

Commerce, Culture and Creativity:
Songwriter Practice and Tactics in Nashville, Tennessee

by

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the understanding of individuals involved in songwriting within genre specific commercial cultures. I focus on the members of the songwriting community in Nashville, Tennessee, who are charged with writing original songs that audiences can authenticate. Country music has always been made according to commercial parameters, yet it is often adhered to as the longstanding vernacular expression of a distinct people (however loosely defined this collective might be). It is thus how songwriters both perpetuate and bring innovation to a longstanding commercial culture that I explore here.

This study is the culmination of research done in Nashville between 2010 and 2012, conducting interviews and attending concerts, workshops, classes, and social events involving songwriters. It presents a perspective not represented in any scholarship to date: of Nashville and Music Row as experienced by the members of its songwriting community. I outline a context and theoretical framework through which my informants and their ilk, and the meaning and significance of their work, can be most relevantly understood.

I contend that songwriters in Nashville work within the commercial and cultural parameters endemic to the physical and social environment they share; yet they collectively create temporary social spaces within which to write songs that listeners can then make meaningful for themselves through the act of consumption. Nashville songwriters' working processes complicate – and ultimately become an argument for the eradication of – long-held binaristic views that narrowly position popular songs as either sincere and authentic art objects or mass mediated commodities intended to manipulate listeners. Commercial, cultural and creative factors intertwine and interrelate to embody the complex milieu and form the unique figure that is the focus of this study: that of the Nashville songwriter.

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Chapter 1: Nashville Songwriters Work and Cultural Capital

Introduction: “Nash-Delphi” and Songwriters as Oracles

At first it seemed quite doable to carry out an ethnographic study of commercial songwriters in Nashville, Tennessee. After all, Nashville songwriters have one significant thing in common that allows for them to be studied as a collectivity: they are all in the same place. Beyond this, I surmised that it would be fairly easy to recognize the members of the Nashville songwriting community and identify commonalities between them. In short, it seemed like I could go to Nashville, meet all these people who do the same job and be able to comment insightfully on what motivates them, how they work, and what type of person becomes a professional songwriter in Nashville.

This tidy scenario, constructed before I had spent any substantial time in Nashville, quickly dissipated once I got there. There are many working performers, publishers, managers and producers who also write songs, and some songwriters earn income doing non-musical work. This ranges from service jobs in bars or restaurants to managing their real estate holdings (given that songwriters often receive large, single sum payments for successful songs, and are able to purchase properties with these). Some songwriters are yet to be established, others in their working prime, others working less as they get older but still keeping a hand in the game, making it sometimes debatable as to who actually qualifies as a songwriter.

There are few consistent characteristics that can be attached to Nashville songwriters. Of the sixty-nine I interviewed, twenty-one of my songwriter informants are Canadian, one is

Australian, and the rest are from the U.S., these split roughly equally between those from the South and non-Southerners.¹ Twenty of my songwriting informants are women, and only one (Tebey Ottoh) is a person of colour (Ottoh's father is Nigerian). My informants' education level varies: some came to Nashville to study in the songwriting, music production or music business departments at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) or Belmont University. Some have university educations and come from middle class backgrounds; others began pursuing their careers in music rather than engage in post-secondary education. Many are young and beginning their songwriting careers, others have been in Nashville for some time and are living financially stable lives and raising families. Some grew up listening to country music and have always felt affiliated with it, others listened to it when young, drifted away from it and rediscovered it later (either as a preference or because of the professional opportunities it fosters), while others profess little personal allegiance to the whole genre culture even as they are writing country songs for a living. Those that don't fall into the predictable visual or philosophical categories still negotiate a place for themselves through having success in getting songs cut.²

In short, my informants, or at least some of them, were people with backgrounds not largely different than my own. I write songs, and have done so since my teenage years. One of the things that drew me personally to songwriters in Nashville is that I have always written songs to suit the various styles and genres I have played (punk, klezmer, ska, reggae, calypso, country and Americana), and have always thought of the act of songwriting in generic terms. It

¹ Traditionally the South included Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and usually Kentucky, the Carolinas, Florida, Virginia and West Virginia (i.e. the Southeastern states that connected with the Appalachian Mountains and the Piedmont Region). For my purposes I define the South as all of these states and also Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas, hoping that this reflects a more modern understanding.

² A "cut" is simply a recording of a song. If a singer (and her or his management team and producers) release a recording of a song that a songwriter wrote or cowrote, that songwriter has attained a cut.

fascinated me to see how songwriters employ their individual talents and subjective processes to write country songs that are encumbered with the weight of expectations they are. My experience of the musicality of the songwriters I encountered there was both reassuring and beyond what I had previously imagined.

One of the assumptions (and there were many!) that I made prior to my time in Nashville, since complicated by my experience with my songwriter informants, is the notion that Nashville songwriters are the bearers of unique insight into country music, the sort of insight that would allow me to unpack the meaning of country music. I imagined Nashville as a kind of country music Delphi, and the songs that originate from there as conduits through which meaning is conveyed and disseminated. It would follow from this that Nashville's songwriting community collectively occupy an oracle- or priest-like position as the source of these songs.

In retrospect I realize I was assuming songwriters could help me answer the questions that sparked my initial fascination with country music, to provide insight into its pervasiveness and influence as a sociomusical *field of cultural production* (Bourdieu 1993). I (naively) felt that as a scholar I could and ought to put my energy into directly refuting false portrayals of country music as well as presumptuous claims within the music, to correct the misconceptions and somehow reclaim the form by putting it into some sort of proper context. Where better to turn for help in this than those who provide the songs that fuel the genre? If I wanted to know what country songs meant to both adherents and detractors, how it came to have these associations in spite of the genre's actual origin being far more nuanced than common perceptions allow for, and why it remains so powerful a force after almost a century of existence and through many changes and cultural shifts along the way, it seemed to me that talking to the writers of these songs was a good place to start.

That I was starting from a premise I wanted to find the data to support was not only a rookie mistake for an ethnomusicologist; in this case it also betrayed a misunderstanding of country music itself. Country music is not some pure form that existed in the past and has since been corrupted by modernity and commercial motivations: it is and always has been music made according to commercial parameters. Nevertheless, it is also positioned as a longstanding vernacular expression of a distinct people (however loosely defined this collective might be), and seeks to invoke a nostalgic emotional response in listeners premised on this cultural association.³ Owing to these dual impulses, the country music field has been both a stable force since its inception and a malleable ground upon which several changes have been imposed.

This ambiguity has been a crucial factor in its weathering of several shifts, trends and fads in popular music that might have long ago rendered country music irrelevant, and its ability to remain largely unconcerned with the oppositional stances of non-adherents who question the music's relevance. Songwriters since the inception of the country music genre in the 1920s (then called "hillbilly" music) have been implicated in the maintenance of what constitutes the *traditional* in country music while also pointing to ways the sound of the genre and its lyrical content can be reinvigorated to suit current tastes and trends. Thus Nashville songwriters have had to balance what seem to be two contradictory impulses: to operate within the parameters established for country music *and* anticipate acceptable and successful alterations to these parameters.

This is hardly surprising when one considers how country music itself is built on contradictions. Even a few of the associations commonly made with country music demonstrate how this is the case:

³ I discuss the dual nature of country music as both popular and vernacular on pages 97-102.

Country music is “white” music even though it has countless demonstrable influences from non-white (particularly black) musical traditions.

