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BARBARA CHING

Acting Naturally: Cultural Distinction and Critiques of Pure Country

COUNTRY MUSIC has the fastest-growing audience in America but it is still rather scandalous for an intellectual to admit to liking it. Contemporary cultural theory—which is to say cultural studies—has thus had practically nothing to say about it. At first glance, it may seem that everything has already been said. I know well enough that many people find country music to be dumb, reactionary, sentimental, maudlin, primitive, etc. Still others, perhaps influenced one way or another by the Frankfurt school, sneer at what they feel is the contrived, hokey, convention-bound nature of the music: they hear a commodification and cheapening of the same supposed folksy authenticity that so disgusts the first type of critic. But the issue is not just authenticity. Behind this issue lies the more sensitive and distinctly contemporary question of sophistication. Put bluntly, whether people question the authenticity of country music, or whether they feel the authenticity of it is too powerfully crude for them, they are often imagining some pitiful (but perhaps good-hearted) rube who happily sings along. And their bemused or puzzled reaction to intellectuals who actually like country music indicates that they want to preserve that image of the rural unsophisticate. The authenticity of the music, then, is seen as either impossibly degraded or impossibly innocent, but this double-binding condemnation never questions the authentic, uncultured “nature” of country music’s benighted listeners. As such, they are either innocent pawns being debased or preserved by their music. Either way, “sophisti-

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cation," an ironic and pleasurable confidence in, or allusion to, a high degree of cultural status, is the one thing that this double bind of authenticity excludes.

In this essay, I will be talking about how country music re-presents, disseminates, and critiques this double-bind of rustic authenticity, a double-bind that also silently underlies many prominent theories of the post-modern condition. At the same time, I will be describing how the music itself explains why we need this particular countrified spectacle to love or to loathe.¹ While the sociological facts of the matter indicate that country music and its listeners are not limited to the rural backwaters of the south and west,² the music consistently portrays and addresses itself to a psychic geography that is at least metaphorically rustic. I know because I respond to this address: I'm from Dubuque—the classic hick town thanks to Harold Ross' refusal to edit the *New Yorker* for old ladies who happen to live there. Country music simply reverses Ross' logic. It thus situates its listeners in what Pierre Bourdieu has called a habitus: the life-space created by both the socio-economic determiners that form individual taste and the choices made by individuals based on their tastes (101, 169 ff). But since the term cultural "tastes," with its allusion to a sensual, natural response, is easily conceived of as an innate rather than a socially constructed quality, those whose taste is "bad" seem to deserve their fate while those with good taste seem to merit the distinction which the social order confers upon them. A similar logic is at work in the separation between country music lovers and haters. While not necessarily rural, country music listeners are not often found among the elite. Sociological research indicates that country music plays in the space of white Americans who are on the whole less educated and hold low status jobs (Peterson and DiMaggio 501–3; McLaurin and Peterson 8–13). Although perhaps relatively privileged by virtue of its white skin, this is a population that lacks, again in Bourdieu's terminology, "cultural capital," a lack announced in a range of labels from the somewhat romanticized yet rustic "cowboy" to the more pejorative "bumpkin," "cracker," "hayseed," "hick," "hillbilly," "redneck," "rube," "simple folk," "yokel," and the name that includes most of the above group, and strips away the euphemistic raillery of those other names: "white trash."

As a cultural phenomenon, then, country music can be heard as the music *chosen* by the unsophisticated. At the same time, the music itself

expresses this group's lack of sophistication. In fact, country music often proudly signals its lack of sophistication—a quality that in its terms is decidedly contemporary and urban. But this skeptical picture of urbanity in itself is neither surprising nor interesting. Instead, what interests me is the critique of pure country that such skepticism can produce. The most flamboyant country music—the lyrics, the characteristic instrumentation and vocal techniques, and the stars of country music, taken together—often functions as a sly, even campy, announcement of the fact that it is a *performance* rather than a spontaneous expression of some pure emotion or state of being. In other words, country music is capable of performing the rural role in such a way as to underline its construction and social purpose rather than its presumed natural essence, innocence, and/or bad taste.³ Instead of legitimating the cultural choices that create the distinction of the privileged, country music underlines the production and dubiousness of such distinctions. This is exactly what I like about it: rather than generating their message from an opposition between a rural immersion in *nature* and the artifices of an urban-based *culture*, many songs suggest that the rural persona is not at all natural although it may well be the “low other” that generates and defines urban sophistication.⁴ (Garth Brooks' 1990 hit “Friends in Low Places” may be the quintessential expression of this sentiment.) Hence, country songs are often about being a hick, about being unable to participate in urban culture even while being bombarded by it. Country music songs are about why hicks—whether they be remote rustics or urban newcomers or perennially alienated city-dwellers—listen to country music.

