

# Bro-Country: Creating a New Image of Country Music

By Katelyn Van Swol

For the last century and a half, country music has been one of the most popular forms of music, growing from rural folk tunes shared between neighbors into the commercialized powerhouses record companies seen today. Throughout the years it has changed with the development of new sounds and technologies. An even bigger influence has been the shift in audience attitudes, morals, and ideas as they move from rural to urban areas and become more connected with the world around them. These changes have led to the development of many different sub genres, from bluegrass and folk to the urban cowboy craze, and, more recently, country pop and country rap. One of these presumed genres that has risen within the past decade has been given the title “bro country.”

Much debate has occurred within the country music community as to exactly how to define this sub genre, but the general description now accepted by most is given by the magazine *Taste of Country*: “songs that include trucks, some small amount of objectification of women, a clearing at the end of the road where physical affection will take place and some amount of strong alcohol.”<sup>1</sup> This definition opens up the genre to a large amount of criticism, both within the country music industry and outside it. Comedic sketches and parody songs have created a mockery of these lyrics and the artists who sing them because of the image that is created, as can be seen in Bo Burnham’s comedic parody song that he performs during his stand up routines, called “Country Song (Pandering).”<sup>2</sup> Even politicians and others in the public eye have spoken out about this image in recent years, particularly with the most recent presidential cycle and belief about who these people support. Senior White House Correspondent Jeff Zeleny was even

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Dukes, “Bro-Country ... What the Heck is It?,” *Taste of Country*, October 9 2014, <http://tasteofcountry.com/what-is-bro-country/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Bo Burnham’s “Country Song(Pandering)” from ‘MAKE HAPPY’ in HD.” *Youtube*, uploaded by Dave Camboy, 9 June, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stVNdLmKGYw>

quoted saying “Something else, I think, to keep in mind - a lot of these country music supporters are likely Trump supporters. This is something, of course, hitting the tapestry of all Americans, and there are going to be victims from across the country here.”<sup>3</sup> This was said in defense of President Trump’s speech in the aftermath of the Las Vegas shooting, and shows a generalization of all country music fans in regards to one part of their image: their political beliefs.

The violent mass shooting in Las Vegas on October 1, 2017, brought the level of criticism towards this image of country music to an all-time high. Many took to social media to post their thoughts on the events, including some who actually blamed the fans and singers, implying that they deserved this as punishment for their beliefs against gun control and other ideas that have been lasting stereotypes of the country music image for many years.<sup>4</sup> These statements will be examined in much greater detail later in the paper.

In response to these perceived ideas, I will be focusing on two separate areas of analysis throughout this paper. First, I will be analyzing song lyrics from the past ten years, 2007-2017, in order to determine whether or not bro country can actually be considered a distinct sub genre or simply a part of the larger country music identity that has been around for years and has only become an object of criticism as people have become more aware of the messages that are being delivered. Second, I will look at the image created by these song lyrics and the artists who sing them in order to determine whether or not the image being criticized in the wake of the Las

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<sup>3</sup> Katherine Rodriguez, “CNN White House Correspondent: Country Music Fans are ‘Likely Trump supporters’,” *Breitbart*, October 2 2017, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-journalism/2017/10/02/cnn-white-house-correspondent-country-music-fans-likely-trump-supporters/>.

<sup>4</sup> Amanda Luz Henning Santiago, "CBS exec fired after making insensitive remarks about Las Vegas shooting victims," *Business Insider*, October 2, 2017. <http://www.businessinsider.com/cbs-exec-hayley-geftman-gold-fired-las-vegas-victims-remarks-2017-10>.

Vegas shooting is based in fact or merely on the stereotypes that are perceived by those outside the country music community. Overall, I will argue that bro country is a subgenre of country music, and that the image criticized in the wake of the shootings is based on an image that is represented by only a small minority, most of whom are not considered “bro country” within the large genre of country music, and many artists have actually attempted to distance themselves from this image.

### Country Music: A Rarity in Scholarly Research

Overall, little has been done to study country music in regards to the sub genres and images created through the music and artist presentation. A majority of the research has been comprehensive historical studies of the overall genre of country music. However, a lot of this only covers up to the 1990s and early 2000s. One example of this is Bill C. Malone’s *Country Music , U.S.A*, which is regarded as the primary source regarding the history of country music. Malone argues that country music “is a vigorous hybrid form of music, constantly changing and growing in complexity, just as the society in which it thrives also matures and evolves. It was introduced to the world as a southern phenomenon, and ... has preserved, to a remarkable degree, the marks of that origin.”<sup>5</sup> As this book only covers up until 2002, my argument will help to further the scholarship on the movements of country music that have occurred since then.

Richard A. Peterson wrote a book that is integral to my research, as it discusses how country music changes its image of authenticity continuously as the culture changes. He writes “authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially

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<sup>5</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 1

agreed-upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered.”<sup>6</sup> This idea is important to my research, as much of the criticism focused on bro country within the industry is on whether or not it is considered authentic. Peterson argues that this idea of authenticity is continuously changing with new musical adaptations, and I am looking to test this hypothesis.

In regards to more modern scholarship on the subject of country music, very little exists. An analysis of Garth Brooks and his alter ego Chris Gaines has been done in order to discuss how the idea of authenticity in country music impacted the failure of this endeavour into rock music and how this image of authenticity can actually be confining to country music artists.<sup>7</sup> Pamela Fox also wrote an article about gender and the issue of authenticity in country music, which covers how the first women in country music created an image through telling their life stories.<sup>8</sup> In my argument, I hope to reveal more about how the image of authenticity that is so important can also be the downfall of country musicians if this image is broken, or revealed to be a false portrayal. An issue that has been seen with bro country is that many critics argue that it is not authentic country music, which could explain why the critics have rejected the sub genre: I hope to look further into this argument and expand on the idea of authenticity in modern country music.