Country music is “rural” music even though it was initially marketed by (and arguably created by) record industry executives in New York, and for years it is a genre that has been made in an urban, technologically advanced setting (Nashville’s Music Row⁴) with the majority of its listeners living in urban settings (cities and suburbs).

Country music texts champion simpler, pre-modern times while its sounds follow current musical trends, exploiting stylistic trends that are by then well-established within the pop and rock (i.e. “urban”) genres.

Country music conjures up nostalgic longing for the past, and yet the past that country songs conjure up is a highly idealized one, one that never existed as it is portrayed.

As I have encountered repeatedly in my explorations into the genre’s meanings, inherent contradiction is the essence of the story of country music, responsible for its power, its persistence and its polarizing effect. The notion of contradiction is also essential to understanding the enduring relevance of Nashville and Music Row. The infrastructure established there ensured that country music survived several threats to its market share from other genres and trends, and has allowed for country music to have a cyclical currency in the American musical landscape (Peterson 1998), relevance it shares with no other popular music genre. Nevertheless, Nashville has positioned itself as the antithesis of such change, the protector of a tradition that has increasingly become associated with right-leaning political views (see Willman 2005, Wolfe and Akenson 2005), whiteness (Mann 2008) and Protestant conservatism (Feder 2006). By promoting the idea of a strong and continuous tradition while simultaneously adapting its practices to wider popular music trends, Music Row’s gatekeepers are compelled to create ways to pursue these dual impulses without the perception of contradiction.

⁴ Music Row is the roughly eighteen square-block area to the west of Nashville’s downtown that houses most of the production facilities and companies that make commercial country music.

Regardless of the more nuanced reality of the situation, country music is used as a site of negotiation particularly because of the perceived *lack* of ambiguity about the ethos it embodies. And while so much about the country music tradition is highly contestable, Nashville has attempted to embody it, essentially defining country music as “whatever gets done in Nashville.” Nashville has been able to sustain the ambiguities underlying country music and its surrounding discourse by acting as a discursive fixed point in terms of its political, cultural and philosophical mores.

But why do these contradictions between the views of adherents and detractors, not to mention those between the real and imagined Nashville, persist in spite of evidence that could seemingly resolve them? Do they serve some purpose? Matthew McAllister, and by extension Watts and Orbe (2002), has theorized that commercial cultures such as country music are premised on a central contradiction that reproduces the spectacle of individual authenticity over a mass scale:

The idea of the spectacle, as Watts and Orbe pointed out, includes an integration of the “authentic” – which as noted is an important concept in many scholarly definitions of popular culture – with massive displays of promotion and consumption styles. As they argued, “The consuming rhetoric of the spectacle thus promotes a contradiction as it seeks strategically to reproduce on a massive scale the singularity associated with the ‘authentic’” (McAllester 2003: 45-6, quoting from Watts & Orbe 2002:4)

McAllister here provides a succinct lens through which to understand the relationship between Music Row marketing strategies and the perpetuation of a particular mythology that is both preexisting and continually refreshed and updated through this relationship. Country music performers authenticate themselves and the songs they sing, in the process performing the wider culture that they come to represent.

The ability to transform imagery into imagined experience and accessible emotion is how Nashville has perpetuated a constructed country music imaginary so successfully to listeners, even those with no direct experience of the events or emotions depicted in country songs. Aaron Fox argues that country lyrics simultaneously de- and re-naturalize visual imagery, allowing otherwise contradictory elements to be recontextualized in an idealized place within which listeners can find comfort and imagined community (to use Benedict Anderson's term). Fox writes "There is no stopping the dialectic of naturalization, denaturalization, and renaturalization, not even long enough to locate an 'authentic' moment of resistance . . . Country's cycle of poetic transformations can easily accommodate the 'authenticity' of historical consciousness into its dialectic" (Fox 1992:68). Fox argues that country music lyrics (and their accompanying sounds) use overlapping "metanarratives of loss and desire" which "organize and produce, and are in turn reproduced by, country music's textual narratives, performative conventions, and its context of production and consumption" (ibid 54). Country music in effect commodifies these emotions and the images that evoke them, "enacted through the very practice of consuming music as a commodity" (ibid).

Given this, it seems endemic that contradictions would run through many aspects of country music's constructed narrative and become an essential aspect of it. Nashville itself is implicated in sustaining these contradictions, which have to a large extent become normalized in the production and reception of country music songs. The writers I met were not actually from Nashville (I can only think of three exceptions to this amongst the hundred plus writers I encountered), and most describe their relocation to Nashville as a turning point in their lives and careers. Regardless of what drew them to make this decision, and in spite of each individual's relationship with country music or the South prior to her or his arrival, all of them had to alter

their perceptions, practices and processes in order to gain success in Nashville. Their success depends on working within spatial, musical, textual, economic and social parameters placed on them, parameters that extend beyond the musical and involve decisions about lifestyle, values, songwriting methods, and of course physical relocation.

It is because of this relocation and adaptation to new surroundings that Nashville itself becomes a character in any narrative of the songwriting community there, and a presence that contextualized so much of what I was seeing during the course of my research. The sense of there being two Nashvilles, one that is at the center of a powerful imaginary involving country music and its associated cultural signifiers, and another that is a manufacturing site⁵ for a musical genre with a unique history and system of production, never left me while I was there. The two become intertwined: there is no separation of these two Nashvilles just as there is an irreversible interconnection between the cultural, creative and commercial aspects of the music.

Nashville is a place that anyone who has grown up in North America and been exposed to mass-mediated popular music can visualize. Indeed there are few other physical places that have attained such vivid visual and textual referents amongst those who have never visited.⁶ These referents relate to and spring from a far-reaching public dialogue (which I examine more closely in the next chapter) related to the nineteenth-century U.S. South, singing cowboy movies, and imaginaries of the rural folk championed by folklorists in the 1920s and 1930s. Country music

⁵ Country Music is not the only industry associated with Nashville. It is a hub for insurance companies serving the southeastern States, Hyundai's North American corporate offices are located in Williamson County just to the south of Nashville, and it is the largest center for the printing of bibles and religious materials in the country.

⁶ I enjoyed quizzing people whom I knew to be new to town, asking them to recreate the moment of their first arrival in Nashville. I never heard a single person say anything along the lines of "Yeah, it was pretty much what I expected."

and Nashville are buoyed by this set of images and texts whose attached meaning largely characterizes and defines the genre, and therefore its adherents.

Of course this association between place and imagery is not natural: it is a strategically contrived one. The popularity of the *Grand Ol' Opry*, the WSM Saturday night barndance program that had been broadcast from Nashville since 1925, meant that by the late 1940s the city had already become a regional hub of commercial musical activity.⁷ But while it seems hard to fathom in retrospect, this status might have been bestowed upon L.A. or Chicago, both active scenes of country music in the 1930s and 1940s, and also home to popular barndance-style radio programs and thriving live music scenes. However, by the late 1940s the L.A. and Chicago scenes were on the wane, and “many country fans had come to look upon the *Grand Ol' Opry* ... as synonymous with country music. All rabid country enthusiasts felt that before they died they must make at least one trip to [Nashville]” (Malone and Neal 205). The *Grand Ol' Opry*'s national syndication earned Nashville the moniker “hillbilly heaven” (Malone and Neal 205), a title that befitted its association with the region that was thought of as the original source of country music. Through its association with the radio show that had come to define the genre like no other entity, Nashville became a representation of the South itself,⁸ not the physical one so much as an imaginary, idealized South nostalgically longed for (Mann 86-91, Peterson 1997:223-25).