Of course, theorists of the post-modern, Fredric Jameson, Susan Sontag, et al., have already implied that unselfconscious authenticity is no longer possible, but they're talking about the relatively high, and explicitly urban, cultural forms that embody this condition (Sontag 275).⁵ Nevertheless, some notion of “rubedom,” the corollary of a tortuous notion of authenticity, functions as one of the necessary and excluded opposites of this urbanity. When the subject of communing with nature and preserving the environment arises, this opposite may be mourned or praised. But many more overtly cultural expressions of a supposed unsophistication are simply unheard and invisible in descriptions of the post-modern condition. While most theorists of the post-modern argue that the boundary between high and low culture is in-

creasingly blurred,⁶ no theorist, as far as I know, has ever spoken of country music, although references to Mick Jagger, David Bowie, and David Byrne abound. In print, of course, critics rarely denounce country music; no one is quite so eager as they might be on my front porch to proclaim that there are still some cultural forms that are just too “popular” or low. Yet the silence that surrounds this *very* popular (in every sense of the word) music is telling. In order to measure what we’ve learned from Las Vegas, or from Paris, or even from the artful (and now taboo) contrivances of *Pee Wee’s Playhouse*, we must imagine someone—poor unsophisticated soul—who remains untouched by contemporary culture. Preferably no one you know. Still, someone must be in Dubuque. Someone must be acting naturally.

So remote is country music from any of the most recent cultural analysis that for lack of a more contemporary vocabulary many of its advocates still talk about it in the traditional terms of the authentic versus the unauthentic. This dichotomy thus pervades the few available intellectual attempts to analyze country music for an audience of already enthusiastic readers. I’ve just given the categoric versions of the phony/real debate, but most sympathetic commentators on country music usually locate this dichotomy within the field of country music itself. Jimmie Rogers, for example, argues that the best-liked country songs create a “sincerity contract” between the singer and the audience (17).⁷ The title of Nick Tosches’ recent *Country: Living Legends and Dying Metaphors in America’s Biggest Music* also alludes to this dichotomy. This book merits special attention because on the surface it has the credentials necessary to focus some intelligent public interest on its subject: the author is associated with *Rolling Stone* and the publisher is in the venerable mainstream. Unfortunately, it is written with all the tedious bravado of a frat boy who knows what’s in and what’s out. Not for Tosches’ “sophisticated” critical attention is the country music that most people actually hear on the radio or see in their local concert hall. Such mundanity apparently qualifies as the otherwise unspecified dying metaphors to which his title alludes. Living legends, likewise left conveniently vague, seem to be those pure and authentic “artists” apparently untouched by the commercialism of the Dolly Partons and Willie Nelsons whom Tosches scorns. That these so-called legends are quite likely would be or have-been commercial successes seems not to have entered

into Tosches' picture; likewise the notion that any "artist" that has entered into that picture probably got there through some impure, commercially-tinged medium has also remained conveniently mystified. The rockabilly days of Sun records—evidently not a commercial enterprise in Tosches' mind—are celebrated as the originating point of pure and creative country, followed by the inevitable decay into commercialism.

Some early country music does sound primitive in contrast to today's recording and mixing techniques—Ernest Tubb's records, for example, sound as if they were recorded in somebody's back yard. Hearing them, it might be easy to convince yourself that the music has a genealogical link to some pure form of expression. But a mass-marketed record, almost by definition, is packaged and produced, so country music, as long as it has been reaching us by recording and radio, hasn't been an authentic outpouring of simple folk emotion. Historical accounts of country music such as Bill Malone's magisterial *Country Music USA* easily demonstrate this fact. Malone's discussion of the history of instrumentation, for example, suggests that both the standard acoustic guitar and the steel guitar, now both *sine qua non* of the country sound, were practically unknown in the rural south until after the First World War, and were gradually added to performances and recordings throughout the '30s and '40s (24–26, 127). Likewise, he links the pervasiveness of cowboy attire, and the cultural interchangeability of the geographically diverse terms western, hillbilly, and country music to the influence of the Hollywood image makers since the 1930s (145). In fact, he suggests that the notion of country music purity is the product of earlier historians' wishful thinking: "an understanding of southern rural music was hampered by the reluctance of both folk scholars and high-art exponents to see it as it really was: that is a thoroughly hybrid form of music . . . which revealed itself as both a commercial and a folk expression" (27). The critical vocabulary, then, needs new terms. Sympathetic or otherwise, the only way for a critic to really start thinking about this music is to escape this double-bind of authenticity that can so readily dismiss or celebrate it.⁸

