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Country Music: The Most Diverse Genre?

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Abstract

The genre of country music rose to prominence and notoriety during the golden age of radio in the early 1900s due to the reach of AM radio and the popularity of Nashville, Tennessee's WSM radio show the Grand Ole Opry. Broadcast from the historic Ryman Auditorium, the early pioneers of the genre included artists Roy Acuff, Bill Monroe, and Uncle Dave Macon. Among the mostly white early Opry stars, harmonica wizard DeFord Bailey, a black man from a farming family in Smith County, Tennessee, was one of the fan favorites and draws of the traveling show associated with the popular radio program. Until recent years, very few black artists like Bailey have risen to prominence in the country market; however, black music was, and still is, a major influence in the overall genre. In addition to Bailey's early contributions, the roots of country music stemmed from many different musical styles, including blues, jazz, gospel, western, folk, and hillbilly music. As the genre grew and progressed to the current era, it has continued to be influenced by various music styles while maintaining its distinct description as country music. Explored in this paper are the diverse influences on the genre from its birth to the current era, making it arguably one of the most diverse genres of music.

Keywords

country music • diversity • blues • bluegrass • mountain music

The genre of country music rose to prominence and notoriety during the golden age of radio in the early 1900s due to the reach of AM radio and the popularity of Nashville, Tennessee's WSM radio show the *Grand Ole Opry.* Broadcast from the historic Ryman Auditorium, the early pioneers of the genre included artists Roy Acuff, Bill Monroe, and Uncle Dave Macon (Snethen 2009). Among the mostly white early *Opry* stars, harmonica wizard DeFord Bailey, a black man from a farming family in Smith County, Tennessee, was one of the fan favorites and draws of the traveling Opry show associated with the popular radio program (Jones 1990). Until recent years, very few black artists like Bailey have risen to prominence in the country market; however, black music was, and still is, a major influence in the overall genre (Hodges & Teague 2023). In addition to Bailey's early contributions, the roots of country music stemmed from many different musical styles including blues, jazz, gospel, western, folk, and hillbilly music. As the genre grew and progressed to the current era, it has continued to be influenced by various music styles while maintaining its distinct description as country music. Explored in this paper are the diverse influences on the genre from its birth to the current era, making it arguably one of the most diverse genres in music.

Dawn of Country Music

One of the first important references to music being deemed "country" appeared in the November 26, 1736 issue of the *Virginia Gazette*. The article described a fiddling contest for country fiddlers. Over the years of its publication, the *Gazette* had numerous references to the fiddling prowess of runaway slaves (Lewis 2001). The fiddle was the South's most common musical instrument and was played by both black and white musicians before the American Civil War. Black fiddle music was described as being more raw, slower, and having less tremolo than the fiddle music of the white players. In addition to fiddles, the music of the South also included banjos and harmonicas. The banjo was invented by southern black slaves in the late 1690s and was very similar to the banjar played by their ancestors in Africa. While it can be inferred that jazz and blues were the staples of black culture brought to the Americas from Africa, in actuality, the music

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of the early United States black culture was predominantly country music derived from the combination of cultures: hillbilly music, ballads, and folk songs from the British Isles, as well as the polyrhythmic influences that came from African slaves (Glanton 1998). Additionally, country music was influenced by the mountain dwellers of Appalachia with their gospel and folk music sound that had evolved from the New England styles of music of the colonial era (Manuel 2008). As the country genre of music advanced over the years, it was passed down from generation to generation by oral tradition until the late 1800s.

Country Music Reaches Mass Audiences

Recorded Sound

A monumental event in musical history occurred in 1877 with Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph. For the first time in history, sound could be recorded and played back to the listener. This ultimately led to the creation of the first record labels and recordings being mass-produced and sold to the public (McNamara 2018). The technological breakthrough allowed the wide disbursement of multiple genres of music. Consumers could then be exposed to music that they would not normally have the opportunity to hear. The growth of the record industry in the early 1900s and the demand for recorded music created opportunities for visionaries and entrepreneurs to seek out new forms of music as well as record and release them to the public. One such visionary was Ralph Peer. While the main focus of the recorded music industry focused on the Tin Pan Alley songs, Peer, instead, focused his vision on recording and marketing southern folk-rooted music, which he called "hillbilly music." In 1927, Peer traveled to Bristol, Tennessee, and used a new portable recording technology to find fresh and unique music that had not otherwise been commercially exploited. While in Bristol, Peer recorded the songs of Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, who went on to become some of country music's earliest stars (Sandmel 2014). Historian Bill C. Malone described Peer's Bristol sessions as one of the seminal events in country music history. Additionally, historian Nolan Porterfield has referred to the Bristol sessions as country music's Big Bang, and the Tennessee Senate recognized Bristol as the birthplace of country music (Olson 2025). Peer went on to become a pioneer of country music publishing and the manager of the Carter Family, who had numerous hit songs in their career, including "Wabash Cannonball," "Keep on the Sunnyside," "Wildwood Flower," and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" (McDowell 2002).