By extension Music Row (the area of Nashville where most of the businesses involved in the production of country music are located) happened in large part because of this identification, and profits from it. Country music is equated with Southern whiteness (and vice versa), and

⁷ I detail the *Grand Ol' Opry* and its interconnection with Music Row more on pages 115-17.

⁸ I discuss the Southern imaginary and its interconnectedness with country music on pages 46-59.

together they help to form and reinforce the beliefs of adherents and detractors alike. Music producers in Nashville, relying on its interconnection with the mythical South and the country music genre, have “transformed tradition into a renewable resource” (Peterson 1997:37).

Nashville has become a metonym for a wider sociomusical culture, a culture mediated by the industrial apparatus there in conjunction with audiences for whom Nashville holds considerable (if imaginary) significance.

While Nashville has had an identity as part of popular culture in North America through boom and bust since the 1950s, it has gone through a discernable spike in popularity even since I began my research there in 2010. No single factor is more responsible for this than the TV show *Nashville*, which as of this writing is airing the early episodes of its third season. The show has been a financial boon for songwriters who have cuts on the show; it has also done much to raise the public profile of both the actual Nashville and the songwriting community there.⁹

The July/August issue of the magazine *American Songwriter*,¹⁰ a Nashville-produced quasi-trade publication for songwriters and adherents, is called the “Nashville Issue,” and is laced with references to how young musicians have started to flock to Nashville in droves, many who have no interest in country music. Here is Mike Grimes, a bass player and owner of The

⁹ The TV show *Nashville* and its effects on the local economy and culture in the actual Nashville merits a whole study in and of itself. It is referred to constantly in conversation there, and has indeed garnered cuts for many local songwriters, whose songs appear on the show and are recorded and released on the soundtrack albums that Big Machine Records produces. My friend and informant John Scott Sherrill cowrote a song called “Come Find Me” that is on the season two soundtrack, and has even played it in concert with Clare Bowen, the actor who performs it on the show. An East Nashville apartment owned by another friend and informant, Kent Agee, is the site of several scenes in the show, so much so that an exact replica of it has now been constructed at a site northwest of the downtown. This is also the site that houses a replica of the Bluebird Cafe (a local venue that I examine in chapter six of this writing, including a discussion of some the effects the TV show has had on the venue).

¹⁰ *American Songwriter* 29, no.5.

Basement and Grimey's, a popular venue and record and bookstore respectively near both Lower Broadway and Music Row:

There's never been a more exciting time to be in Nashville . . . A more exciting time will be tomorrow. And then the next day. And then the day after that. People move to Nashville because they want a sense of community that they don't get in placers like L.A. or New York. They come here for the ease of operations and the cheaper cost of living, even if the cost of living *is* going up (Leahey 41).

The magazine paints a picture of this city in middle Tennessee as both a scene that continues to grow and the last bastion of livability for the working musician in North America.

I began my scholarly journey with country music largely because I felt that many of the myths surrounding it needed discrediting (in as much as they did disservice to the contributions of non-white, non-rural, non-working class and non-male contributors to its current manifestation). However, upon arriving in Nashville, I was struck with how the mythical and the real intertwine and how one contributes to the perpetuation of the other. Nashville is a town full of dreamers trying to live out their dreams. My informants often talk about lessons learned and naïve idealism leaving them once they began working in Nashville, how the realities of the marketplace temper expectations, and how hard lessons learned are cause for continual reassessment. Nevertheless, the dreams that brought them to town remain a powerful motivator, and without them songwriters are far less likely to be sustained through the lean times and experiences of rejection that are endemic to being a Nashville songwriter,¹¹

¹¹ Tom Douglas, currently one of Music Row's most successful writers, has a story of trials, defeat and eventual triumph that is bandied about as an inspirational, 'never give up' tale for other songwriters to heed in times of despair (and I heard my informants Terry Sawchuk and Gordie Sampson refer to his story in just that way). He had moved to town and not achieved enough success to support his young family, eventually moving to Dallas and selling real estate. He never stopped writing or dreaming of being one as a profession however. He attended a songwriting camp run by producer Paul Worley (best known for his role in discovering both the Dixie Chicks and Lady Antebellum) in Austin. Worley, upon hearing Douglas' song "Little

This dichotomous nature of Nashville as an imagined and actual place underpin the lyrics of the song “Sundown in Nashville,” written by Dwayne Warwick:

The sign says "Welcome to Nashville"
 From whatever road you've been down
 It seems like the first of the milestones
 For here is the city, the town
 It's a quaint, old mystical city
 Where legends and idols have stood
 It's a place, where dreams come to harbor
 A country boy's Hollywood

But it's lonely at sundown in Nashville
 That's when beaten souls start to weep
 Each evening at sundown in Nashville
 They sweep broken dreams off the street

You'll walk, down 16th to Broadway
 Into a world of heartache and pain
 Where hillbilly honky tonk angels
 Cry out, from the dark side of fame
 You'll find, some discarded love songs
 And tear stains all over the ground
 In a city where dreams get shattered
 And swept to the outskirts of town

But it's lonely at sundown in Nashville
 That's when beaten souls start to weep
 Each evening at sundown in Nashville
 They sweep, broken dreams off the street¹²

Rock,” strongly suggested that Tom move back to Nashville. Collin Raye’s 1994 recording of “Little Rock” became Douglas’ first #1 cut, and the rest, as they say, is history.

¹² © 1968 Ceerleader Music (ASCAP), Mernee Music (ASCAP). I have included the lyrics Marty Stuart sings on the version of this song that appears on his album *Tear the Woodpile Down* (2012). Stuart is a keen observer of country music history, and would have heard this song as it was originally recorded by Carl and Pearl Butler in 1969, though it was not a hit for the Butlers. The second verse that they sung (which Stuart blunted in his version) may help in understanding why it was not promoted as a single on Music Row (and perhaps why their label, Columbia, only released two more Butlers’ singles afterwards): “You walk down 16th to Broadway/ You walk past the new hall of fame/ And the record man with the big cigar/ He never once asked me my name.”

As the song potently depicts, Nashville is a place where many have come to fulfill lifelong dreams and aspirations, only to encounter a vastly different reality in the cold light of day. While my study is largely about shedding light on and challenging commonly held preconceptions about country music (my own and those of anyone who has never been to Nashville and never met people like my informants), it is also about understanding the persistence and power of these preconceptions, myths and inherited viewpoints, and how they work to construct Nashville as place “where dreams come to harbor.”

I am struck by what has changed in my own perspective from the time I began my inquiries, and how my experience in Nashville and with my informants is so different than what I speculated it might have been. My search for meaning in, or the meaning of, country music has far more often left me with more questions than answers, something like grabbing what you think is a stone on a beach, only to discover it is some clumped sand that immediately breaks apart and sifts between your fingers. Because of its complex nature, country music has relationships with many aspects of cultural work, and class, race and gender issues taken broadly. It has been an arena in which many have asserted their views on social issues, from Loretta Lynn talking about birth control and domestic abuse in the 1960s to more recent statements for and against American foreign policy in the post-9/11 era. However, the binaries that are used to delineate the music (low vs. high, folk vs. art, vernacular vs. commercial, white vs. non-white) dissolve upon close inspection of country music as a historical, economic and cultural phenomenon.