While country music is a uniquely American phenomenon, the cultural logic which puts it in this double bind has its origin in a longstanding strain of western discourse. A recognition of this heritage goes a long way toward explaining why concepts of authenticity and sophisti-

cation are ingrained to the point of inarticulation in much cultural criticism. This issue became quite vivid to me when on a research trip to Geneva. Deprivation forced me to think about country music much more than I listened to it; I constantly scanned the radio dial, but I couldn't find any country music. Outside of French-speaking Switzerland I saw posters advertising country music concerts, some with big stars, but the Genevans didn't seem interested. Two of the city's most noticeable and contradictory characteristics account for this lack: it prides itself on being a sophisticated center of international finance and diplomacy, perhaps too sophisticated for such music. Yet the city's puritanical heritage, an effort to maintain a certain cultural innocence, is also very much in evidence. Here the double bind was put in another context that made some historical sense: I spent a lot of time wondering whether country music was the kind of urbanized spectacle from which Rousseau wanted to protect the innocent, Calvinist Genevans of his memory, or whether the music's hillbillies and cowboys could represent the kind of pre-cultural, egalitarian noble savagery and festivity that he so admired. I've already described the attitude that would equate country music with the kind of spontaneous, participatory festivity that Rousseau recommended to his city in his 1758 letter on spectacles, yet the virtual absence from the public airwaves of any kind of "folk" or country music, even indigenous, would seem to deny this theory. On the other hand, while it could be said that country music displays the very kind of theatrical artifice that Rousseau and some later cultural analysts feared, I'm not sure that it has the kind of effect that they fear. It neither encourages its listeners to unsuccessfully emulate urban models of cultural distinction, nor does it encourage its audience to unquestioningly imitate the self-pitying laments and redneck boasting manufactured by the Nashville culture industry.

Yet Rousseau's critique of acculturation and its concomitant urban sophistication is worth remembering, since it confines, underlies, and justifies the kind of things that have been said about this music. But if, as I have said, one of the most fascinating things about country music is its power to uproot and escape these assumptions, what better place to prove it than on their home territory? Cowboy Kurt's "boutique western" is certainly odd even with its address in Pâquis, Geneva's liveliest and most atypical neighborhood, with a few second-hand stores, an occult bookstore, and prostitutes so obvious they seem like parodies of

prostitutes. On clear days the shopkeeper places a larger-than-life papier-mâché sculpture of himself, Cowboy Kurt, on the sidewalk, and from the open door you can hear country music—Buck Owens the first time I walked by, and Dwight Yoakum, Buck's protégé and recent duet partner, the next. Kurt sells a selection of tapes and albums as well as western-style clothing, jeans, cowboy boots and hats, etc. The store does not do a booming business, but at least Cowboy Kurt, a Zurich-born fan of country music and "western wear," gave me the chance to hear Buck Owens every now and then.

When I reported on the state of country music in Geneva, though, I received very little sympathy. The main thing people asked was if Cowboy Kurt is an allusion to Pee Wee Herman's friend Cowboy Curtis, a black cowboy. What my post-modern, Pee-Wee Herman-watching friends want to know further underscores the dilemma of our ways of talking about country music. In their eyes, an allusion to Cowboy Curtis would show a knowing sophistication about the degraded status of country-western "cultural" artifacts. If no allusion is intended, Cowboy Kurt seems comically and complicatedly deluded since no trilingual cosmopolite can be what a country music star or fan is presumed to be—a hick. In this case, it seems neither natural, normal, nor deserved. In other words, the social construction and social significance of taste becomes clear: Kurt seems to be choosing what it suddenly seems impossible to freely choose—why would anyone choose to be a hick?

Yet Kurt's dilemma is one of country music's recurring themes: the odd cultural constructions that are store-bought and storefront cowboys, that are armchair, paper-pushing, or assembly-line hillbillies. Out of this uneasy habitus comes what might be called "country camp." Such a term characterizes the songs and stars (and Cowboy Kurt) that question the naturalness of the habitus, and that call attention to its production and use. As Andrew Ross' discussion of camp suggests, this overt emphasis on production is not necessarily a celebration of the commodity form. Nor is it a debased expression of once pure sentiments. Rather, such use of camp can be seen as a self-conscious, ostentatious, and deliberately comic "operation of taste," much as Cowboy Kurt's inventory is simply an operation of taste, while his papier-mâché statue of himself is camp since it is also self-conscious, ostentatious, and comic. Because they are at once self-conscious and comically communi-