One of the legendary artists catapulted by Peer's recordings was Jimmie Rodgers, who became known as the first country star (Manuel 2008). Rodgers attributed much of his music to the influence of the blues. This is evident in his recording "Travellin' Blues" and his use of blues mode (Ripani 2006). By the time of Peer's recordings, country music was exemplifying many different elements in addition to the basic Anglo-American ballads and style. African American rhythms, blue notes, and black fiddling styles were woven into the sound along with the banjo. Rodgers' music incorporated yodels, slide guitar, and blues structures (Lewis 2001). Black singer Henry Thomas wrote and recorded twenty-three songs for the race label Okeh, and although his work was not commercially successful for him, early country stars Uncle Dave Macon and Lew Shilde had success with Thomas' songs "Arkansas," "Fox and the Hounds," and "Fishin' Blues." The hillbilly folk classic "Casey Jones" was written by a black engineer named Wallace Saunders. As the Carter Family rose to fame, they went in search of songs. A. P. Carter traveled through Tennessee and Virginia to collect folk songs. Traveling with Carter was black blues singer Lesley Riddle, who helped bring the Carters their blues-styled hits "Cannonball Blues" and "Motherless Children," as well as helping Mother Maybelle Carter develop her scratch guitar playing technique (Lewis 2001).

Radio

Another monumental event shaping the course of the country music industry was the invention of the radio. The question of who invented the radio is debatable, but credit is usually given to either Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi or inventor Nikola Tesla. Each took the work of German physicist Heinrich Rudolph Hertz on electric current, in the form of radio waves, being projected into the air in the same manner as light and heat waves. The waves travel at the speed of light and have the illusion of being instantaneous (Bellis 2019). While Marconi was the first to send a radio signal, Tesla was the first to patent the technology. Initially used in military ship-to-ship communication, radio eventually became available to the general public, with receivers sold for the home that could pick up and amplify the broadcast signals. The business of radio began in 1920 when the Harding/Cox presidential election returns were broadcast on KDKA-Pittsburgh**.** Afterward, the station began broadcasting radio programs, including music and variety shows, on a daily schedule (Bellis 2019). Initially, radio was broadcast on a frequency between 535 and 1605 kHz in what is known as amplitude modulation (AM) (AM vs FM 2023). The wavelengths were considered "long" at between 300 and 600 meters. The long wavelengths allowed the AM signal to travel extremely long distances, especially during nighttime hours (which was deemed the "skywave effect") (Linden 2021). Essentially, a broadcast from Nashville could be heard in Canada or on the West Coast of the U.S. Radio quickly replaced the upright piano as the way that most Americans entertained themselves at home. As a result, the

next thirty years, up until the early '50s, became known as the "Golden Age of Radio" (*The development of Radio,* n.d.). For the first time in history, millions could tune in and listen to the same program at the same time. During the Golden Age of radio, The National Life Insurance Company in Nashville, Tennessee, launched its own radio station WSM on October 5, 1925, on AM 650. (*History,* n.d.). *WSM Barn Dance* was a popular show, which was eventually renamed *The Grand Ole Opry*. As a result of the reach of AM 650, *The Grand Ole Opry* could be heard almost instantaneously over most of North America, influencing and exposing millions to the previously regional genre of country music (*History: WSM,* n.d.). Over the next few decades country music stars emerged, such as Roy Acuff, Hank Williams, DeFord Bailey, and Uncle Dave Macon, who went on to have prosperous careers.