Bro country as its own subject, however, has had no scholarly research conducted on it, so my research will be the first critical analysis of the rhetoric. A majority of the writings done have been published in magazines or published on online blogs throughout the last few years.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 1.

<sup>7</sup> Heather Maclachlan, "The Greatest Rock Star Who Never Was: Garth Brooks, Chris Gaines, and Modern America." *American Music* 26, no. 2 (2008): 196-222.

<sup>8</sup> Pamela Fox, "Recycled "Trash": Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography." *American Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1998): 234-66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30041614>.

The issue with these sources is that they are mostly based on opinion and do not appear to be backed up by actual in depth analysis of the material they are criticizing. A majority of these were written for media outlets like *The Boot*, *Taste of Country*, and *Saving Country Music*, all of which have a favorable bias towards country music.<sup>9</sup> Through looking at these sources, they will help to show the opinions on bro country and the image that is created and perceived by those within the industry. *Rolling Stone*, *Billboard* and other newspapers have also published articles on the issue and image of bro country, and these help to portray perceptions from those outside the industry. Overall, my writing seeks to create a more modern scholarly resource on the image of country music and expand on the arguments made by Malone and Peterson that reveal how country music has changed and adapted to the ever changing culture of the United States.

#### A Brief History of Country Music

In order to understand the issues of bro country as a genre, it is necessary to take a step back and look at the history of country music as a whole. Bill Malone discusses the foundations of country music, stating that original folk music, which was the basis for country music, actually developed through a combination of many different cultural traditions that had come together in the rural south during the 1800s. Everything from traditional British jigs to African American spirituals could be seen.<sup>10</sup> Since then, country music has continued this adoption of different forms of music, from blues to rock, and created unique sounds through combining them with traditional country sounds, like the banjo and steel guitar, and creating steady beats for people to dance to.

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<sup>9</sup> "Bro-country." *Saving Country Music*. May 12, 2015. Accessed October 11, 2017. <http://www.savingcountrymusic.com/tag/bro-country/>.

<sup>10</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 3.

The sound has not only changed, but the subjects of country music have slowly changed over time too as the people who write and listen to it have changed their lifestyles and beliefs and began moving from rural and separated communities into more connected and urbanized areas. Malone writes, “These themes then changed into songs reflecting the problems and changing social status of the ex-rural dweller ... often spoke of family fragility, the insecurities of love, marriage dissolution, drinking, and having a good time.”<sup>11</sup>

As country music became more mainstream and industrialized, the themes and music shifted to follow along, and the artists themselves began to create an image that appealed to a wider audience. The first perceived image that musicians created was seen in the creation of the western cowboy image, in which the performers wore tailored cowboy attire and sang about life in rural farming communities, even if the cowboy singers themselves had little to no experience in this way of life.<sup>12</sup> This image has slowly morphed over time through eras of the Rhinestone Cowboy and Urban Cowboy, up until more recent years, where singers have once again adapted their image. While the cowboy hat and boots are still commonly seen on many, singers have also adopted fashions that are considered more modern, in order to take a step out of traditional country music and appeal to a wider audience.

These steps outside of traditional country music have also been seen in the actual music and lyrics, like in country rap and the bro country genre. Malone writes that “a rash of young and generally photogenic entertainers, described variously as Young Country or New Country, have edged the older performers aside and consequently have renewed anxieties concerning the

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<sup>11</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 154.

<sup>12</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 137.

music's identity."<sup>13</sup> However, this is another case in which the overall genre of country music is changing and adapting as the way of life for the artists change and become ever more connected and influenced by the world around them.

Within the midst of this inner conflict of country music and the worries about what exactly the identity is becoming, tragedy struck that has brought the community together in a united front. On October 1, 2017, a gunman in a Las Vegas hotel fired what is thought to be over 900 rounds of ammunition into a crowd of fans attending a country music festival, killing fifty-nine and injuring 527 others.<sup>14</sup> Hours after this coverage broke, people were trying to understand what happened and many took to social media to vent their emotions and views about the events. While most expressed feelings of sympathy and sadness, others took a different approach. Former CBS executive Hayley Geftman-Gold wrote in a Facebook comment, "If they wouldn't do anything when children were murdered I have no hope that Repugs will ever do the right thing. I'm actually not even sympathetic bc country music fans often are Republican gun toters."<sup>15</sup> Rapper Lil B also made comments on Twitter comparing the reactions regarding the people who were killed with what he believed the reaction would be if this had happened at a rap concert.<sup>16</sup> He wrote "I no if 50 young black man died at a rap concert with saggy pants and

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<sup>13</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 419.

<sup>14</sup> The New York Times, "Multiple Weapons Found in Las Vegas Gunman's Hotel Room." *New York Times*, October 2, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/02/us/las-vegas-shooting.html>

<sup>15</sup> Amanda Luz Henning Santiago, "CBS exec fired after making insensitive remarks about Las Vegas shooting victims." *Business Insider*. October 02, 2017. <http://www.businessinsider.com/cbs-exec-hayley-geftman-gold-fired-las-vegas-victims-remarks-2017-10>.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Knox, "Las Vegas shooting - Rapper Lil B sparks outrage by claiming people are only upset America's worst gun massacre because it involved white people," *The Sun*, October 02, 2017, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/4596670/las-vegas-shooting-rapper-lil-b-sparks-outrage-by-claiming-people-are-only-upset-americas-worst-gun-massacre-because-it-involved-white-people/>.



dreadlocks nobody would even care! They say it's gang violence," and followed this by saying "Lets play court of public opinion! 50 people get shot at a rap concert is that normal? 50 people shot at a country music show? What?"<sup>17</sup>

Similar comments were made by people from all walks of life, but these views were greatly criticized, as Geftman-Gold was fired from her job, Lil B was forced to issue a formal apology, and others faced similar consequences. However, this caused country music to begin looking inward at their community and become more vocal about their beliefs in order to change some of these stereotypes.