cative, such manifestations of camp are also acts of cultural commentary (136). Similarly, Sontag's description of the camp sensibility inadvertently characterizes country music—at least in some of its forms—since it, like Sontag's camp, “sees everything in quotation marks” (280). In other words, country camp expresses a complex relationship to the range of country roles and habituses that extend from the romantically patronizing to the outright dehumanizing. These constructs also saturate most forms of American culture—think of the lovably dumb bumpkin Woody on “Cheers” or the deranged hicks of *Deliverance*. However, the “campy” way such roles can be performed in country music gives them a charge that they do not have elsewhere.

In fact, country camp is particularly interesting since the built-in sneer of the sophisticate, postulated in Sontag's, and especially in Ross' accounts of camp (152–53), plays no part in it. Instead, the countrified version is often a response to this urban-based condescension. I think that much of what makes people uncomfortable with country music lies in its aggressive questioning of the notion of an urban-based sophistication perhaps best described in Sontag's “Notes on Camp” (275), but reiterated in different forms in other popular media and in many field reports from post-modern culture. For example, in *Details*, which supposedly covers Manhattan's downtown scene, one of my favorite country singers, Dwight Yoakum, answers an interviewer's typical either/or suggestion that he is only a parody of a country singer, “a talented opportunist playing dress-up,” with the assertion that “what you saw at my show was not parody. It was real life, 1988” (Sarko 141). I agree—what I heard and saw at the Greensboro Coliseum, the cardboard cacti stage-props, the satin cowboy suits, the loudspeaker that announces “Ladies and Gentlemen, from Hollywood, California, Dwight Yoakum”—was real life. Except I also think it *was* parody and dress up—but no less “real life” for all that. Yet the interviewer's question doesn't allow for this nuancing. In fact, behind her question about the “authenticity” of Yoakum's persona lies the fear that even this alleged country boy is just as sophisticated—as talented an opportunist—as any post-modern reader of a slick magazine. He might not be a hillbilly. Or if he is, being a hillbilly doesn't mean what it seems to mean; it doesn't imply a well-deserved state of degraded unacculturation and unsophistication.

Although he wasn't asked, I suppose Yoakum is aware of this dynamic. After all, he consciously models himself on Buck Owens, and

Owens, to me, is the perfect country star, veering in and out of self-parody as he does. He has great clothes: an amazing parade of spangled, embroidered, braided, and sequined suits. He even wrote a song about his “closet full of Nudie suits.”⁹ Between 1969 and 1986, you could see him every week as the cheerful co-host of “the longest running comedy show of any kind in television history”—“Hee-Haw” (1969–) (“A Couple of Cowboys” 46).¹⁰ His happy songs, like “I’ve Got a Tiger by the Tail,” are infectiously and ungrammatically nonsensical, and on his sad songs the steel guitar sounds like an upset stomach: “It’s crying time again” could be the refrain for them all. They are overdoses of countrified expressions and instrumental twanging. In fact, these songs rely on the hyperbolic manipulation of country’s acquired symbols. They are campy “operations of taste” on the part of both the performer and the accepting audience. Once seen as an interpretive stance, however, such phenomena cannot be so easily degraded by the vocabulary of authenticity or postmodernity.

As far back as I can remember, I can remember Buck Owens songs. One of my favorite “real life” memories of my grandfather is of him singing along to “Tiger by the Tail” with Buck. We must have been at a family gathering, listening to the radio or jukebox in a restaurant in Dubuque. But I’m not sure that real-life memories “authenticate” this music, especially since another vivid memory I have from early childhood is watching the “Roy Rogers Show” and hearing him sing. Fifteen years or so later, I remember hearing a Barbara Mandrell song that even addresses these mass-cultural memories: “I remember singing with Roy Rogers when the west was really wild.” The eponymous refrain boasts that “I was country when country wasn’t cool.” So here apparently is that standard by which Cowboy Kurt is to be judged: Roy Rogers (born and raised in Ohio)—a white American movie and tv star. Real country music and real country music fans?—according to this song it has something to do with the kind of clothes you wear and how long you have listened to country radio—“I remember wearing straight-legged Levis and flannel shirts even when they weren’t in style”; “I remember listening to the Opry when all of my friends were diggin’ rock ‘n’ roll and rhythm and blues.” The song draws no lines between country music, being country, and playing dress-up.