Country music is a discursive entity perpetuated through a collective notion of itself, and relies on a metadialogue through which performers, producers and listeners alike attach meaning to a series of visual and textual referents (Hughes 186-87). Songwriters have limited influence in

this sphere in that they do not decide which of their own songs will be heard on the radio: rather, they write songs that are submitted to their publishers, who then pitch¹³ selected songs from a songwriters catalogue to those who are looking for a particular type of song to attach to a particular singer, hoping to gain the notice of listeners. In fact, only a small fraction of a Nashville songwriter's catalogue is ever recorded. Further, these songs when recorded, circulated and consumed are responded to and take on meanings beyond those its writers could have imagined. Songwriters then are not oracles or sages; they are culture workers who ply their trade in unique and fascinating ways within a particular commercial culture that contextualizes it.

Seeing the effect of the powerful imaginaries surrounding the work of Nashville songwriters, discrediting common perceptions of Nashville and country music seem far less interesting to me now than examining how the constructed meanings of country music and Nashville guide the thoughts and actions of those who are both fans and detractors, and in particular my songwriter informants. To its detractors country music often seems a series of clichés and stock sentiments, but this criticism distracts from deeper, more important questions: how are the conventions employed, and to what effect? How do audiences interpret them? How do record producers and radio station managers approach them? More generally, how are songs recognized, or branded, as authentic country songs? A Nashville songwriter needs to wrestle with all of these questions, have a handle on the genre culture's conventions and be able to execute his or her craft within them.

Is a Nashville songwriter a type of bard within country music culture? Bards as they existed historically in European and West African societies were the purveyors of accumulated

¹³ Pitching is the process through which a song comes to the attention of a singer or whomever makes decisions on that singer's behalf about which songs will be cut. While traditionally the domain of songpluggers, songwriters themselves have taken up this task more recently as the significance and number of songpluggers has decreased.

cultural wisdom and the conveyors of information, exhortation and praise to their people and leaders. They also played a powerful role in establishing and reinforcing certain ideologies that both put her or his benefactors in a positive light and reinforced the social order in which they themselves were situated (Charry 91-96). Could one reasonably place Nashville songwriters in this context? After all, Nashville songwriters are tasked with conveying authenticity and connecting emotionally with potential listeners through the writing a song. They create songs with cultural meaning, intended to both enlighten and reflect the concerns of listeners, and to solidify each individual's affiliation with a larger group. Further, Nashville songwriters must respond to the continually shifting parameters established by gatekeepers on Music Row, and implicitly align themselves with these powerful players who determine the conditions of their livelihood.

Though I continue to think of my informants as having unique insight into country music songs and their significance, the analogy of the Bard likely misrepresents the nature of the agency or autonomy that songwriters in Nashville possess, and indeed the culture that situates their work. Curtis Ellison here encapsulates country music culture:

Commercial country music was invented during a period of intense modernization in the twentieth-century American South. It evolved rapidly . . . [into] an extensive national network of performers and fans unparalleled in other forms of popular music. That network supports a distinctive, self-conscious entertainment community within American society that I call 'country music culture.' Borrowing *culture* from its anthropological use, here I mean to focus on the accumulation and reinforcement through time of shared attitudes, values, traditions gestures, rituals and ceremonial events" (Ellison xvi).

Importantly, Ellison presents both the historical and vernacular significance and the commercial and constructed nature of country music as omnipresent and relevant factors. Aaron Fox delves further into how the practice and discourse that surrounds country songs might be seen as

culture, suggesting it might be usefully viewed as an “ideological hegemony” (Fox 2004:32). This hegemony of ideas both privileges and normalizes certain positions, and establishes them relatively to dominant ideologies it both accommodates and resists. In defense of the usefulness of culture as a descriptor Fox argues:

. . . we cannot understand history’s epochal social conflicts without the idea of ‘culture.’ Culture . . . consists of both ideas and practices, and especially the idea of calibrating ideas and practices in expressive discourses. Culture *is* structured in dominance, internally contradictory, and interwoven with the materialities it both shapes and responds to . . . It enables and institutionalizes possible forms of both ‘resistance’ and ‘accommodation’ within particular hegemonic social orders – and allows for the imagining of alternative hegemonic social orders (Fox 2004:33-34).

“Culture” as Fox understands it is what allows for the integration of particular songs, ideologies, images, tropes and practices into a coherent formation. Songwriters occupy a particular position within this formation, the maintenance of which requires some allowances for these larger factors that affect the transmission and consumption of country songs.

Seen in this light, songwriters could only awkwardly be termed bards. Nevertheless, I examine throughout this writing the ways that songwriters might be seen to perform this function within country music culture, and the effect of such a performance. In country music culture, songwriters provide the songs that keep the genre culturally relevant, and while the Nashville songwriter is no bard as traditionally understood, neither did the cultural practices in which bards were situated resemble the modern genre culture that country music is. Perhaps a more apt descriptor for the Nashville songwriter is one used by one of my informants:¹⁴ a “creative” (used here as a noun rather than an adjective). A creative, properly speaking, is an individual within an

¹⁴ The informant in question is Roots Three A and R man and songwriter Denny Carr, who used this analogy during an interview with the author on August 16, 2010. Characters such as Salvatore Romano, Paul Kinsey, or Peggy Olson on the popular TV drama *Mad Men* are perhaps the most ready popular culture referent for this type of worker.

advertising agency whose role it is to come up with the concepts for the ads themselves. While these individuals are clearly operating within an industrial apparatus, their task is a much less tangible or predictable one than most other workers (Negus 2004: 15). Moreover, the effectiveness of their creations is only realized through positive reactions from both their employers and the public to which the creation is intended to appeal. There is thus a discernable similarity between these workers and Nashville songwriters who work within the Music Row apparatus.

Conveying the sort of authenticity that typifies country songs¹⁵ is more easily managed when in a room singing directly to an audience,¹⁶ yet Nashville songs are tasked with achieving that same intimate effect even though the path they take to get from their source to listeners is much less direct. They create songs that can be sung by other singers. Songs become performative vehicles that produce visceral responses in concert and radio listeners. Songwriters must write songs while factoring in and balancing the concerns of producers and listeners alike, demanding creativity that is defined by adaptation as much as any other factor (Negus 2004: 14-19).

To position my songwriter informants as conduits of everything that country music is overly simplistic and misleading. The reality is not nearly so simple or categorical, and what my informants do is elusive and difficult to ascertain in many ways. Nevertheless, my examination of these songwriters allowed me to at least partially clarify what country music is (and is not!), overturned many of my erroneous preconceptions, and taught me much about how the commercial field of country music operates. It is ultimately my hope that my readers will come

¹⁵ I discuss the concept of authenticity as it relates to country music on pages 102-6.

¹⁶ Songwriters get the opportunity to do this at the Bluebird Cafe – the subject of the sixth chapter of this dissertation – as well as a sizable number of other local venues that feature songwriter performances on a weekly basis.

to see my informants in the same way as I came to: as dreamers and doers, visionaries and entrepreneurs, people with families and life concerns and plans for the future even if the money dries up in Nashville. They are remarkably resourceful and creative, yet are often noticeably understated and matter of fact when describing themselves. Fortunately for me, they are also remarkably willing to reflect on the work that they do, and were extraordinarily generous in giving their time to help with this study.