### Genre Criticism

In this paper, I will use Campbell and Jamieson's essay, "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction", to introduce how a genre is defined and then present why "bro country" is a specific part, or sub group, of this genre. In this essay, Campbell and Jamieson state that "A genre is composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic."<sup>18</sup> These constellations consist of different groups, or forms, of ideas that can be found in other forms of rhetoric, but create a genre when all of them appear together in a recurring pattern. Although many of the themes I looked at throughout the course of my analysis have been present within country music since its inception, the particular combinations that were predicted to be seen within the sub genre of bro country were not as common up until the past decade. Even throughout the course of the highest point of popularity, the definition of "bro country" shifted and changed. Originally, this genre of music was referred to as "checklist

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Karlyn Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction." in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism 5th Edition*, edited by Carl R. Burghart & Hillary A. Jones, 422-439. State College, Pennsylvania: Strata Publishing, Inc., 2017. 431.

country,” meaning that a song required a certain set of ideas in order for it to become successful in the current market.<sup>19</sup> Then, in 2013 Jody Rosen published the first article in which the term “bro country” was used, and he described this as “music by and of the tatted, gym-toned, party-hearty young American white dude.”<sup>20</sup> Since then, these two definitions have merged together into the one that *Taste of Country* and Billy Dukes created, and is now the most widely accepted definition.

In order to determine whether or not bro country is actually a sub genre, I will be looking for a specific “constellation,” or set, of themes within the larger context of country music. These themes are provided by the tentative definition stated above by Billy Dukes. Essentially, what I looked for were songs that contained these themes: 1. Objectification of women, 2. References to drinking and partying, 3. References to “country” life (i.e. dirt roads, fields, fences, other country singers etc.), and 4. Was sung by a male artist or group. I also looked for any songs that referenced issues of violence or fighting, to see if the stereotypes regarding guns and violence that have been brought up in the aftermath of the Las Vegas Shooting are present. Using this method of rhetorical analysis will allow me to determine whether or not bro country is a subgenre of country music, or if it was based on a seemingly unfounded panic in the media as they were approached with a new sound in the music scene.

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<sup>19</sup> Lauren Harris, “From Check List Songs to Bro-Country,” *University of Texas*, Published November 21, 2015, <https://sites.dwrl.utexas.edu/countrymusic/2015/11/21/from-check-list-songs-to-bro-country/>.

<sup>20</sup> Jody Rosen, "Jody Rosen on the Rise of Bro-Country." *Vulture*. August 11, 2013. Accessed October 11, 2017.

<http://www.vulture.com/2013/08/rise-of-bro-country-florida-georgia-line.html>.

In using this method, I utilized the *Billboard* Country Charts database in order to conduct my research. I decided to take my research back to the first chart of 2007, in order to ensure that I had gone back far enough to see whether or not there was a rising trend in this genre. Many country news sources state that this genre rose to the forefront in 2011 and had died by the end of 2014, so this 10 year span from 2007 to now (2017) allowed me to take a full look and test whether or not this was true. I then looked at the full “Hot Country Songs” list from the first weekend of each month to find any song with lyrics that fit the constellation criteria.<sup>21</sup> Through doing this, I was able to look at the most popular country songs released each year to determine which would reach the widest audiences and thus would have the most influence on images created.

After this, I used my analysis in order to examine the images that were being portrayed by the song lyrics and the artists who sing them. This allowed me to assess the stereotypes that were presented in the wake of the Las Vegas shooting, and determine whether or not these stereotypes were based on fact or if they were merely perceptions from the larger public that have carried over from past generations.

### The Breakdown of Bro Country

*Billboard*'s list of Hot Country songs consists of the most popular songs of the previous week, and are based on a combination of sales, airplay, and streaming sites.<sup>22</sup> Looking at this particular chart instead of others that focus on one specific aspect, like sales or airplay only, allowed me to focus just on the most popular songs of the year, showing what was most widely

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<sup>21</sup> "Country Music: Top Country Songs Chart," *Billboard*. Accessed October 11, 2017, <http://www.billboard.com/charts/country-songs>.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

available and listened to by the largest audience. I was able to analyze these songs and determined that 203 of them contained some element of the themes that are the defining factors of bro country. Of these 203, eighty-four contained all three qualifying elements: some objectification of women, references to drinking and partying, and the ever important references to “country” living. In order to fully understand how these elements are used within the context of bro country, it is important to look into each one and understand how it is utilized. One thing that is important to remember is that while all elements are present within each song being analyzed, the extent that they are used varies from piece to piece.

The timeline of the rise, and even possible fall, of bro country, is also visible when looking at this timeline of songs. In 2007, there were only seven songs containing several elements of bro country, and only two of these seven songs contained all three necessary qualifications. In contrast to this, in 2014, which is considered the peak year of this subgenre, there were 36 songs with bro country characteristics, and 19 of them had all three characteristics. This is a significant rise in both the number of songs that contain characteristics, and in the ones that contain all elements, which helps to show the rise in popularity. Continuing into 2017, there has been a significant decrease from the numbers of 2014. Of all the songs on the Hot Country Chart, only 9 had some definite characteristics, and of these only 2 contained all of the characteristics of bro country.