Influences of Early Country Stars

As mentioned above, DeFord Bailey, a black harmonica player, was one of *The Grand Ole Opry*'s earliest stars. Bailey was not alone in influencing the early sounds of the genre. Country star Hank Williams attributed much of his musical style to Georgiana, Alabama, and a local black street musician named Rufus Payne, who would play for spare change outside Georgiana bars in the 1930s. Williams' biographer, Colin Escott, attributed Williams' lazy swing and his uptempo style to Payne's legacy (Lewis 2001). Country star Bill Monroe was also taught guitar by black Kentucky fiddler and guitarist Arnold Schultz. Early Grand Ole Opry star Bob Wills' first single was a cover of "Gulf Coast Blues" by black artist Bessie Smith (Lewis 2001). Many country stars of the Golden Age of radio found chart success and had hits with songs that were either created or first performed by African American writers and artists (Glanton 1998). African American influence was ever-present during the era in the solos of Bob Wills' fiddlers and guitarists, in the high lonesome sound of Bill Monroe's singing and the slurred phrasing of his fiddlers, Merle Travis' rhythmic and syncopated guitar picking, and the bent vocal notes of Hank Williams. In the early years of the genre there were also a number of African American artists who played country music, including Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, who played 12-string guitar, and Amedee Ardoin, a Creole country singer and accordionist who made over thirty recordings from 1929 to 1934, with many being duets with white fiddle player Dennis McGhee. While country music had many African American influencers, it is important to note that post-emancipation, many African Americans chose to put the memory of slavery behind them— which included banjos, for fear of being stereotyped. Many lost their association with country music when they moved to urban areas in the early 1900s and began playing in taverns and saloons, where pianos and brass horns were more popular (Glanton 1998).

Western Influence

Manuel (2008) described the heavily accepted past narrative as country music being the music of plain white folk of the South. The article states past arguments that attributed country music's influences to the folksongs, ballads, dances, and instrumental pieces brought to North America by Anglo-Celtic immigrants, instead of the influence of African Americans, calling the black influence an occasional influence. Some historians disagree with Manuel's opinion; however, the study also describes the heavy pre-World War II Western influences on country music based around the singing cowboys from the film industry. The songs were focused on life on ranches and the cowboy culture of the American West. The article explores the various styles of Western music, a phenomenon it attributes to Texas, California, Oklahoma, and Louisiana. The sounds included a complex mix of racial and ethnic forms which were shaped by the public's fascination and the romanticism of the West portrayed in the media and film. The first notable Western singing film star, or "singing cowboy," was Gene Autry, but other popular contemporaries included Roy Rogers and female artists Dale Evans and Patsy Montana (June-Friesen 2011). While the Western film craze was primarily in the 1950s and 1960s, the music and nostalgia of the period made its way into the country music of the 1970s, with artists like Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Riders in the Sky, and Michael Martin Murphy all singing about the Western themes they loved from their childhood film heroes (June-Friesen 2011). One of the biggest Western-themed hits of that period was "Mama Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys," sung as a duet by Jennings and Nelson. The influence of Western music can still be seen in the market today in the occasional song with cowboy themes, as well as the country stars that choose to wear cowboy hats as part of their personal brand.

1960s and 1970s Country Music

As country music progressed through the twentieth century, the African American influence in the genre did not disappear, even as blacks transitioned to more urban areas and musical styles. The black influence was simply absorbed more deeply into the sound of country music (Lewis 2001). Black blues music also influenced the rock and roll music of the 1960s, which gave country artists and rock artists the ability to record in each genre, due to similarity in song structures and styles. While it is hard to determine if country music influenced rock

and roll or vice versa, it is evident that both were heavily influenced by the African American styles of the early 1900s. 1960s and '70s country guitar virtuoso Chet Atkins claimed to trace his guitar techniques back through Merle Travis to an unnamed African American coal miner. George Jones claimed he was inspired by black artist Little Richard when he wrote and recorded his country hit "Rock It." 1970s country star Mickey Gilley covered black artist Sam Cooke's "Bring It on Home to Me," making it a hit in 1976 (Lewis 2001). Classic black rock and roll artist Chuck Berry's songs were covered by country star Waylon Jennings as well as white rock and roll stars Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, leading to Berry being ultimately inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. Black rock and roll artist Ray Charles recorded four country albums between 1962 and 1974. Elvis Presley also recorded prolific black songwriter Otis Blackwell's song "Don't Be Cruel," which was number one on the country chart for ten weeks (Glanton 1998). These are just a few of the examples of the cross-pollination between black music, rock and roll, and country of the mid-to-late twentieth century.