Although I don’t like this song’s teenage lingo, it certainly expresses the logic at work in the country music performance, especially in camp

performances. Country music songs and stars often complicate or reject the “natural,” “uncultured” state they supposedly reflect. In such terms, real country, cool or otherwise, is a choice of favorite movie stars, singers, radio stations, and fashions. So as long as we choose to listen to this music, we’re all store-bought cowboys and armchair hillbillies. This is not to say that there’s nobody earning a living tending cattle, and that there are no rural Appalachians. What I am saying is that the country music performance does not necessarily address such experiences except through the more complicated notion of signifying rusticity. So if there are examples of people who strongly identify with a country song, or a singer, or an image that the music conveys, such examples may say more about the interpretive and critical power of the music than about any “experience” that the music simply reflects or offers up for mindless imitation. This point should be fairly obvious at this stage in the history of cultural analysis; part of my argument, of course, is that when it comes to country music, it’s not yet obvious. Does a song like Moe Bandy’s “Hank Williams, You Wrote My Life” refer to the accuracy of Williams’ powers of observation, or the charisma of his country performance? While such meaning may be present in the song, the tradition to which it alludes also conjures up the “country boy”-in-quotation-marks image that Williams projected with his sharp southern accent, his flamboyantly colloquial lyrics, and his flashy suits.

When turned into adolescently smug assertions about having the right clothes and being popular, the Barbara Mandrell song and most of Hank Williams Jr.’s productions seem facile. But my personal tastes aside, the point is that in all of these songs, the cultural construction of the “country boy” (and girl) are quite clearly displayed. And in these songs—perhaps especially in my least favorite ones—something even more significant is displayed: that aggressive critique, which I alluded to earlier, of the high/low, authentic/unauthentic, and now sophisticated (urban)/unsophisticated (rural) oppositions that serve to denigrate country music, and more importantly, country music listeners. Hank Williams Jr.’s songs and persona are perhaps among the most aggressive. With his beer-belly, black leather, and bad ol’ boy lyrics, Hank Jr. enacts a grotesque country dandyism that may be one of the last effective ways to “épater la bourgeoisie.” His song “Young Country,” for example, raises the temperature of Mandrell’s affirmation: “We know when it’s hot, we know when it’s not, if you don’t mind, thank

you." A recent interview with Barbara Mandrell proves this point more poignantly: she talks about her strong attachment to the song "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool" (ten years old, but still getting considerable airplay) in terms of her own childhood memories of the scorn heaped upon her rural mannerisms by her schoolmates (Bane 71). Like Hank Jr.'s song, her song is a retort.

This same schoolyard malice, in an attenuated version, may explain the absence of country music from contemporary cultural critique. Listening to these songs makes us (I'm speaking now as an intellectual) confront our investment in a particular form of hierarchy. This confrontation is what makes some of these songs so uncomfortable because to re-imagine a rural persona as a matter of choice, no matter how commodified, in the way that Barbara Mandrell's (and Hank Jr.'s) song does clearly is a powerful notion. (On this point hear also Mary Chapin Carpenter's laugh-provoking "How Do": "Where'd you get that accent, Son? It matches your cowboy boots".) It means that many people who could know better still choose to listen to the country music they were innocently exposed to during their provincial childhoods. It means that the distinction between the rube and the sophisticate is disturbingly indistinct. That's why I'm never quite sure (speaking now as a provincial) that a jokingly delivered "I can't believe you listen to that stuff!" is *merely* a tactless remark. Likewise, the very existence of Cowboy Kurt makes the element of choice inescapably obvious although it may be ideologically painful to imagine that a European would *choose* to be a rube. But clearly the element of choice is more important and significant for people who may bear the stigma of supposed unsophistication. In fact, changing the meaning of that stigma is what makes these country performances so appealing to their audience and so threatening to those who have no need or desire to reinterpret this stigma.

Once country music is seen as a form of cultural re-presentation and critique, the question of "authenticity" should seem irrelevant. Some people like country music because it allows them to re-configure their habitus. The choice of country music is especially interesting, though, in the way that it deviates from Bourdieu's theories about cultural distinction. Bourdieu argues that the non-elite are faced with the "choice of the necessary": an illusion of choice which leads people to label as "taste" what are in fact their only options (372-74)—cheap, filling food, cheap practical clothes, and cheap, gaudy decorations and enter-

tainments that are at once poor imitations and valorizations of “higher choices” (386).¹¹ However, the campy operation of country taste, from the audience’s point of view, at once calls attention to and refuses these constraints. Country camp acknowledges the spuriousness of these ostensible choices in the social space at large at the same time that it creates a *choice*; it allows listeners to see and hear the quotation marks that even a Bourdieu, pessimistically sympathetic with their plight, would put around their “choices.” “We know what’s hot,” sings a snarling Hank Williams, so there’s no need for your condescension or sympathy. What Bourdieu’s analysis hasn’t seen is that this hyperbole and stylization is an act of *aestheticization*, an act usually associated with the more powerful (Bourdieu 376). Most importantly, country music camp, whether from a creator’s or an audience’s point of view, and especially from a disdainful point of view, refuses to legitimize through pale imitation the tastes of the more sophisticated possessors of cultural capital. It refuses, except as camp, to be an expression of other people’s unacculturation and unsophistication.