There are three distinct audiences that are being targeted in the lyrics of these songs: the female they are interested in, their peers, and outsiders, whom most often appear to be those coming from the “big city.” Out of the total list of 203 songs, 71 of them are speaking to an imagined female, 104 of them are speaking to their peers (young men from the country, typically

with the same interests and ideals), and only 15 seem to be talking to those outside of the stereotypical country audience.

### The Objectification of Women

Analyzing the lyrics of the songs identified in my research revealed that there are several ways in which women are discussed, creating an identifiable characteristic that has led to some of the most intense scrutiny of the sub genre. Although the intended audiences may vary, the general statements made about the women in the songs all have similar focuses: the girl's appearance, encouraging the consumption of alcohol, and some sort of physical interaction. Luke Bryan's song, *Country Girl (Shake it for me)* is one of the most popular examples of this. The chorus of this song goes as follows:

Shake it for the young bucks sittin' in the honky-tonks  
 For the rednecks rockin' 'til the break of dawn  
 The DJ spinnin' that country song  
 C'mon, c'mon, c'mon  
 Shake it for the birds, shake it for the bees  
 Shake it for the catfish swimmin' down deep in the creek  
 For the crickets and the critters and the squirrels  
 Shake it to the moon, shake it for me girl<sup>23</sup>

A closer reading of the lyrics reveals that the singer is encouraging this girl to display herself for all to see, which may not be seen as an objectification, if it was not for the verses. The verses focus on the girl's pretty smile, her hair, and describes several other places that the girl can dance

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<sup>23</sup> Luke Bryan, *Country Girl (Shake It For Me)*, recorded 2011, Capitol Nashville, track 1 on *Tailgates and Tanlines*, Compact Disc.

out in the country. There is not a sense of pride in the girl: the only reason perceived that this is encouraged is to flaunt her and show her off to other men because of her beauty. However, the girl overall is a fairly static character, who does not seem to be of great importance except as the target of visual pleasure for men.

Another example of this would be Kip Moore's *Somethin Bout a Truck*. This song focuses on the image of what the ideal "country" night would be, at least according to the singer. The chorus of this song, too, provides the best example of this:

And there's somethin' 'bout a truck in a field  
 And a girl in a red sundress with an ice cold beer to her lips  
 Begging for another kiss  
 And there's somethin' 'bout you and me and the birds and the bees  
 And Lord have mercy it's a beautiful thing  
 Ain't nothin' 'bout it luck, there's somethin' 'bout a truck<sup>24</sup>

Although the objectification may not be immediately obvious in this song, the fact that the "girl in the red sundress" is lumped together with a truck and a bottle of beer suggests that she is just another object of fascination and comfort, with no real agency of her own. In other words, she is an object, not a human character, in this song.

This objectification is important in identifying the bro country genre, as it is much less common within the larger genre of country music. Looking back at the history of country songs, this sort of objectification was much less common than it has become in the last decade. The most famous songs from earlier decades were often focused on idolizing the woman that was the

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<sup>24</sup> Moore, Kip, *Somethin' 'Bout A Truck*, recorded 2012, MCA Nashville Records, track 3 on *Up All Night*, Compact Disc.

focus of the song, rather than objectifying her. One example of this was Lonestar's song *Amazed*, which discusses the woman's physical beauty, along with the beauty of her thoughts and dreams, creating a fuller character that is equal to the singer, or, at the very least, is treated like a human being.<sup>25</sup>

### The Drinking Culture

Unlike the problematic themes focused on objectifying women, the references to drinking and partying have been a characteristic of country music since its inception. This makes sense as the primary places where country music was performed in the beginning were honky tonks, drinking halls, and taverns where people went after a hard day's work in the field or factory. George Jones, who is considered to be one of the most legendary country artists of all time, sang a song about his father making moonshine entitled *White Lightning*.<sup>26</sup> This song describes how he figured out why the drink is called white lightning, due to the strength of the liquor, and the burn as it goes down the throat. The impression created by this song is one where it is worth the experience once but not exactly something that needs to be tested again.

However, the way that the drinking culture is presented in songs that are labeled bro country create a much different view on the consumption of alcohol. While early songs seem to be delivered with some degree of caution and limitation, these new songs encourage the consumption of alcohol in excessive amounts.

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<sup>25</sup> Lonestar, *Amazed*, recorded 1999, BNA Records, track 3 on *Lonely Grill*, Compact Disc.

<sup>26</sup> George Jones, *White Lightning*, recorded 1959, Sinetone AMR, track 1 on *White Lightning and Other Favorites*, Vinyl Record.

Florida Georgia Line's *Get Your Shine On* is an example of this encouragement.<sup>27</sup> The chorus of the song states:

Homemade jar,  
 Lemon drop take a sip  
 Don't stop girl, you know I love it when you get your shine on!  
 'Cause you and me be rocking all night long!  
 Summer sky dripped in rhinestones,  
 Turn your party lights on,  
 Baby get your shine on, shine on!  
 Baby get your shine on!

Within this one chorus the singer encourages the imagined girl to drink the “lemon drop” moonshine no less than four times. This verse also encourages a more party-like atmosphere, as the fun will be continuing until the morning comes as the two adventure throughout the country with their friends. The fact that the title contains a reference to alcohol also makes evident the importance of the presence of alcohol as one of the characteristics of this song.