Bakersfield and California Country Music

While Nashville is known as the home of country music, California artists and stylings have had a heavy influence on the genre. One such styling is the Bakersfield sound. Bakersfield country music originated in the San Joaquin Valley of California in the town of Bakersfield. The sound was rooted in the Western swing of the 1950s and was distinguished by prominent pedal steel guitars, backbeat rhythms, strong harmonies, and a preference for electric instruments over acoustic instruments. A thriving California live music scene developed around the style, with artists such as Buck Owens and Merle Haggard springing out of the movement and becoming worldwide stars (Rowe 2019). The twangy Bakersfield guitar styles continued in the genre and were once again brought to prominence when Dwight Yoakam found success in the 1990s utilizing the influences of Owens and Haggard in his hits.

Another California influence on the genre came out of Los Angeles with the country-style rock and roll of artists such as Jackson Browne, Pure Prairie League, Linda Ronstadt, and the Eagles. While at the time, the music was mainly considered rock music, the style would most likely be considered country music if released today. Of the artists of the Los Angeles scene, the Eagles probably had the most impact on the country market and influenced artists throughout the 1980s and 1990s. While much of the band's success was in the rock genre, their song "Lyin' Eyes," penned by Don Henley and Glenn Frey, had actually reached number 8 on the country chart in its initial release and was nominated for record of the year. "Lyin' Eyes" was also included in the soundtrack for the film *Urban Cowboy*, one of the most successful films of the era. The early 1990s tribute album *Common Thread: The Songs of the Eagles* spotlighted the Eagles' influence on the genre and produced new country hits, with country stars of the time covering classic Eagles' songs. The covers included Diamond Rio's cover of "Lyin' Eyes" and Travis Tritt's cover of "Take It Easy." The album went on to sell over three million units and won Album of the Year at the CMA Awards (Zaleski 2021).

Gospel Music

Religion, specifically Christianity, has had a major impact on the genre of country music from its roots in gospel music. The influence appears not only in the stylings but in the subject matter of the lyrics of songs. There are two distinct types of gospel music, black gospel and southern gospel. Each has gradually been interwoven into the sound of country music since the genre's beginnings. Black gospel sprang from the black churches of the south after the slaves were freed across the United States in the late 1800s (Haynes 2022). Typical black gospel styles include large choirs and call-and-response styles of singing and worship (Rick 2023). The influence of black gospel permeated the sound of country music from artists rooted in the church. Southern gospel also sprang from the churches of the south, but primarily the rural white churches. Southern gospel was traditionally composed of a quartet accompanied by a piano during worship services (Haynes 2022). Rick (2023) described how the signature harmonies of gospel music mirrored the church singers and added to the emotional delivery of faith-based themes and topics. As a result, the biblical themes of redemption, virtue, and stories with religious meaning have been a prominent part of country music through the years and continue to this day.

One of the first moments of gospel music appearing in the country genre was in the early recordings of the Carter Family. Originally a hymn written in 1907 by Ada R. Haberson, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" was adapted and recorded by the Carter Family in 1935. The song became a foundational song for the country genre but also for the Grand Ole Opry. Classic country artist Hank Williams credited his gospel roots to singing in church. Williams wrote and recorded his own gospel/country song "I Saw the Light," which became a major hit in both the country and gospel circles (Johnson, n.d.). Since that time, many other artists have bridged the gap between gospel and country music, including the Louvin Brothers and the Stanley Brothers in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as Elvis Presley in the 1960s and 1970s. Presley grew up singing in church and regularly crossed the boundary between the two genres, even winning a Grammy award for his version of the classic

hymn “How Great Thou Art” in 1967. Over her long illustrious career, country star Dolly Parton also recorded numerous gospel albums and regularly incorporated religious themes in her own songs (Johnson, n.d.).

The four-part harmony styles of southern gospel have also found success within the country genre, with the success of country vocal groups such as The Statler Brothers and The Oak Ridge Boys. The Statler Brothers started their career singing in churches and as their fanbase grew, they realized that they could incorporate their four-part harmony style into country-leaning songs. The group had a long career, with three albums attaining Gold status; they included a gospel song on each of their albums throughout their career (Kendall 2017). The Oak Ridge Boys took a similar path to the Statler Brothers, also with roots in the church. After shifting their musical focus from gospel to country music the vocal group achieved enormous success with the classic country songs “Bobbie Sue,” “Leaving Louisiana in The Broad Daylight,” “Trying to Love Two Women,” “American Made,” “(I’m Settin’) Fancy-Free,” and their biggest hit, the classic ’80s country song, “Elvira.” The Oak Ridge Boys went on to win four ACM awards, four CMA awards, and twelve Dove awards and were inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame, The Gospel Music Hall of Fame, and the Vocal Group Hall of Fame (Grisham 2023).