Purpose, Goals and Methodology

This study is intended to not only give a portrait of the working processes of the Nashville songwriter, but also the perspective, one otherwise not represented in any scholarship to date, of Nashville and Music Row as experienced by the songwriting community there. As such I spent my fieldwork time in Nashville (five separate trips totaling eight months between 2010 and 2012) acquainting myself with how the various aspects of the Music Row apparatus work together, how songwriters collectively comprise one of a series of overlapping social and professional networks, and how these various factors affect the work and views of writers.

I lived in Nashville in every season save the fall months (September to November), in stints ranging from two weeks to four months in length; short-term stays but long enough to get some sense of the daily rhythm of the place. It is both strange to be in a place where the culture is so seemingly dominated by one industry (though Nashville has a large banking and insurance company presence, and is a center of book publishing, in particular that of bibles and other Christian literature), and stranger still when that industry is music production. Yet perhaps “strange” is not the right word, in that after a very short period of time in Nashville this exceptional place seemed quite “normal”. It is as diverse as many mid-sized Southern city, which

a 2010 census numbers as 28.4 percent African American, 10 percent Hispanic or Latino and 3.1 percent Asian. There are poor and rich sections, urban and suburban areas, bustling zones of public activity and nightlife and quiet residential streets.

I stayed in three different places: with songwriter Tebey Ottoh and his wife Bridget south of the downtown area near the airport; with songwriter Rylee Madison and her husband Clay Krasner north of town in Madison, Tennessee; and at the “Nashville House,” which is actually two rooms on the lower level of a house owned by songwriter Daryl Burgess and his wife Lee Ann, strategically located in the Green Hills neighbourhood near the Bluebird Cafe. The Ottohs and Rylee Madison are Canadian, and were both renting out a room for a week at a time to those who were coming to town to participate in local musical activities (such as songwriting, performing, recording, and media appearances), and the Nashville House is funded by the Canadian performance rights organization SOCAN.¹⁷

All three of these accommodations exist because of the number of musicians (in these cases mostly songwriters) that travel between Canada and Nashville on a regular basis. All three places aided me greatly in my study, both because of the elements of songwriters’ daily lives (and those of their spouses) that I was able to observe and become briefly part of, and the networking opportunities (through introductions to their friends and colleagues, and suggestions for sites of research) that my hosts generously provided for me.¹⁸

In the initial stages of my research I found it most expedient to let my informants themselves suggest new informants, and either let them help arrange for further interviews with

¹⁷ SOCAN is the moniker for and acronym of the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada.

¹⁸ While all my hosts were extremely welcoming and giving with their time and aid, Bridget Ottoh in particular often asked me how she might be of help in making connections and by offering information and advice, and my study’s content owes no greater debt to anyone more than her.

relevant people, or use their names to put others at ease about talking to me. This approach coupled with my places of stay, my own nationality and the location of my host institution in Toronto resulted in a disproportionate number of my informants being Canadian (compared to the percentage of Nashville songwriters who are Canadian), something that requires comment here. I considered writing specifically about Canadian songwriters in Nashville, yet decided not to largely because the word-of-mouth approach I used to find informants led me beyond any specific network, and I attempted to gain access to as many different types of songwriters as I could. Further, and as my experience there has shown, Canadians are not recognized as distinct amongst the wider community of Nashville songwriters, and I did not want to imply that this was the case. That being said, how I observed Canadians providing informal support to each other is tangible and merits further scholarly attention, and in chapter five I discuss one notable exemplar of such reciprocity, Deric Ruttan.¹⁹

I spent my days doing interviews and other forms of research, writing notes and generally acquainting myself with Nashville's culture, economy and history. My evenings were spent attending music shows or socializing with an assortment of songwriters and musicians and their families that I befriended there.²⁰ I interviewed publishers, executives, studio owners and staff, educators who teach songwriting courses to undergraduate students, and journalists²¹ whose work involves piecing together the complexity of the Music Row apparatus. And of course I

¹⁹ See pages 196-97.

²⁰ These include John Scott and Rayna Sherrill, Scotty Emerick, Kent and Mary Agee, Phil Lee, Richard Bennett, Tom Mason, Tebey and Bridget Ottoh, Brian and Jennifer Davis, Gordie and Helene Sampson, Brad and Marylynne Stella, Jason and Amy Blaine, Danny Mitchell, Pete Finney, Gwen Holt and Dan Heller.

²¹ Here it behooves me to mention the excellent and insightful writing of Jewly Hight, and to acknowledge the several instances of help, advice and encouragement she has given me in the course of my study.

talked to the songwriters themselves, interviewing around seventy²² and talking more informally to over a hundred.

Most of the songwriters I approached readily agreed to spend an hour or so with me talking about their work, even though I offered no tangible incentive beyond the purchase of a coffee (which was routinely refused). Having speculative meetings with others that may or may not prove to be of tangible benefit is not unusual in Nashville, a place that relies on interactions between people to initiate many musical projects. Older, more established songwriters may have been interested in something like legacy recognition, and appearing in a scholarly study seemed to them a potentially useful means to this end. Over and above these factors however, a large motivation for songwriters to talk to me is owing to the misunderstood and underappreciated nature of songwriting work in Nashville generally. Songwriters, unlike performers, do their actual songwriting outside of the public eye and in writing rooms with only other songwriters present. The result of these songwriting sessions may eventually be heard, but the work behind the songs is rarely explored.

There are, according to my estimation, as many as two thousand people in Nashville who earn a substantial part of their living from writing and selling songs.²³ The complexity I encountered was not one I could have imagined, and I struggled with the right parameters with which to frame my study. Further, like any commercial culture, country music relies on the reinvigoration that comes from continual change, and songwriters are expected to keep up with the times. Inspiration can dry up, the pressure to produce can get the better of people, or they can simply tire of the grind. The songwriting community in Nashville is thus in constant flux. My

²² I conducted ninety-six interviews in Nashville, sixty-nine of which were with people who made at least part of their income from writing songs.

²³ This puts the hundred or so that I interviewed and spoke with while there into perspective in terms of how representative they are of the totality.

portrait of this community can only be considered a partial (and already dated) one, and I had to continually refocus my efforts by returning to the simple fact that *there are songs written by people* in Nashville, so I must be able to do ethnography about it.

Yet far from negating the usefulness and purpose of doing ethnography, the complexity of the songwriting community I encountered in Nashville underscores the importance of it, of usefully complicating what might be easily dismissed based on misleading preconceptions and lack of available information. Indeed there *are* songwriters in Nashville, and the ones that I spoke and hung out with were generous, inspired and life-affirming people without exception. More importantly for my study they were also a constant revelation, introducing me to ways of thinking, working and living that I had never experienced. It is ironic that the individuals who actually create the content of mainstream country music, its songs, are given so little public voice outside of the songs they write. As my experience has shown, it is not as if they have nothing to say when asked.

Aspects of Nashville Songwriters' Work

The following sections present a view of Nashville songwriters that positions their participation in the Music Row infrastructure, their place within Nashville and country music culture, and their own individual talents as inseparable aspects of doing the work that they do. Songwriters work in dialogue with Music Row, adapting their practices to suit producers' demands, demands that relate to the perceived tastes of country music listeners. They use the position they occupy within the Music Row structure in a way that allows them to also apply their own subjectivities and creativity to a songwriting session. As I will continually stress throughout this dissertation, the Nashville songwriter's creativity is defined by *adaptation*, and in the reckoning with and

balancing of a number of factors that may seem to be oppositional impulses, yet all are crucial to a song's success. My attempt throughout this introductory chapter is to argue for ways in which Nashville songwriters' work can be contextualized, suggesting particular lenses through which it and they can be most relevantly viewed.