Another song that reveals consequences of the excessive drinking and partying is Parmalee's *Musta Had a Good Time*.<sup>28</sup> This song describes the aftermath of a party that had been thrown of which the singer remembers nothing, and thus is working on putting the pieces together the next morning. Once again, the chorus provides the best example of this:

Now I'm picking up beer cans, what a mess,

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<sup>27</sup> Florida Georgia Line, *Get Your Shine On*, recorded 2012, Republic Nashville, track 3 on *Here's to the Good Times*, Compact Disc.

<sup>28</sup> Parmalee, *Musta Had a Good Time*, recorded 2013, Stoney Creek Records, track 1 on *Feels Like Carolina*, Compact Disc.



Oh Man, who's that passed out in the yard?  
All that's left in the fire pit's one of my lawn chairs  
And a piece of siding off my barn  
Somebody doin donuts musta hit the mailbox  
Cause it's laying out there in the road  
There's a flood in the bathroom  
A hog in kitchen, a dude on my couch with a bloody nose  
And I don't know what the hell went on around here last night,  
But we musta had a good time

These lyrics help to show what can happen when excessive drinking occurs: damage to property, lost memories and confusion, and the potential for violence. However, the last line of this chorus paints a different light on these issues, creating a positive view of the events and downplaying the potential consequences. These ideas help to reveal the targeted audience: a younger demographic who might be more familiar with the events being described, or potentially the desire to see what this is about.

The importance of alcohol becomes even more evident when it comes to looking at explicit references within the songs: 14% of the songs reference alcohol in the title alone. Furthermore, 129 of the 203 songs directly discuss alcohol, which, at 63%, is well over half and shows just how relevant the theme of alcohol is to this subgenre. Although this characteristic is clearly present within the larger context of country music, the frequency with which it is referenced, the way in which it is discussed, and the combination of it with the other characteristics, shows why it is so important to the formation of the genre of bro country.

### “Country” Life

This is the most obvious characteristic present within the genre of bro country, as it explicitly states it in the title. However, the difference between these references to country living and the references used within the larger genre of country music are once again slightly different, and this is what keeps bro country distinct. There are many songs written about life in the rural United States, working in the fields and taking care of the family, from the very beginning of country music. In these early years, and even now, many of these songs were autobiographical and based on the real experiences of these writers and singers as they grew up and spent their life in these tight-knit communities.

With bro country, however, these references are more along the lines of partying in the fields and cruising the backroads with a girl in the passenger seat. This is where the idea of checklist country comes into play, as most of these songs contain references to this, and also harken back to older country artists like George Jones, Hank Williams, and Patsy Cline. Richard Peterson writes, “These songs facilitate the singer’s claim to be a country performer and help to naturalize the tradition that is being fabricated.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, through doing this, these new artists create a connection with the older ideals of country music and show that they are familiar with the history of the genre, which helps to secure themselves as legitimate country music artists.

An example of this is Florida-Georgia Line’s *Cruise*, which is also arguably the most widely known and successful example of bro country. This song spent 22 weeks at the top of the *Billboard* Hot Country Chart in 2013, and even had success as a crossover hit when a remix was

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<sup>29</sup> Richard A Peterson, *Creating country music: fabricating authenticity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. 228.

released featuring the rapper, Nelly.<sup>30</sup> As such, this song was able to reach a much wider audience than is typical for a country song, and thus also helped to propagate the perceived image of country music by these outside audiences.

*Cruise* is a unique song in the fact that it is talking to the girl in the song, but also seems to be circling back and praising itself as a country song just like the one it is describing. The chorus of the song goes as follows:

Baby you a song  
 You make me wanna roll my windows down and cruise  
 Down a back road blowin' stop signs through the middle  
 Every little farm town with you  
 In this brand new Chevy with a lift kit  
 Would look a hell of a lot better with you up in it  
 So baby you a song  
 You make me wanna roll my windows down and cruise<sup>31</sup>

This chorus provides an example of each characteristic mentioned above, and frames it with country references. References to the farm towns separated by backroads come up several times throughout the course of the song, not just in the chorus. The idea of a “brand new Chevy with a lift kit” is also a resounding country reference to the importance of trucks in the work that people

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<sup>30</sup> Wade Jessen, “Florida Georgia Line’s ‘Cruise’ Sets Record For Longest No. 1 Run On Hot Country Songs,” *Billboard*, Published August 1, 2013, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/5529872/florida-georgia-lines-cruise-sets-record-for-longest-no-1-run-on>.

<sup>31</sup> Florida Georgia Line, *Cruise*, recorded 2012, Republic Nashville, track 1 on *Here's to the Good Times*, Compact Disc.

do in these rural areas. The girl in the song is also treated as an object rather than a human, as the metaphor is created that describes her as a song. This becomes even more problematic as the song draws to a close and the girl appears to have been forgotten about as the singers praise songs that, much like the girl, make them want to roll their windows down and just drive as they enjoy them. Finally, this song ties itself to the larger realm of country music through referencing Marshall Tucker, an early southern rock and country western group, showing the awareness of the larger history of country music and creating an authenticity through this connection.

### Guns and Violence?

One aspect that I felt was important to consider in the aftermath of the shootings in Las Vegas was whether or not this newly popular genre contains references to violence that would create an image that promotes these ideals. What I found in my analysis showed that this was not the case. Out of the 203 songs that I analyzed, only 8 of them appeared to reference violence. Most of these examples, however, are not explicit references to violence, but rather references to protecting family and loved ones at whatever cost, or drunken fist fights typically caused by jealousy and too much alcohol.

