

**Little Women Against the Machine: Feminism in American Country
Music.**

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Introduction

For most of its existence, country music has been deeply intertwined with the identity politics of America and typically represents a conservative populist viewpoint that is nostalgic, patriotic and explicitly anti-feminist. Iconic country artists such as Merle Haggard frequently negatively reference the women's movement that has allowed white American women to find work and move outside of a traditional household role. The implication within these songs is that women leaving the household negatively affects the American family unit which is at the core of society's strength. This is the narrative of country music that has been explored by political scientists, who have examined country music and its relationship to conservative identity politics in rural America.¹ This identity narrative is dominant but it is not representative of the entire country music scene and it ignores a long tradition of independent female country artists. Country music is a genre that prizes authenticity above all else, its songs focus on the joys and fears of everyday life for rural (and some non-rural) Americans. Popular topics include family, faith, love, rebellion and struggle topics that are just as meaningful to women as they are to men.²

This research paper will analyse four country music songs using multi-modal analysis to identify pro-feminist viewpoints in country music.

Theory

This paper uses Mattern's theory of music as a form of political communication, focusing particularly on its effect on identity politics. Mattern recognizes music as a tool of community building and maintenance. This occurs through the formation of identity that is based on interaction with social environments, because music is influenced by an individual's identity it can convey past experiences, trauma and joy. Others with similar social and cultural circumstances then internalize the experiences and meanings conveyed in the music and make it a part of their identity. This common identity is then linked to the music and reaffirmed every time a similar song is created. Through this function music becomes a marker of the community and a record of its past.

Music is a tool of community and communities of humans are inherently political. Mattern identifies three functions that music can serve as a tool of political communication in and between communities. The first is confrontational. Confrontational communication is where music draws attention to perceived oppression, wrongdoing etc by an outside force. Confrontational music has sharp distinctions between right and wrong, aggressors and defenders. It can be used to heighten tensions, as a call to action and to distinguish and

¹ Peter La Chapelle, *Proud To Be An Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music and Migration to Southern California*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 180-207, https://www-jstor-org.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pnmnz.11?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad93ce22671db80d326a444d06b10fd1b&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

² Kenneth J Meir, "Looking for Meaning in All the Wrong Places: Country Music and the Politics of Identity," *Social Science Quarterly* 100, no.1 (02, 2019):89-108, <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/doi/10.1111/ssqu.12556>.

exaggerate differences between communities. The second function is deliberative. Music can act as a deliberative tool within communities, where differing opinions on aspects of the community can be raised and debated. Communities are not stagnant and shared values, experiences and beliefs shift over time. Music can therefore act as a vehicle to express different groups shifting beliefs. Deliberative music challenges the unthinking reinforcement of a community's values and forces communities to redefine or reaffirm their shared identity. The third function is pragmatic. Pragmatic communication is used to further the goals of functions one and two by inviting collaboration. This collaboration can be through an invitation for others inside or outside of the community to participate in a cause, as a way to earn money for a political goal, or to advance a set narrative.³

A single definition of a feminist ideology is not feasible as the movement is both large and fractured. This paper will use an intersectional feminist approach as created by Kimberlie Crenshaw, as it has had the most influence on modern '3rd wave' feminism. Using this approach means understanding the multiple hierarchical identities any individual can hold and how this specific combination of identities will affect their interactions with people and power structures. In this paper race, gender, sexuality and class are especially salient identities, as many female country musicians explore what it means to be white, female and working class in the American south.⁴ I hypothesise that there will be evidence of a subgenre of artists in American country music who express feminist viewpoints through their songs.

Method

This paper will use multimodal analysis of lyrics and album/single covers of four songs. A multimodal analysis is a form of qualitative research developed from Critical Discourse Analysis; that assumes that choices that are made by the writer/artist reveal broader intentions or meanings that may not be explicitly stated. In this sense, the multimodal analysis focuses on the interaction of multiple modes of communication with each other, how the modes of communication reveal artists intentions and how they affect the context of the piece.⁵

This essay will examine the lyrics of songs and the cover image for the album/single the song was originally released as. If both an album and single cover exist the single will be given preference as it was selected with the specific song in mind. Each song's lyrics and album cover will be examined in the context of the contemporary events of the time, the artist's personal life, the dominant identity politics of the time and area. Lyrics and covers will also be examined for

³Mark Mattern, *Acting in Concert: Music, Community and Political Action*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998,

https://web-b-ebsscohost-com.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE4MzI4X19BTg2?s_id=1ff5bbe9-81ab-4b44-b88c-f914502f8170@sessionmgr103&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1.