Songwriter Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's theories have had a considerable impact on recent scholarly understandings of and inquiries into how and why individuals behave and make decisions as they do in specific situations. To Bourdieu, a field of cultural production such as that of country music is characterized by a set of hierarchical relationships that exist between its various members and between one set of members and other similar sets (Bourdieu 1993:6). In this sense songwriters act as one aspect of the wider field of country music, overlapping and interacting with other groups of workers and figures on Music Row, with some groups wielding power over or competing for power with other sets. Fields are normalized as "cultural" because they operate within a self-defined set of understandings that are accepted widely as markers of that particular field.

Bourdieu argues that individual behavior has implications that are at once cultural, social, and economic, involving class positioning (as defined by such things as income level, educational background, and occupation) as well as the cultural tastes and the life experiences an individual may possess and accumulate that are largely endemic to such a positioning. Individuals within fields accumulate experiences, and though their worldviews can change, Bourdieu argues (and I contest that) this only happens within certain parameters that align with one's classed, racial and gendered background. To Bourdieu, individuals act within "concrete

social situations governed by a set of objective social relations” (ibid), and thus agency, while not entirely consumed by preexisting factors beyond the agent’s control, is nevertheless reduced to a limited set of options the agent deems possible.

An individual within a field is able to make sense of it based on her or his ability to understand and interpret its sociocultural subtleties. This ability is related to an individual’s *habitus*, a system of “durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu 1990:53) whose substance varies according to each individual and her or his accumulated experiences, but is determined by a series of factors related to one’s upbringing, social status, and educational background. As Graeber points out, *habitus* comprises “symbolic systems that can be absorbed and endlessly reproduced without the actor ever being aware she is doing so” (Graeber 27).

Another of Bourdieu’s analytic models that bears relevance to my study is that of *capital*. Bourdieu extends the notion of economic capital to include other forms of exchange that function in similar ways. In particular, Bourdieu identifies *symbolic capital* (i.e. accumulated prestige based on knowledge and education); *cultural capital* (i.e. cultural knowledge and understanding informed by class positioning but also relying on accumulated experience); and *social capital* (i.e. resources available to an individual as the result of her or his membership within a particular group) as important factors determining success within a field (Bourdieu 2004 241-49, Johnson 35). This extension of the idea of capital allows for slippage between conventionally understood notions of class positioning and economic prestige and other ways that status can be attained such as through accumulated experiences and interactions within a confined physical and social space.

Bourdieu’s equation “[*(habitus) (capital)*] + field = practice” (taken from Maton 51) quantifies a way of conceptualizing how diverse factors – some predetermined and others

spontaneous, some seemingly fixed and others ever evolving – affect behavior. His theories help explain why some are conferred higher status within groups than others with similar backgrounds and skill sets (for instance, why some become Nashville songwriters and succeed at doing so, while other songwriters fail or simply stay home and do not make the attempt). While Bourdieu's own application of his analytic paradigms were groundbreaking in and of themselves, it is arguably their flexibility that has been his most lasting legacy. This flexibility has allowed scholars since Bourdieu to usefully theorize modified forms of Bourdieu's ideas on habitus and cultural capital that recognize how individuals move and create meaning within larger structures, and how individuals in the process help to form or modify such structures through their choices and behavior.

One of the ways that the concept of habitus arguably falls short is in its dismissal of spontaneous choice and the agency it manifests. Though Bourdieu's ideas are helpful in understanding how an individual may ally herself or himself with a certain constellation of values and tastes (Smith and Wilson 2004:193), they may not serve to fully grasp the complexity of the overlap of these constellations in the experience of individuals or groups in American culture, where class is a shifting and malleable marker of identity. In the case of Nashville songwriters, they come from a variety of significantly divergent backgrounds, including divergently classed ones. This is not easily reconciled with Bourdieu's claims that there is a "recognized hierarchy of the arts" which "corresponds [to] a social hierarchy of the consumers," and that this "predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class'" (Bourdieu 1984:2), or that "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (ibid 7). Further, such claims leave little room for vagaries of personal choice or spontaneous creativity. I align myself with De Certeau (1984) and

others who argue for a view of human behavior that, while in the context of particular situating structures and ideologies, is nevertheless a series of spontaneous and individual responses to these situating forces.

I contend that for Nashville songwriters, their experiences relocating to Nashville and negotiating the complexities of Music Row become significant factors informing each of their habitus and defining one that they share. I share Shawn Lindsay's appeal for a notion of habitus that "actualizes the conditions of its production in making a virtue of necessity" and that "must be envisaged as possessing the capacity for generating practices which are not in themselves 'inherent in the particular conditions of its production' (Bourdieu 1990:55), but are actually transformative of those conditions" (Lindsay 200). Nashville songwriters' tactics, practices and professional reputations are premised on how they adapt to and remain productive under the circumstances they work within in Nashville, yet in turn these adaptations and the songs that are written as a result of them have a powerful influence on country music and its surrounding discourses and practices.

The history of country music has been characterized by an ambiguous attitude toward class structures, at once eschewing and embracing wider class markers. Bourdieu's groundbreaking ideas about cultural capital, while a provocative starting point for inquiry, arguably have limitations as an analytic tool. This is largely owing to the specific types of capital that are produced and embraced in commercial cultures when various fields overlap in unpredictable and unforeseeable ways. In the case of my writer informants, they come from a variety of backgrounds, have varying levels of education, and have different understandings of and personal affiliations with the music they write for a living. They write songs that are intended to be noticed by and adopt subject positions of others that possess far different types of

capital to their own. The capital songwriters possess can only be understood when positioned within this complex context, and arises largely from the songs they write and the genre culture that authenticates them.

Sarah Thornton (1995) has effectively discussed the cultural capital of live “DJs” as figures that contain specific “subcultural capital” (Thornton 11). Steven Cottrell (2004) has analyzed how music itself behaves as capital in particular ways in the lives of British classical musicians. Marion MacLeod has discussed how, in certain live music performance venues, alcohol can become a socioculturally value-laden commodity, even acting as a form of currency. MacLeod positions habitus as a series of expectations that inform the behavior of particularly classed-individuals, but in practice these expectations can act as “axes of subordination” (MacLeod 273) that inform tactically²⁴ deviant behavior.

Throughout this dissertation I argue for a specific type of capital possessed and produced by Nashville songwriters, and attempt to isolate what the aspects of this capital are. Their capital arises from their successful adaptations to the various commercial constraints and cultural concerns endemic to their work. It comes from their ability to access a liminal space whereby they can create songs from a series of positions they do not personally occupy yet have to convey convincingly to listeners. While Nashville songwriters are often enmeshed in processes that they have little or no ability to affect, my study seeks to demonstrate that their responses to this ought

²⁴ I use tactic here in the sense that DeCerteau does. His influential study *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) examines both “the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures” (e.g. Music Row), as well as how individuals and groups (e.g. songwriters) resist their impositions, “deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of ‘tactics’ articulated in the details of everyday life.” DeCerteau seeks to “bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of ‘discipline’” (a term borrowed from Bourdieu 1977). I explore this idea further on pages 256-7.

to be viewed as more than exercises in futility, and are economically, culturally and socially value-laden in Nashville in a myriad of ways I examine in this dissertation.