Even the more favorable versions of those terms, purity and authenticity, fall apart in many country songs. At the same time, camp, being a complex response to the exigencies of culture, acknowledges the utopian power of Rousseau’s imagined state of authenticity before the fall into culture. Mark Booth, for example, compares the perception of camp to a “nostalgia for sincerity, the sort you might feel for a very dear and distant moment in childhood” (9)—no doubt much like my own childhood memories of music in Dubuque. Still, camp calls attention not so much to that innocence and sincerity as to our *inevitable* distance from these concepts. This observation is equally true of the country version; for example, country songs often turn the jukebox and the bottle into a recipe for an ironic form of nostalgia. While the nostalgia such songs express seems to be for earlier, and perhaps purer, versions of themselves, such historical self-reflexivity leads to any irony that makes it difficult for a listener to cling very hard or very long to a belief in pure country. “A Bottle of Wine and Patsy Cline,” for example, is a sad song with a rhyme so tight it provokes a Brechtian laugh. Gene Watson’s “The Jukebox Played Along” provides a list of those earlier versions of itself: Buck Owens’ “Crying Time” is mentioned first, of course. George Jones is merely mentioned—no particular song is singled out (I’ll say more about the symbolic power of this name later). Watson even

mentions one of his own previous hits, by now ten years old, and perhaps the most self-consciously lugubrious song ever: "Farewell Party." With its melodramatic steel guitar slides and operatic high notes, this song waxes sentimental about an event that hasn't even happened yet: the singer imagines the woman who abandoned him attending his funeral, and wails that "I know you'll have fun at my farewell party." (Asleep at the Wheel's "Hello Everybody, I'm a Dead Man" leaves no doubt as to how seriously one is to take this proleptic conceit.) A decade later, encased in another song as it is now, "Farewell Party" can all the more easily be heard as country music camp, that is to say, as a song about being country.

Similarly, songs about performing country music can call attention to their own production and circulation. In a song that complains about performing in "rhinestone suits" and incessant concert tours, Waylon Jennings' hook is a repeated "Are you sure Hank [Williams] done it this way?" While Gaillard takes this chorus as a protest against the artificiality of contemporary country music (28–29), there is no plausible way to make Hank Sr. into a symbol of an authentic and unproduced, almost unperformed, musical experience. The singer in this song may be adopting the belief in lost authenticity for rhetorical effect. In other words, he is re-presenting a disputable *belief* about country music. In fact, the opposite belief generates the song, and like Jennings' imagined interlocutor, I'm pretty sure Hank did do it that way. Anybody who really listens to country music knows how Hank did it, how the songs that we hear on the radio and jukebox so many times got there, and how Hank sang them in amazing braided and appliqué-ed suits.

One of the reasons I like Dwight Yoakum so much is that he doesn't even pretend to ask questions about how "Hank done it." In fact, his songs are often about the erosion of this myth of rural purity and authenticity. "Readin', Rightin', Route 23," for example, talks about acquiring the education and "the luxury and the comfort a coal miner can't afford" through migration to the big city. In this song, the country and its ways, although constantly revisited and even admired in the figures of Yoakum's grandparents, are not envisioned as an American paradise lost. Perhaps this explains the "Rightin'" in the title where one expects to see (and probably hears) "Writin'." Not that the city is imagined as a utopia: the chorus of one of Yoakum's songs announces that "the only things that keep [him] hangin' on" in the urban land-

scape are indeed an odd lot of things: "guitars, Cadillacs, hillbilly music." Moreover, these things are poor substitutes for another, unspecified, and perhaps unspecifiable, kind of satisfaction. But Yoakum doesn't pretend to know what that might be; his song simply allows him to make *some* sense and pleasure out of a hillbilly's alienation. This song nearly named his first album, "Guitars, Cadillacs, etc.," and the second album, entitled "Hillbilly Deluxe," allows the constructed notion of the supposedly authentic, unacculturated hillbilly to resonate even more openly. The title provokes a discomfort that again explains the desire to question Yoakum's authenticity: if hillbillies can be deluxe, who can't?