⁴ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and AntiRacist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no.1 (1989): Article 8.

http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8?utm_source=chicagounbound.uchicago.edu%2Fucf%2Fvol1989%2Fiss1%2F8&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

⁵ Mona Krewel, "Music, Politics, and Pop Culture II," POLS365: Politics & Music (Class Lecture, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand, July 13, 2021).

references to the family structure, formal and informal power institutions, the patriarchy, class and sex. From this, the song's viewpoint should be evident.

Lyrics are at the core of country music, and unlike in other genres such as rock or indie instrumentation never overpowers the lyrics in a country song. Music is important but is expected to be a support for the message of the lyrics more than the other way around. Some of this focus is because country music focuses on authentic, emotive storytelling which demands lyrics that an audience can connect to and understand.⁶

All the selected songs are high performing, songs that achieved critical and radio success in the country music scene, or were prevented from achieving radio success due to their expressed viewpoint. The four songs are by established country artists who have all contributed multiple albums to the genre. The songs were released over a range of years from the late sixties to the present day meaning the social context of the time of recording and/or release is especially relevant.

⁶ Madeline Rachel Morrow, 2017, "Women's Hit Cheating Songs - Country Music and Feminist Change in American Society, 1962-2015," Masters Thesis, University of Denver.

Dolly Parton - Just because I'm a woman (1968)



Released in 1968 'Just because I'm a woman' was Parton's second album. The song just because I'm a woman was a medium success at the time reaching 17 on the country charts, partially due to a lack of radio play due to producers being unenthused by the content. The messages behind the lyrics have continued throughout Parton's career, that of being an ordinary authentic person who's made mistakes and only wants to be treated equally as she deals with them.⁷ A statement emphasised by the chorus:

*"Yes I've made mistakes
But listen and understand
My mistakes are no worse than yours
Just because I'm a woman."*

The song's focus is on the double standards of sexuality and purity for men and women perpetuated in society.

"Now a man will take a good girl and he'll ruin her reputation."

⁷ Leigh H. Edwards, *Dolly Parton, Gender, and Country Music*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018):64-100, <https://doi-org.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/10.2307/j.ctt2005t8k>.

*But when he wants to marry, well, that's a different situation.
He'll just walk off and leave her to do the best she can
while he searches for an angel to wear his wedding band."*

The song rails against the hypocrisy of a society that judges a woman for sleeping with a man without marrying him, but in the same breath congratulates the man for a successful conquest. The double standard of expecting virginity from women and sexual experience from men and the idea that either has any bearing on an individual's value. Dolly explicitly states that "*I'm no angel*" and tells her husband that he has no right to be disappointed in her choices unless he too feels ashamed of his own past sexual experiences.

Dolly Parton's gender presentation has always been intentionally subversive, a look she has described as "hillbilly barbie" and inspired by "the pure mountain girl and the town hooker".⁸ In this cover we see her classic over the top blonde locks, a tight fitted white dress and silver pumps. The choice of white is interesting considering its traditional associations with the purity and innocence of a wedding dress, and a woman's virginity. As a dress choice in the context of the song's lyrics it makes a statement that purity is not something determined by a woman's sexual history.⁹

⁸ Leigh H. Edwards, *Dolly Parton ,Gender, and Country Music*,(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018):1-63, <https://doi-org.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/10.2307/j.ctt2005t8k>.

⁹ Leigh H. Edwards, *Dolly Parton ,Gender, and Country Music*,(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018):27-63, <https://doi-org.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/10.2307/j.ctt2005t8k>.

Loretta Lynn - The Pill (1973)



Loretta Lynn recorded “The Pill” a few years before it was released in 1975, but held back on the release due to managers fear of public backlash against a song celebrating contraception as a tool of women’s freedom. The fears were initially correct as many radio stations blacklisted the song, female fans however loved it and sales propelled it to number five on the country charts forcing many stations to add it to their programs due to its popularity. The song is jaunty and comedic employing classic country imagery of a chicken farm experiencing upheaval because of the hen’s newfound control over their bodies. While upbeat the song is also deeply autobiographical and reflective of Lynn’s own experiences of life before birth control was readily available. Loretta Lynn married young at 19 and had nine children over x years. It was an unhappy marriage with a husband who was both abusive and unfaithful. Lynn has publically said

that while she doesn't regret any of her babies, she would never have had so many, so quickly if she'd had the choice.