Balancing Commerce, Culture and Creativity

I think there's something to be said for making music be accessible for everybody . . . well you can't please everybody but . . . to make it more accessible is probably a good thing . . . we are in the business of making money, and it is "where does commerce meet creativity", it's all those questions . . . so you have to figure it out (Tommy Lee James, personal communication, August 12, 2010).

In spite of several stylistic innovations and a tendency to adapt to current styles and market trends, there has been for over six decades now a type of music known as country music, produced almost exclusively in or having connections with Nashville. Country music songwriters have been relied on to innovate and refresh the sound of country music to suit ever-changing popular tastes, and are relied on to bring an innovation to the style on an ongoing basis (Hughes 190, see also Becker 707). Thus the need for them to be versed in musical styles outside of the country music tradition, and their tendency to look to outside influences (e.g. current events, politics, other musical styles) to influence the textual and sonic substance of country music. While this innovative tendency has been characteristic of Nashville virtually since the inception of Music Row, it stands in contrast to common perceptions of country music as lacking innovation or originality.

A songwriter in Nashville writes knowing that her or his song will be scrutinized by a series of publishers, producers, agents and managers before it gets cut. If it is chosen as a cut it will be interpreted by a singer, and further altered by session musicians, engineers and producers in the recording process. Once all this has happened, the song may or may not make the final released recording due to a variety of factors beyond the ability of the songwriter to anticipate. In

order to be successful, the song will eventually have to be selected by radio managers and played in a crucial time slot to get the attention of the song's intended target audience, who will then of course have to have the intended reaction to it (and indicate so through buying product or calling the station or looking the singer up on the internet).

The writers of the songs that are put through such a process have developed a practice and process that has been molded over time and adapted to suit Music Row, creating a unique legacy of country music songwriting in Nashville. Phrases that use the terms (and emphasize the dichotomy between) commerce and creativity, bandied about with familiarity by Nashville songwriters as Tommy Lee James does above, serve as an encapsulation of the act of writing popular music generally. This can be read as an acknowledgement of both the quantifiable and predictable and the immeasurable and unforeseen aspects of popular songs, and the inseparability of one from the other in the songwriting process. Popular songs reflect the concerns, values and tastes of listeners and in doing so become (hopefully profitable) commodities; both economic and sociocultural concerns are an integral part of a song's creation, transmission and consumption.

I add a third term to James' "commerce meets creativity" notion, employing a trio of descriptors to encapsulate the work of Nashville songwriters: commerce, culture and creativity.²⁵

Though these terms represent processes all of which are factors in work and lives of my

²⁵ I here must acknowledge Keith Negus' use of this same trio of concepts (though he typically uses "industry" instead of "commerce") in *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (1999) and again in *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value* (2004). I approach my analysis of Nashville songwriters guided by Negus' idea that "the act of creation involves grappling with the conventions, traditions, media and institutional conditions through which any experience can be given communicative form," and that "innovation may be strikingly apparent within a particular artistic field, [yet] how new is new, and how successful any innovation may be, are questions that can only be decided in specific cases, and sometimes only with hindsight" (Negus 2004: viii).

informants, their popular usages often denote oppositional impulses (Negus 1999: 24). With the residual influences of nineteenth-century romanticism, the twentieth-century folklorist movement and industrial capitalism still operating as powerful discursive forces, commerce is seen to be the debasement of authentic cultural processes that ostensibly exist outside of the capitalist economy and can only be tainted by contact with it (Negus 2004: 2-5, 46). Commerce is positioned as antithetical to art itself, to the individualistic genius that rises above the mundane that creativity implies. Thus the commercial is seen to be corrupting the processes of the working classes, or the folk, and also as preventing visionary individuals from being recognized as such.

It is important to remember that ‘commerce’, ‘art’ and ‘folk’ discourses spring from the intellectual classes, and fall short as ways to understand the work of individuals who write songs that are part of a complex, widely consumed genre culture. As Diane Pecknold has insightfully traced in her study *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry*, country music has since its inception as a genre been characterized by commercialism (Pecknold 2). Indeed, the embrace of commercialism by country music fans has been a definitive aspect of the genre (ibid 96). Since Keith Negus’ influential study *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (1999), many scholars have argued for a new understanding of fields of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993) such as country music that examines and theorizes the commercial aspects of song production (Negus 1999:14). I build on this idea here, arguing that responses to both the challenges of creating a song and responding to the parameters imposed by the country music genre generally and Music Row specifically are all intrinsic parts of a Nashville songwriter’s process.

While it is comparatively easy to define and observe country songs as commercial objects, how country songs are cultural is less so. Country songs have to conform to the expectations of country music fans that expect the songs to reflect their lifestyles, concerns and

values. More significantly, a country song is expected to incite an emotional response in listeners, and this motivation and the type of response enlisted is distinctive to and definitive of the genre itself.²⁶ Thus while harder to quantify and analyze, it is crucial to keep in mind that country songs get circulated as not only commercial and popular commodities but also as cultural and vernacular objects with a particular resonance for a recognized²⁷ group of people (Holt 2007: 65, Bourdieu 1984: 100).

Creativity, the third of my trio of descriptors, incorporates the notion that it is the unique abilities of gifted individuals that allows for the creation of songs from a single idea in the course of a few hours. While I have suggested that adaptation to the demands of the marketplace and Music Row producers is a definitive aspect of a Nashville songwriter's creativity (see Negus 2004: 9-10), it must also be acknowledged that each song is born out of the unique confluence of particular songwriters' abilities and the interaction between them at a particular moment in time. As such there are highly subjective and unpredictable aspects of Nashville songwriting (which I examine as the auratic qualities of Nashville songs in the following section).

Given the variety of processes and concerns that impinge on country songs, *commerce*, *culture* and *creativity* take on a particular meanings as they relate to the act of songwriting on and for Music Row and the adaptation that Nashville songwriters demonstrate in the course of

²⁶ In the classes taught by Tom Douglas that I attended at Belmont University, this point was stressed often. Douglas stated that he approaches his writing with the idea that listeners have God-given emotional traits that are universally poignant, and a good song is one that addresses these traits in a meaningful way (Tom Douglas, personal communication, Feb. 21, 2012).

²⁷ Positioning and problematizing the idea of country music as a vernacular expression is largely the concern of ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox's *Real Country* (2004), in which he discusses how the sound of the voice when singing country songs constitutes and embodies specific cultural meaning for his informants in the small town of Lockhart, Texas. While the group of people that collectively comprise country music listeners is difficult to isolate in practice, the belief in its existence acts as a powerful force in public discourse. I discuss country music as a popular and vernacular hybrid on pages 97-102.

writing them. Throughout this dissertation I continue to employ these terms and emphasize the interrelationships between them in the work of my informants.

The Aura of the Nashville Songwriter

In his often revisited essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Benjamin positions aura as the presence of the artist in an original work of art, a presence that is absented once that work is reproduced. While Benjamin wrote within a specific historical and political climate that provides the pretext for his views, his ideas about aura and its relationship to authenticity have allowed for critique of popular production and consumption practices, including musical ones, largely because of the aspects of such practices he *didn't* anticipate.