Gospel stylings remain in today’s country market as well. In the year 2000, country star Randy Travis won a Grammy award for best southern, country, or bluegrass gospel album with his *Inspirational Journey*. The album celebrated his gospel roots and was among several gospel albums throughout his long career. In 2011, country star Carrie Underwood performed the hymn “How Great Thou Art” at the ACM Girls’ Night Out television event. Underwood has consistently incorporated gospel and religious elements into her music, which have helped to showcase her powerful rangy voice while giving background to her Christian upbringing in the church. Most recently, gospel music elements have been displayed in country star Chris Stapleton’s music. Stapleton has expressed his gospel influences, and his 2020 album *Starting Over* included the song “Watch You Burn,” which featured prominent gospel elements (Johnson, n.d.).

Disco

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the phenomenon of disco was taking the world by storm. With bands such as ABBA and The Bee Gees, the musical style permeated many aspects of society all over the world. Disco found its way into the country music genre after the success of the Hollywood blockbuster films *Saturday Night Fever* and *Urban Cowboy*. The four-on-the-floor pulsing beats and disco basslines began to show up in the country hits of the time. With the *Urban Cowboy* movement, country music also found its way onto the dance floors of America with the Bellamy Brothers’ worldwide 1976 country crossover hit “Let Your Love Flow,” Whispering Bill Anderson’s 1978 hit “Love and Other Sad Stories,” Ronnie Milsap’s 1979 hit “Get It Up,” Mel McDaniel’s 1985 hit “Baby’s Got Her Blue Jeans On,” and many more. The country hits of the era mimicked the funky beats and style of the disco greats such as KC and the Sunshine Band and The Bee Gees (Betts et al. 2018). Dolly Parton, one of country’s biggest stars, even moved to Los Angeles during that time and churned out her late 1970s disco-inspired hits “Here You Come Again” and “Heartbreaker” (Owen 2023). One of the biggest hits of the era was the 1980s anthemic song “Islands in the Stream” by country superstars Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton. The song was written by the Gibb brothers of the Bee Gees, who went on to write an entire album for Rogers called *Eyes That See in the Dark* that reached number one on the country charts (Sexton 2024). Disco’s influence on country music was not just a passing trend, however. The stylings remain in the genre and have been consistently incorporated into the records of today. In 2012, Barry Gibb received a standing ovation when he performed three songs on the Grand Ole Opry with Ricky Skaggs. Kacey Musgraves also incorporated the disco-style song “High Horse” in her 2018 album Golden Hour (Betts et al. 2018).

’90s Rock

The 1990s saw another infusion of the country genre being influenced and infused with new sounds. Country artist Shania Twain teamed up with rock legend and producer Robert John “Mutt” Lange. Lange had previously had enormous success with ’80s rockers Def Leppard and AC/DC. Twain’s hits blurred the lines between country, rock, and pop with her crossover hits such as “Any Man of Mine” from the album *The Woman in Me* which sold millions of units all over the world (Burchard 2017). Lange’s influence inspired other artists and record labels to seek out producers fluent in the rock stylings of the ’80s. Most notably, rock guitarist Dann Huff found tremendous success in the country market producing many of the genre’s hits in the late 1990s. Huff had been the frontman for the ’80s rock band Giant but found his way to Nashville and worked on numerous recordings throughout the ’90s. Eventually moving into production, Huff became the go-to producer for labels and artists seeking the rock-infused sound of the country music of the era. The rock sounds and stylings also inspired past rock and pop artists to try their hand at making their own country music. Artists like Peter Cetera, former singer for the band Chicago, rock artist Sheryl Crow, rocker Jon Bon Jovi, and the hair band

Poison's singer Bret Michaels all released singles targeted at the country market (Giles 2016). The rock influence is still present in the genre today and can still be heard in the Huff-produced artists from the era who have maintained successful careers and fan bases. One such artist, Keith Urban, has experienced a sustained successful career since his 2002 album *Golden Road*, which contained many rock and pop influences (Burchard 2017). The stylings are still prominent in his music today.