For example, Josh Thompson's *Way Out Here* says "Our houses are protected by the good Lord and a gun/And you might meet' em both if you show up here unwelcome son."<sup>32</sup> However, this is the only song that makes an explicit threat to the intended target audience, which seems to be those outside of the country way of life. Other songs, like Kenny Chesney's *Out Last Night*,<sup>33</sup> Eric Church's *Guys like Me*,<sup>34</sup> and Brantley Gilbert's *Kick it in the Sticks*<sup>35</sup> only

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<sup>32</sup> Josh Thompson, *Way Out Here*, recorded 2010, Columbia Nashville, track 7 on *Way Out Here*, Compact Disc.

<sup>33</sup> Kenny Chesney, *Out Last Night*, recorded 2009, BNA Records, track 1 on *Greatest Hits II*, Compact Disc.

contain minimal references to fist fights. These seemingly inconsequential references normalize the idea of fist fights occurring, but through combining it with the earlier characteristic of partying, it downplays the seriousness as they make it feel as if these only happen in these heightened emotional situations and are often fueled by a large supply of alcohol. Even though these songs reference fist fights, it is clear that they are not encouraging any higher levels of violence towards others. These references do not promote issues of racism or speak against gun control, which are two areas that are used most often by those attempting to criticize country music artists and their supposed and stereotyped beliefs.

So what is the image that is promoted by these bro country artists?

In his book, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, Richard Peterson addresses the ever-present issue of creating an authentic image in country music as the way of life, the sound, and the themes of the music continued to change throughout the past century. He writes “Continuity can be taken for granted, and, in fact, statements about the death of authentic country music have a venerable history. As early as 1910 it was said that authentic “traditional” music-- meaning english type balladry -- was being displaced by crassly commercial, string-band styles.”<sup>36</sup> This shows that the issue of authenticity and all of the criticism that has been faced by new artists within country music, and especially bro country, are a continuation of this trend.

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<sup>34</sup> Eric Church, *Guys Like Me*, recorded 2006, Capitol Records Nashville, track 7 on *Sinners Like Me*, Compact Disc.

<sup>35</sup> Brantley Gilbert, *Kick It In The Sticks*, recorded 2009, The Valory Music Co. LLC, track 5 on *Halfway to Heaven*, Compact Disc.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 221.

Country music is once again adapting to the changing culture of the wider society and older generations are working to fit these new ideas into their already established world views

In regards to the image that the typical artists of bro country, those like the men of Florida Georgia Line, Luke Bryan, and Chase Rice, promotes through their music, their attire, and their physicality, is much different than the historic idea of a man in boots, a button up shirt, and a cowboy hat. These men present themselves as forever young, even men like Luke Bryan and Tim McGraw, who are 41 and 50 years old respectively, and are still playing into these bro country stereotypes. There seems to be a display of hypermasculinity in many of the song lyrics and personal images that are presented. Tim McGraw's song, *Truck Yeah*, demonstrates this because the song creates images of a group of guys out on the town having fun drinking and flirting with women, even though McGraw himself is 50 years old and has been married for 21 years. These songs seem to promote the ideal male country image: a young man who works hard during the week and then kicks back with a pretty girl and a lot of alcohol on the weekend.

Another component that adds to the image that these men portray in their songs and personas is in the adoption of other images and styles, both in music and clothing, from the wider and more integrated American culture. Peterson writes:

Innovative young artists, that is, those who fabricate a contemporary way of expressing authenticity, commonly feel that they are doing so in opposition to the music they have grown up with, finding inspiration in sources outside country music as defined ... for country music innovators these sources often come from the African American music of their time.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Richard A Peterson, *Creating country music: fabricating authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 230.

Although Peterson's book was published in 2002, before bro country was alleged to be a sub genre, this statement still holds true and can be seen all throughout the music of the genre. First, the steady beat that is created through the use of drums and bass guitar has a resemblance to the louder and more intense bass beats present in popular rap and hip hop. Second, many songs have a verse that is spoken, or rapped, rather than sung like in the rest of the song. Florida Georgia Line's song *Cruise* is one example of this, as they have a verse that is rapped by one of the men in the group in a similar style to that of a hip hop artist. This is much different than what most think of as traditional singing, and is immediately noticeable. Even more interesting is the fact that when the remix was created, they actually joined forces with Nelly, who is a well known pop and rap artist. Other country artists, like Jason Aldean and Tim McGraw, have also teamed up with famous pop, rap, and hip hop artists to be featured in their country songs. These collaborations are done through working with the labels representing the artists, with the goal of reaching wider audiences with their music. For example, Florida Georgia Line and Nelly work under the same record label, and began their working relationship when pop stations began requesting to play *Cruise* on their radio stations.<sup>38</sup> Finally, country artists also drop names of these artists in their songs, much like they did with historic country singers, in order to create a connection with audiences outside of country music and present themselves as people who are more aware of the wider culture around them. From references to "Ozzy's Train" in Dierks Bentley's *5-1-5-0*,<sup>39</sup> to "Lil' Wayne pumpin' on my iPod" in Tim McGraw's *Truck Yeah*,<sup>40</sup> these

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<sup>38</sup> Adele Platon, "Nelly Talks Smooth Tour With Florida Georgia Line & Making Records Country Fans Can Appreciate," *Billboard*, June 1 2017, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7817347/nelly-country-florida-georgia-line-smooth-tour>

<sup>39</sup> Dierks Bentley, *5-1-5-0*, Recorded 2012, Capitol Records Nashville, Track 10 on *Home*, Compact Disc.

artists show that they are aware of the wider music culture, and also know what would be known by their audiences too.