"I'm ready to make a deal

And you can't afford to turn it down

'Cause you know I've got the pill."

The song celebrates Lynn's hope for a new generation of women who will have the chance to explore their sexuality without the fear of pregnancy hanging over them "*The feeling good, comes easy now, since I've got the pill.*" Lynn has publicly discussed her own ignorance about sex before her marriage saying the night of her wedding she "had no idea what was going on". These experiences were foundational in her advocacy for contraception and frank discussions about sex with young women so they had the information necessary to make their own decisions about their own bodies.¹⁰

The vinyl cover for 'the pill' features Lynn posed casually, seated at the base of a tree, with a paddock scene in the background. This country setting displays her authenticity as a rural southerner. Wearing practical denim clothing, with her hair loose in the wind the image conveys a sense of freedom that the song conveys through its lyrics. However, despite this freedom Lynn doesn't look directly into the camera and is still wearing her wedding ring on her finger.

¹⁰ Mark Allan Jackson, "Stand Up to Your Man - The Working-Class Feminism of Loretta Lynn," In *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*, edited by Mark Allan Jackson, 102-120. University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, <https://doi-org.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/10.2307/j.ctv3t5qf4>.

Kacey Musgraves - Follow your arrow (2013)



Like previous songs discussed, Kacey Musgraves song “follow your arrow” was initially blacklisted from some country radio stations. This ban was due to the lyrics explicit support of homosexual relationships, a key line in the song’s chorus “*So make lots of noise, kiss lots of boys, or kiss lots of girls if that’s something you’re into*”. While the lyrics might seem casual they were a major break from the heteronormative norms of the country music scene and this, along with a reference to smoking marijuana, resulted in many stations refusing to play the song.¹¹

¹¹ Joseph, Hudak, “Kacey Musgraves ‘Follow Your Arrow’ wins CMA for Song of the Year,” *Rolling Stone*, November 6, 2014,

The core message Musgraves expresses throughout the song is that people should do what feels right to them and that society has no right to judge these individual choices. The lyrics call out the double standards of small rural towns in their expectations of religiosity, appearance and behaviour. The song tip-toes around explicit language using wordplay to point out the inherent hypocrisy in many common judgments, especially those about women.