A similar confrontational power makes George Jones so important in so many country performances. His songs make it clear that the worn-out consumer items and trite emotions that represent the white trash versions of American life are in fact only bizarre representations of such experiences—not necessarily the "choice of necessity." His widely-praised vocal techniques—his sliding pitches and affected phrasings which create rhymes you never knew existed—reinforce this sense of deliberate concoction. Moreover, Jones' songs never tell about rural idylls. Instead they talk about tacky trash in order to symbolize the sorrows of the unsophisticated. The title of one song sums it up: "Things Have Gone To Pieces." And Jones really is singing about things—burnt out light bulbs and broken-down chairs. They are a metaphor for a state of mind, of course, but the "choice" of this "unnatural" junk, as opposed to, say, storm clouds or dead flowers, is revealing. The song is saturated with lowly and decayed cultural objects. A newer song, "The King is Gone," is perhaps the definitive George Jones song with its portrayal of a playful yet recognizable sadness about the detritus that at once allegorizes and alienates life in the cultural sticks: in a mournful mood, the abandoned "I" of this song pours himself some whiskey from a "Jim Beam decanter that looks like Elvis" into a Flintstones jelly jar, then proceeds to narrate a conversation between himself, Elvis, and Fred Flintstone. "Yabba Dabba Doo, the King is gone and so are you" proclaims the chorus. Jones is neither glorifying nor mocking this hillbilly raving. Only the ear of an uninitiated listener hears an either/or simplicity. Jones' dips into the bathetic are deliberate, a sort of burlesque bathos that incites both tears and laughter.

Jones has thus become a living synecdoche for this kind of campy embracing of the real yet reified status of the "simple folk." So much so that his name and his songs are constantly used to create meaning in other people's songs. Becky Hobbs' ingenious "Jones on the Jukebox" strings together quotes from Jones' songs to create an up-tempo lost-love drinking song. Sung from a woman's point of view, this song cheerfully re-presents the two-bit trading on countrified emotion that Jones' own performances mock: "I've got Jones on the jukebox and you on my mind / I'm slowly going crazy, a quarter at a time." Jimmy Martin's "Play Me Another George Jones Song" provides yet another example. As the persona in that song addresses his bartender, the fact that "George Jones" signifies the simultaneous performance and critique of a standardize exchange becomes clear. The customer in a honky-tonk knows, because listening to Jones' songs tells him (and he knows that's how he knows), how the evening will unfold: "Here's where I live / and some money in case / I should end up on my face / So fill it up again, Joe, / and play me some more George Jones songs." The mere mention of listening to Jones' songs in "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool" is proof of the title's claims, and when Jones lends his voice to a line in that song, the producer of this record is inspired to dub in the din of a cheering crowd, undoubtedly assuming that all of us longtime country listeners know what Jones is shorthand for.

Barbara Mandrell believes that "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool" will "never be an old song" (Bane 71). And as long as some mystified notion of sophistication remains a viable form of post-modern distinction, she may be right. But finding another way to think about and hear country music might diminish the angry appeal of this song's message. At the same time, it would deal one more blow to the more condescending critiques of mass culture. I even think it would increase our skepticism about ostensibly neutral descriptions (and more forthright celebrations) of the postmodern. For now, both criticism of country music—whether found in some book or heard on my front porch—and wider-ranging analyses of the postmodern condition sustain the rhetoric of authenticity and the belief in other people's unsophistication that lurks behind this rhetoric. Only Bill Malone's massive history of this performance style erodes the myth as it pertains to the music. But the music itself—the lyrics, the performers, the perfor-

mances—explodes this myth in the larger cultural realm. It may allude to its reputation for authenticity, and to its listeners' reputation for uncultured innocence and bad taste, but only to demonstrate what Oscar Wilde, an earlier camp performer, maintained: "to be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up" (cited by Sontag 282).