The overwhelming issue in regards to image that is seen by many in bro country connects back to the objectification of women that was discussed earlier. This paints an image that is hyper masculine and aggressively sexual in nature, but also makes it difficult to see any deeper personality within these singers. This is when it is important to note that this genre is unique in the fact that no single artist is primarily defined as bro country, but rather has different songs that can be considered part of the bro country genre. This allows artists to create songs that show a different side of their personality and keeps them from being placed in a certain niche. For example, Thomas Rhett, who rose to fame around the same time as Florida Georgia Line with a bro country song all his own, titled *It Goes Like This*, has released several songs outside of this bro country genre and seen great success.<sup>41</sup> The most well known of these is *Die a Happy Man*, which is a song written to honor the love shared between him and his wife.<sup>42</sup>

Others have not been so lucky in redefining their style of music and have had to decide whether or not they wished to embrace the bro country identity, or reject it continuously in the hopes that their name would eventually be disconnected from these ideas. Jason Aldean is a country artist who rejected this label, referencing several of his early songs that were much more “country life” oriented, and honored the farmers that work so hard to provide for their families

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<sup>40</sup> Tim McGraw, *Truck Yeah*, Recorded 2013, Big Machine Records, Track 5 on *Two Lanes of Freedom*, Compact Disc.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Rhett, *It Goes Like This*, Recorded 2013, Valory Music Group, Track 5 on *It Goes Like This*, Compact Disc.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Rhett, *Die A Happy Man*, Recorded 2015, Valory Music Group, Track 4 on *Tangled Up*, Compact Disc.



and their country. Florida Georgia Line, on the other hand, have embraced this label. In an interview with Dan Rather they were asked about the label of bro country and responded by saying:

I would say our music is just who we are. It's a culmination of all of our influences ... There's no label that can really hurt our feelings. Some people say that can be a negative thing, 'Bro-Country,' but every night we look out and we see thousands and thousands of fans that are happy and partying and enjoying.

Overall, this is a very positive outlook on the labeling and creation of an image, as they recognize that they had a lot of different influences in their music. They also recognize that other people had tried to force an image onto them that they cannot control, so they accept it and try to move on in creating further success.

One artist whom has fully embraced the label of bro country is Brantley Gilbert. In his response it is possible to see the use of nominal power to change the opinion of what bro country was thought to be. When the term was coined by Jody Rosen it was meant as a pejorative label. However, Brantley Gilbert released a song entitled *Same Old Song*, that directly targeted these issues and defended them. The song starts by saying:

I hear there's folks

Tired of us talking about dirt roads

Tailgates, tanlines and corn rows

It sounds made up but that's the life I know

We know all about some moonshine

Moonlight, bonfires

Seein' all the stars on a summer night

Don't see how that's gettin' old<sup>43</sup>

This first verse brings up several different “country” references that are seen in most bro country songs, and throughout the rest of the song, others are brought up and addressed. In the chorus Gilbert then invites those who criticized the use of these tropes to come along with him and his friends on a Friday night to see if these are not exact reflections of how these people live their lives and explains why they continue to sing the same songs: it is what they know. Gilbert continues to release songs that are considered bro country, whereas many artists have slowly backed away from this image.<sup>44</sup> However, the difference between him and the others is the fact that he seems to be an authentic and original portrayal of these ideals, while others have adapted and changed, showing a less authentic portrayal.

#### A New Image In The Wake Of Tragedy

Through looking at the image that is portrayed by bro country lyrics and artists, and the one perceived by audiences both inside and outside the country music industry, one can see how complicated the overall image has become. Many different aspects play into this image, from the themes present in the lyrics, to the clothing and demeanor of the artists. Although the genre

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<sup>43</sup> Brantley Gilbert, *Same Old Song*, Recorded in 2014, Valory Music Group, Track 18 on *Just As I Am*, Compact Disc.

<sup>44</sup> Jewly Hight, "Brantley Gilbert Doubles Down On Bro Country." *NPR Music*, February 07, 2017, Accessed November 12, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/02/07/513800149/brantley-gilbert-doubles-down-on-bro-country>

of bro country has slowly been replaced by what Jon Caramanica calls “the country gentleman,”<sup>45</sup> it is still the most popular image for people outside of the country music industry to turn to when they think of modern country music.

However, country music fans have not helped to create a better image in the wake of these negative portrayals. In 2014, the peak of the bro country era, several incidents occurred that continued to shed a negative light on the overall genre of country music. Within a matter of months, a man was found dead in a landfill after becoming extremely intoxicated at a Jason Aldean concert, downtown Pittsburgh was devastated by fans before a Luke Bryan concert, and a mass casualty incident was declared by police at a Keith Urban concert in Ohio because the amount people rushed to the hospital due to alcohol-related issues exceeded the hospital’s capabilities to treat them.<sup>46</sup> Many have linked these instances to the large amount of drinking songs that have proliferated country music, particularly in bro country songs, within the last few years. However, Don Cusic, a professor of history and country music historian, disagrees with these claims, saying that the more likely effect is the fact that the targeted demographic of these performers, and thus those who attend the concerts, are younger people who have a tendency to act a little more out of control. He goes on to say: “I think maybe country music always reflects a culture more than it creates it ... If country music didn’t exist, people would still be getting

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<sup>45</sup> Jon Caramanica, "In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (for Now)." *The New York Times*, September 21, 2017, Accessed October 11, 2017,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/21/arts/music/country-gentleman-thomas-rhett.html>

<sup>46</sup> Emily Yahr, "Violence, tragedy, mass arrests: What is going on with country music concerts this summer?," *The Washington Post*, August 07, 2014, Accessed November 12, 2017,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/08/07/violence-tragedy-mass-arrests-what-is-going-on-with-country-music-concerts-this-summer/?utm\\_term=.caf5ec59c9d2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2014/08/07/violence-tragedy-mass-arrests-what-is-going-on-with-country-music-concerts-this-summer/?utm_term=.caf5ec59c9d2).

drunk and arrested."<sup>47</sup> In other words, country music lyrics and the artists who sing them can not be totally blamed for these actions.