“If you save yourself for marriage you’re a bore

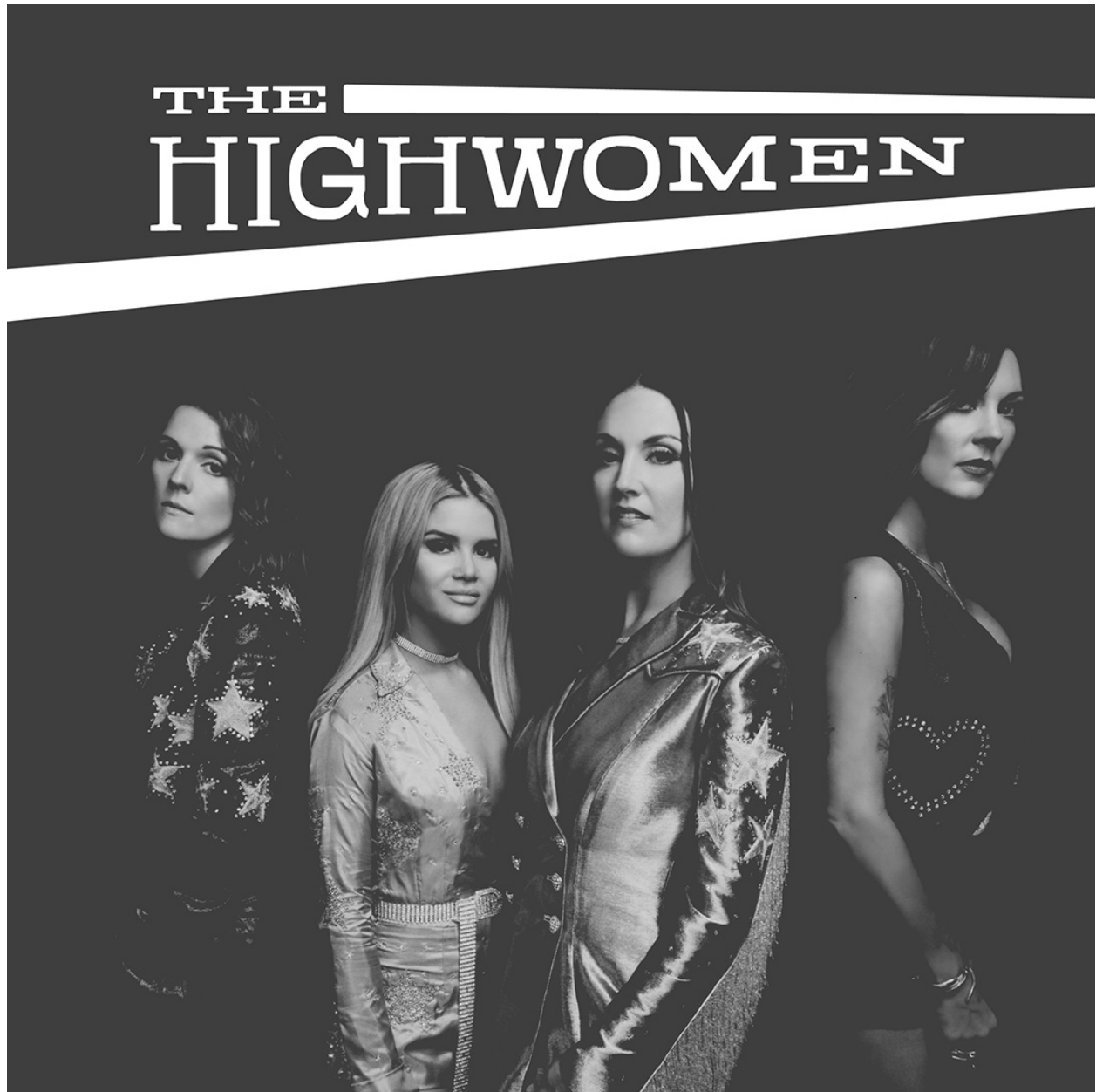
If you don’t save yourself for marriage you’re a whor - rible person”

“If you don’t go to church you’ll go to hell

If you’re the first one on the front row you’re a self-righteous son-of-a”

The cover and title of the album “Same Trailer, Different Park” are explicitly working class and country. The title and cover both reference the stereotype of the ‘trailer-park hillbilly’, with Musgraves posed on a trailer park fence in heavy makeup, cacti in the background and cowboy boots on her feet. The cover unashamedly embraces Musgraves small town working class roots and aesthetics and provides a glimpse of the authentic storytelling so integral to country music.

The Highwomen (Brandi Carlile, Natilie Hemby, Maren Morris, Sheryl Crow, Amanda Shires, Yola) - The Highwomen (2019)



The song 'Highwomen' is an answer song to the 1985 country classic "Highwayman" written by Jimmy Webb and performed by country supergroup the highwaymen formed by Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson. Highwomen was written by Jimmy Webb, Brandi Carlile and Amanda Shiles. In 'the highwaymen' the lives of four unnamed men in different places and times are described; a highwayman, a sailor, a construction worker and a

starship pilot. "The highwomen" focuses on the lives of four women in American history, however unlike its predecessor its choices of focus are political in nature.¹²

The first chorus describes a young Honduran woman in the 1980s who made the decision to emigrate to America illegally for the sake of her family's safety.

"My family left Honduras when they killed the Sandinistas.

We followed a coyote through the dust of Mexico"

The song references the death of the Sandinistas, referring to America's policy in the 1980s under Regan to support right wing contra's to undermine left-wing Latin American governments as a way of maintaining 'American security'. The Sandinistas were a left wing party operating in Nicaragua who the American Government accused of supporting Cuba and the Soviet Union. In order to destabilise the government the Regan administration supported contras based in Honduras. The consequences of these policies continue to destabilise Honduras today and are widely believed to have caused the large illegal immigration flows from the country to the United States. At the time of 'the highwomen's' release immigration was dominating the public conscience as the Trump administration's family separation policy was introduced. This makes the choice of a young honduran mother as the subject of a remake of an American country classic particularly subversive.¹³

"I heard witchcraft in the whispers and I knew my time had come

The bastards hung me at the salem gallows hill"

The second unnamed woman referenced is from the infamous Salem witch trials of 1692. The final line "the bastards hung me at the salem gallows hill" is a direct contrast to the original highwayman song about in 1985 whose lyric is "the bastards hung me in the spring of 25." The line links not just the songs but also compares the punishment of hanging, for a real crime of highway robbery a male was hanged, while for a women the rumour of witchcraft was enough to guarantee death.