I was most delightfully reminded of this predicament on one of my first days out of Rousseau's Geneva. As I washed dishes, I heard a song that I hadn't heard for many years. It was Buck Owens singing "Act Naturally." Suddenly a different goofy voice took over. It was Ringo Starr. I knew that the Beatles had recorded this song after Buck did, but I had never heard the Beatles' version. The combined version is new, the DJ announced at the end. As an Owens-Starr duet this recycled song is wonderfully silly, high camp in a way, especially since neither of them can sing very well anymore. The fact that for me, and I suppose for plenty of others, there's some memory strongly attached to it can't really change this more complex reaction since it's built into the performance. The next day, on a dull trip to the grocery store, as I was driving along with the radio, hoping that I'd hear the song again, it occurred to me that the title, emblematic and oxymoronic as it is, sums up the appeal of country music: at once proclaiming the imperative that condemns its audience to rusticity, its enactment questions what that condemnation means. The singers and listeners are *acting* naturally, and *naturally*, they're acting. And naturally, not everybody likes to hear that.¹²

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NOTES

1. Rogers also discusses the social-psychological reasons for the widespread tendency to vociferously advertise an abhorrence of country music (213–14).

2. See, for example, Peterson's and DiMaggio's discussion of the relevant data (497–506).

3. As in any cultural form, not every example is equally interesting. Many country songs *are* guilty as charged: some are simply tired reworkings of convention just as others are cloyingly sentimental.

4. Stallybrass and White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* provides a good analysis of the construction of "low others" that characterizes western cultures.

5. Jameson continues Sontag's analysis, and the urban landscape plays an important role in his argument (77, 80 ff).

6. Huyssen gives a clear statement of this argument. On the other hand, Collins argues that theorists of the post-modern (especially Marxists, Jameson in particular) have never really laid these terms to rest (122–24). In spite of his objection, Collins' examples of excluded popular culture don't seem all that popular. In this respect his analysis is quite like Jameson's. Collins, too, rounds up the usual suspects: detective novels, performance art, architecture, etc.

7. McLaurin and Peterson's 1992 collection of essays about country music themes perpetuates the assumption that country music lyrics are straight-forward statements from a singer to the audience.

8. Peter Guralnick's *Lost Highway: Journeys & Arrivals of American Musicians* is a more enjoyable book, but it, too, is structured on the commercialism vs. creativity dichotomy. As in the Tosches book, Sun Records functions as the point of pure origin. Likewise, Frye Gaillard's generous attempt to describe the appeal of country music, *Watermelon Wine: The Spirit of Country Music*, works with these dichotomies. Interestingly enough, Gaillard associates creativity with an attempt to return to the roots of the music, assumed, of course, to be pure, uncommodified outpourings of the "white-man's soul" (146). At the same time, he argues that imitating an isolated tradition is the death of creativity, and the death of that tradition. Nevertheless, the dichotomies he works with prevent him from articulating this insight any further.

9. Malone's explanation of this phenomenon is worth quoting at length: "Nudie Cohen (whose complete name is seldom printed) came to the West Coast from Brooklyn shortly after World War I and, after a brief career as a boxer, began sewing costumes for Warner Brothers. Before Tex Williams hired him to make costumes for his band in the late forties, Nudie had also had some experience as a brassiere and G-string manufacturer for the strip-tease industry back in New York City. The western suits supplied to the Tex Williams organization were tasteful and restrained, but the costumes commissioned thereafter became progressively more outlandish with their bright colors, ornate decorations, and fringe. Success for country musicians became almost defined by the number of Nudie suits in their wardrobe" (203). He also notes that Porter Wagoner, another one of Nudie's steady customers, pays about \$5,000 per suit (271).

10. As Marc notes, "Hee-Haw" was on CBS until 1971. Then, in spite of the show's popularity, CBS decided to cancel it in order to rid itself of its rural image. Nevertheless, new episodes are still being produced and sold to individual stations.

11. Such a notion may in fact be too simple for American society where many low-status individuals often have considerable disposable income. Nevertheless, popular culture often suggests that the rusticity of rubes is unalterable; indeed, their relationship to the affluent society's commodities is legendarily vexed. For years one could watch this ideological drama played out in popular prime-time (and now widely syndicated) sitcoms like the "Real McCoys" (1957–1963) or the "Beverly Hillbillies" (1962–1971) in which affluent urban and suburban lifestyles were depicted as the common-sensical norm to which the rubes, no matter how wealthy, could not adjust (Marc 77–78). On the other hand, the running gag of Minnie

Pearl's hat with the forever dangling price tag, though similar, may not be the stuff of mass-marketable, once-a-week television comedy. Nevertheless, Minnie Pearl (Sarah Ophelia Colley) is a staple of Grand Ol' Opry broadcasts and "Hee-Haw." But with no normalizing, "citized," sitcom background, she makes most of us uncomfortable since her humor cuts the other way: this "hick" is too clearly schtick. Sontag's campy quotation marks are inescapably there; one doesn't have to choose to see them.

12. I want to thank Mary Bellhouse, Amy Koritz, and Dana Phillips for very helpful conversations about earlier versions of this essay.

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