After looking at all these different issues, it is now possible to turn to the image that was criticized in the wake of the mass shooting in Las Vegas. Recall the statement made by Hayley Geftman-Gold: "If they wouldn't do anything when children were murdered I have no hope that Repugs will ever do the right thing. I'm actually not even sympathetic bc country music fans often are Republican gun toters."<sup>48</sup> Others, like Richard Dawkins, have created a caricature of country music in order to express their opinion. He tweeted out;

durn tootin, great shootin'. Cool dude sertin' he's 2nd Mendment rahts. Hell  
yeah!

Every country has its psychopaths. In US they have guns.<sup>49</sup>

This tweet speaks to the stereotypical idea that country music artists and their fans are typically pro gun activists and seems to portray the idea that they would actually support the killer because of his use of his right to firearms. However, this issue goes so much further than simple gun rights. While it may be correct that many country artists do support the right to own guns, this has actually begun to change in recent years.

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Amanda Luz Henning Santiago, "CBS exec fired after making insensitive remarks about Las Vegas shooting victims," *Business Insider*, October 02, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/cbs-exec-hayley-geftman-gold-fired-las-vegas-victims-remarks-2017-10>.

<sup>49</sup> Dawkins, Richard. Twitter Post. October 2, 2017, 5:33 AM. <https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/914830692651012098>

In the past few decades, the National Rifle Association (NRA) has had a close relationship with country music and artists as they claim that the lifestyle and values that create a shared bond between the artists and hard-working American fans is one that the NRA wants to support and celebrate. Many country artists join and accept endorsements from the NRA in order to promote their music and create a larger degree of success. However, the NRA has increasingly come under fire because of its continued defense of the second amendment rights in the wake of the many mass shootings that have occurred in recent years. This has led many country artists to distance themselves from the NRA either because of their own personal beliefs, or because of the worry that they will lose fans if they are aligned with the organization. In the wake of the Sandy Hook tragedy in 2012, major artists like Blake Shelton and Florida Georgia Line, who have both been labeled bro country at some point, ended their relationships with the organization, and other artists have followed.<sup>50</sup> In the wake of the Las Vegas shooting, these numbers have increased even further. *Rolling Stone* published an article addressing this issue, stating that country music's ties to the NRA seem to be weakening more and more. They contacted many artists who are still connected with the organization according to the NRA website, and many declined to state whether or not there was a relationship with the NRA still, and others clarified that there was no affiliation between the two groups any more.<sup>51</sup>

Overall, these newer country artists are striving to separate themselves from the stereotypes that formed in earlier decades and have been encouraged by small sects of country

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<sup>50</sup> Jonathan Bernstein, "After Vegas Shooting, Country Music's NRA Ties Show Signs of Fraying." *Rolling Stone*, October 5, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/country/features/nra-country-music-alliances-weakening-after-las-vegas-shooting-w507289>

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

music fans. In fact, one musician took to social media to express how his views had drastically changed in the wake of the Las Vegas shooting. Caleb Keeter, a guitarist for the Josh Abbott Band, had performed at the Route 91 Harvest Festival in Las Vegas hours before the shooting took place. In the aftermath of this, he took to Twitter and stated, “I’ve been a proponent of the 2nd amendment my entire life Until the events of last night ... We need gun control RIGHT. NOW. My biggest regret is that I stubbornly didn’t realize it until my brothers on the road and myself were threatened by it.”<sup>52</sup> This single statement shows how the image that is perceived by those outside of country music, and the statements made by many in the wake of the tragedy were unfounded and unfair, as they did not hold true to what was being said by the people within country music. Jason Aldean, who was the performer onstage when the shooting happened, and also one of the many that have been placed under the bro country genre, has also addressed these sentiments, encouraging people to forget their biases in order to join together and begin to enact changes and stop the hate that is permeating the country.<sup>53</sup>

In the end, the reactions of country musicians in the wake of this tragedy do not match up to the hateful stereotypes that were referenced in the reactions by those outside of the industry, revealing the wrongful perception that these country artists are racist, violent gun toters who are closed off from the outside world. Through looking at the genre of bro country, it is possible to

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<sup>52</sup> Paulson, Dave. “Country star Caleb Keeter changes guns stance: ‘I cannot express how wrong I was.’” *USA Today Network*, October 3, 2017. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/nation-now/2017/10/03/performer-las-vegas-shooting-we-had-legal-firearms-they-were-useless/726646001/>

<sup>53</sup> Natalie Neysa Alund, “Jason Aldean shares response to Las Vegas shooting: Time to come together and stop the hate,” *The Tennessean*, October 3, 2017, <http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2017/10/03/jason-aldean-response-las-vegas-shooting-comments/726336001/>.

see that this is far from the truth. The combination of different music styles, like rap, hip hop, and pop, and the subsequent styles and lyric references, actually show that these artists are interested in engaging in the larger world around them and are aware of all the different cultures and views that are present within it. It also shows that these artists are interested in interacting with these different cultures and reaching out to new audiences. Thus, the stereotypes that are presented within the tweets and statements made by those in the wake of the Las Vegas shooting are based on much older perceptions of country music and show that those making the vulgar statements are actually the ones who are uninformed and unaware of the false ideas they are presenting in regards to the more modern perceptions and images that are being created in country music.

