger of being shut down by the idealized qualities and characteristics of the urban—New York City and the Government.

This is not to say that the historically idealized rural as a physical site has at all disappeared from current country music. Significantly, the sense of rural-based, redneck pride conjured by Travis in “Better Class of Losers” in 1991, has remained an enduring and powerful statement in recent years. Solidly rooted in idealized images of small, working-class farm
towns, this assertive pride in class proclamation has not only become important for establishing “country” identity for new artists, but also as a means for establishing country music as meaningfully different from other popular genres. Interestingly and somewhat ironically, the lyrics of many of these songs, or what might be called redneck-pride songs, do not often explicitly chastise or demonize the urban, but rather, emphatically celebrate the rural-based images and ideas that the popular mainstream had earlier considered to be, as Jensen writes, “‘too country’…too twangy, rustic, hokey” (1998:33). Jason Aldean’s “Hick Town” (2005), for example, constructs images of trucks and truck pulls, buying beer at country gas stations as opposed to drinking martinis in the city, and in general, partying or “gettin’ down” in a hick town. In this case, the redneck imagery is idealized as decidedly rural, and in turn, genuinely fun. Similarly, “Boondocks” (2005) by a band tellingly dubbed Little Big Town echoes this pride in redneck ideology in its celebration of isolated communities with gravel roads and front porches where people “learn about living… learn about love…learn about working hard.” In the end, lyrically, these tunes espouse a message that connects the historically idealized rural with images and an ideology that is thought of by many as stereotypically country. Somewhat paradoxically though, these tunes have not alienated the artists performing them and have become highly successful. Though a full explanation of the implications of the success of redneck-pride songs is beyond the scope of this paper, this solidly rural-based ideology appears to be a heavily commercialized construction, aimed at appealing to an audience connected to the rural less as a reality and more as an imagined playground of sorts.

This assertion seems to be corroborated by the fact that current songs such as “Hick Town” and “Boondocks” are far removed by the traditional sounds of honky-tonk. Though traditional honky-tonk instrumentation may be employed in some redneck-pride tunes, the styles
and sounds are heavily influenced by rock, specifically Southern rock. Electric guitars often play loud, overdriven pentatonic riffs, and drum sets often provide heavy downbeats and highly-driven rock rhythms to create soundworlds that sound more like Lynyrd Skynyrd than Lefty Frizzell. I believe this integration of pop-rock styles and sounds appeals to twenty-first century audiences that have grown up with and been exposed to a multitude of popular genres, and serves to dilute some of the hokey-ness that modern day audiences might otherwise tune out.

At present, it seems that a sea change is taking place within the field of country music. As country artists and audiences continue to embrace the inclusion of sounds and styles from across the entire expanse of mainstream popular music and crossover success becomes increasingly sought after, the definition of what it means to be truly “country” stands in a state of flux. Yet, the tensions implicit in the antagonistic relationship between the rural and the urban still provide a path into the idealized field of country and also to create a romanticized vision of an authentic, rural reality uncorrupted and untouched by urban progress. Thus, the rural vs. urban theme stands as an enduring and powerful tool for perpetuating not only the essence of the country music’s idealized origins, but also the genre itself. Despite its varying constructions and continual updates, the theme remains a foundation within the complex world of country music, for it is the contrasting idealizations of the rural and urban that have given and will continually give country music much of its distinctiveness, meaning and power.
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