Rap and Hip-Hop

In the last twenty years, country music has continued its tradition of incorporating traditional black styles of music with the influence of rap and hip-hop. With the genre's beginnings touching on blues and jazz music, it should not come as a surprise that the current black music styles could influence and even be successful in country music. Rap finding its way into the genre can be traced back to the late 1990s, with artists like Cowboy Troy and Bubba Sparxxx when they began experimenting with country themes while using rap beats and instrumentation. Throughout the early part of the next decade, major country artists began to experiment with rap and hip-hop elements in their music. Most notably Tim McGraw's collaboration with rapper Nelly, "Over and Over," was the first commercially well-received song bridging the gap between rap and country and helped to pave the way for others to follow their lead (Patria 2024). The new style of country music known as "country rap" opened the door that rappers like Big Smo and Colt Ford have walked through, further expanding what the public knew as the genre of country music (Patria). Country rap often lyrically celebrates the lifestyles of rural American and southern culture and has helped to globalize the genre by finding success in countries all over the world.

Hip-hop and rap-style country music experienced a major milestone at the 2008 Country Music Association Awards when Kid Rock performed his rap/rock song "All Summer Long" while bringing hip-hop star Lil' Wayne on stage with him. Two weeks later Colt Ford released his country rap album *Ride Through the Country,* and other artists such as LoCash Cowboys and Moonshine Bandits emerged on the country scene. The new style of country found success on YouTube with over 6 million video views. Country rap did not find radio success, however, until Jason Aldean's "Dirt Road Anthem," which had originally been recorded by Colt Ford. Aldean performed the song at the Country Music Television Awards in 2011, and the song reached number one on the country charts in July of that year (Trigger 2013). Following Aldean's success with "Dirt Road Anthem," radio programmers, who had previously been reluctant to play country rap, began to regularly play country songs with rap and hip-hop elements. Many of the genre's major artists began to follow suit and released their own country rap-styled songs including Blake Shelton with his song "Boys 'Round Here," Brad Paisley's duet with LL Cool J. "Accidental Racist," and Luke Bryan's reference to rap artist T Pain, who was known for his use of auto-tune, in his song "That's My Kind of Night." All found success on the country charts (Trigger 2013). The influence of hip-hop and rap has even opened the door for more black country singers within the genre which historically has had very few artists of color. The genre currently has more black artists finding success than ever before (Hodges & Teague 2023; Dowling 2020).

Conclusion

In order to fully examine the diverse influences included in the genre of country music, it is important to first define country music. Wildridge explained that country music covers a huge selection of genres within its own genre of music. Country music encompasses elements of rock, folk, blues, jazz, gospel, and more (2022). It is also important to examine the meaning of diversity or multiculturalism. Silverman (2010) explained that diversity is the difference among groups of people and individuals based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic area. In applying Silverman's definition of diversity to music genres, the aspects of race, socioeconomic status, religion, and geographic area have had a strong impact on country music throughout its history. For example, in contrast to the African American lineage of genres such as black gospel, blues, and jazz, the music stylings displayed in the early country music genre known as hillbilly music originated from another continent and cultural group altogether. Socioeconomic differences are displayed in the genre from the poor white mountain music to the music originating from the slaves of early America to the music that came out of poor urban areas of the early 1900s, to the Western styles of the cowboys and ranch workers. Different religious stylings also originated from the gospel of the black churches as well as in the southern gospel of the southern white churches. Both religious styles found their way into the overall sound of country music. With all of the different sounds and styles incorporated into the genre, one could ask what makes a song country as opposed to being called blues, hip-hop, rap, gospel, or bluegrass. Ken Burns' documentary *Country Music* explained that country music is not so much about a sound or a specific instrumentation,

but that it is "about universal human experiences of joy at birth and sadness at death and falling in love and trying to stay in love and losing love and being lonely and seeking redemption" (Owen 2023). To sum up this thought, country music is music about the story of life. Country Music Hall of Famer Harlan Howard described country music as "three chords and the truth" (Owen 2023). Most genres of music are based on a specific sound, structure, instrumentation, or production style, while the country genre can incorporate any structures, instrumentations, and production styles as long as the themes are about life. This lone distinction is what makes country music one of the most diverse and multicultural genres of music in the world.

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