"I sat down on a greyhound that was bound for Mississippi

My mother asked me if that ride was worth my life?"

This verse focuses on an unnamed freedom rider from the sixties who is shot on one of the many rides south that occurred during the civil rights movement. Sung by famous soul singer Sheryl Crow the verse doesn't shy away from the South's bloody racial history, something that is still a major identity issue often unacknowledged in country music. The verse ends with each

¹² Natalie, Weiner, "Country Music is a Man's World. The Highwomen Want to Change That" *New York Times*, September 3, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/03/arts/music/highwomen-country-supergroup.html>.

¹³ History.com Editors, "President Reagan orders troops into Honduras," This Day in History, March 13, 2020, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/reagan-orders-troops-into-honduras>.

singer affirming that they still believe that they made the right choice regardless of the consequences. *"I'd take that ride again, and again, and again, and again."*

"I was a preacher..."

"But teaching wasn't righteous for a girl"

The final person discussed is a woman who feels called to preach Christianity in a time when women were expected to fulfil the role of submissive help-meet according to the churches reading of the bible. The verse reminds listeners of the complicated history that religion plays in both the oppression and liberation of women, acting as both a barrier to and a pathway to power in society. This verse also links the song back into the original 'highwaymen' with a reference to baptism in the Colorado River, which is the site of the dam where one of the original highwaymen died.

"Singing stories still untold

We carry the sons you can only hold

We are the daughters of the silent generations

You send our hearts to die alone in foreign nations

It may returns to us as tiny drops of rain

But we will still remain."

The final verse of 'the highwomen' is unique from the original and has all four women singing together, invoking their shared solidarity throughout history - a concept critical to intersectional feminism. The first line of the final verse *"singing stories still untold"* explains the purpose of the song, to remake an iconic country song from a female perspective - a previously untold story. It also refers more broadly to the untold histories of millions of women throughout history who went unacknowledged in their own lifetimes because of their gender and were therefore denied a place in the historical record leaving us to guess about their lives, *"the silent generations."*¹⁴

The cover of the highwomen is stylistically simple. Black and white with the four women who make up the band standing back to back. All four women are looking directly at the camera, and only one is smiling. The other three look on with solemn intense gazes. All four wear distinctly country styles but vary in degrees of traditional notions of femininity and androgyny. The cover makes use of shadowing to draw attention to the women's faces, and only shows their top halves.

¹⁴ Natalie, Weiner, "Country Music is a Man's World. The Highwomen Want to Change That" *New York Times*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/03/arts/music/highwomen-country-supergroup.html>.

Results/Conclusion

Looking at the four chosen songs it is clear that there is evidence of feminist viewpoints in American country music as understood through an intersectional feminist lens. The artists discussed use their music to assert their own independence and value, separate from the standards that society might restrict them too. In doing so they exercise the deliberative communication that Mattern identifies as a part of music's function as political communication. Deliberative communication is a part of a process in which a community debates and renegotiates its identity and values, rather than mindlessly reaffirming its commitment to tradition. In arguing against society's double standards for men and women, fighting for women's right to control over their own reproductive history and questioning the male-led narrative of history, all of the songs discussed offer different versions of what it means to be an authentic American southerner.

While these songs are all critical of the patriarchal society we live in they are also (excluding the highwomen) exclusively focused on the white southern experience. Further research looking for examples of Black, Latin American or indigenous intersectional feminist viewpoints in country music would be an interesting area of research but potentially difficult, as non-white music with country stylings is frequently classified under indie or folk music due to the automatic assumption of country music's inherent whiteness.¹⁵

¹⁵ Kenneth J. Meir, "Looking for Meaning in All the Wrong Places: Country Music and the Politics of Identity," *Social Science Quarterly* 100, no.1 (02, 2019):89-108, <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/doi/10.1111/ssqu.12556>.

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