Sarah Thornton expands on this here:

What Benjamin did not and could not foresee was the formation of new authenticities specific to recorded entertainment, for these were dependent on historical changes in the circumstances of both the production and consumption of music . . . as the composition of popular music increasingly took place in the studio rather than, say, off stage, records came to carry sounds and musics that neither originated in or referred to actual performances . . . the record shifted from being a secondary or derivative form to a primary, original one . . . Recording technologies did not, therefore, corrode or demystify 'aura' as much as disperse and relocate it (Thornton 27).

Thornton is suggesting that recordings, when distributed and consumed at the local level, have over time attained their own authenticities as cultural products, thus not negating aura so much as transferring it.

To Benjamin, the aura of the artist is eradicated when the art object is removed from its original context (i.e. the physically and historically located tradition from which it emerges) (Benjamin 223), and when a co-presence between the creator and observer can no longer be shared (ibid 220-21), both of which happen through the process of mechanical reproduction

typified by recorded country songs. Benjamin was not in a position to anticipate the “new authenticities specific to recorded entertainment” that, Thornton asserts, arose after his writing. Country music’s traditional objects *are* mechanically reproduced songs, yet like Thornton I contend that the technological process is not antithetical to the auratic presence of a songwriter in a recorded and mass mediated songs.

Benjamin argues that “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” (Benjamin 221), and further that “the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value” (ibid 224). The historical and political contexts of Benjamin’s writing is manifested in the quasi-Marxist language he employs when he argues that the “desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly . . . is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of everyday reality by accepting its reproduction” (ibid 223). He is arguing from a position that the decay of the aura caused by mechanical reproduction is concurrent with the rise in the importance of popular opinion and the wresting of criticism of artistic practices from critics themselves. But what if sociocultural practices center around reproduced objects that have no authentic, unreproduced “original”, as country music arguably does? And what if these practices became longstanding and relevant enough to constitute a “tradition” with its unique sense of “ritual”, a characterization of their genre culture that country music adherents widely embrace.

While the sorts of interventions by those in power and the corruptibility of such interventions are not as scrutinized presently as they were in the post-war era (arguably to our detriment), popular music has come to function in a myriad of ways Benjamin would have found unimaginable. Country songs facilitate a reality that is internal, subjective and experienced privately as well as being widely shared, and Nashville songwriters intend their songs to address

these internal realities. I am suggesting that even in the case of commercial cultures such as country music – and contrary to Benjamin’s distinction between authenticity and reproduction – it is worth considering the possibility that songwriters create cultural objects that are infused with auratic qualities, and that their eventual reproduction and mass mediation does not negate this.

Hard-core/ Soft-shell

The mutual concerns that Music Row producers and songwriters have with keeping the genre up to date musically and yet continually reflecting a particular set of cultural tropes is seen in what Peterson termed “The Dialectic of Hard-Core and Soft-Shell in Country Music” (Peterson 1995). According to Peterson, Music Row alternates between a pop sound and a more hardcore (i.e. honky tonk) country sound in response to listeners’ demands and in the interest of maintaining profitability. When the Nashville sound strays too far from its roots, a counter-movement champions the return of older (primarily honky-tonk) sounds. This can be observed in the 1970s, when the biggest selling country acts were pop-country singers Olivia Newton John and John Denver before the release of *Wanted: The Outlaws* in 1977 prompted a trend toward more traditional sounds (ibid 290-91). Kenny Rogers dominated country charts through the 1980s until Emmylou Harris, Steve Earle and Randy Travis stoked traditional flames at the end of the decade (ibid 295-97). More recently, this debate and its effect on Music Row’s practices has been affected by the development of Americana as a genre, as this entity champions many of the older styles that are often out of favour on Music Row, along with audiences still interested in hearing them.

Two of my informants, Brian Davis and Tommy Lee James, seem to view this phenomenon through two different lenses. Davis thinks that Music Row should cut its losses and favour hardcore fans exclusively, as he discusses here:

There was a lot of that in the 90s . . . as it continued to be exploited, I think it moved away from that and it moved more into a money-making machine, less love for what people are about, which . . . I don't fault, that's business man, business is that way but it's all cyclical . . . right now I think you're starting to see the ripple effects of . . . guys saying "we're done with that side of it, we want it to be real again" . . . and that's why guys like Jamey Johnson . . . either you love him or you hate him . . . and some other guys are starting to . . . poke above the rest, cuz . . . they're preaching a real message again . . . and it goes back . . . I mean Waylon and Willie and all those guys . . . Our industry is all about "how can we keep people from turning the station", so we water things down and make things as bland as possible, [in] the attempt of trying to appease 100% of the demographic . . . it's impossible . . . my philosophy has always been "let's polarize the demographic, let's take the 50% that love what we do, make enough money, have a good time", and the 50% that don't...I'm fine with that . . . (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

Davis has the perspective of a songwriter who also performs in front of audiences on a regular basis, and feels that the people that come to hear live country music represent the real and only true demographic for the genre. To him, pandering to anyone else for the sake of greater profit is both a slap in the face of true fans and compromises the sound of the songs.

Tommy Lee James sees the same phenomenon from the seemingly opposite perspective; he cringes at the possibility that country music would be surrendered to the tastes and desires of its hardcore fans entirely:

Things go in cycles here where it gets really stone country . . . and go back and go . . . pop country . . . it goes back and forth . . . I guess at one particular point I was a little disillusioned . . . it was SO stone country and [that's] not really what I do best . . . I hear things a little more pop . . . I just don't really like redneck country music . . . it's not what I . . . there's are other people who are just gonna do it better . . . I think there's always been that back and forth for a lot of years in Nashville . . . It's funny the country people . . . the real hardcore country people . . . they're really defined about how country should be . . . and so it'll go real country and then they'll realize that whenever it goes real country nobody cares that much . . . I mean the numbers go down, all the numbers always go down . . . there's a happy medium somewhere where

you can protect the integrity of that Nashville thing . . . I don't think Nashville should be LA . . . or go there, but at some point . . . I think there's something to be said for making music be accessible for everybody . . . (Tommy Lee James, personal communication, August 12, 2010).

James' goal in writing a song is to be able to appeal to as many people as possible, and he displays no proprietary interest in preserving the genre according to the tastes of hard-core fans.

While James and Davis are members of the same occupational group, it is striking how differently they view country songs and those that ought to listen to them. They occupy divergent positions within the hard-core/soft-shell dialectic, and claim to defer to the perceived tastes of different groups of listeners. Also notable is the classed implications of their perspectives, and the divergent economic strategies – Davis's wish to focus on cater to and gain the loyalties of the genre's most faithful listeners versus James' suggestion that the country music songs promoted by Music Row producers should appeal to as many listeners as possible – that each approach would engender.

Nashville songwriters not only respond to the dynamic tension that exists between two musical aesthetics on Music Row, but also collectively embody it. While Peterson observes this dialectic in terms of songs and the larger trends that they act as catalysts for, the above quotes illustrate how the hard-core/soft-shell dialectic plays out within songwriting community itself and individual songwriters' divergent intentions and predispositions. It is important to note that hardcore and soft-shell elements never entirely disappear from Music Row's output, and indeed there is a continuum between these aesthetics that songwriters regularly exploit. The two exist side by side and compete for listeners' attention and loyalty, and both are crucial to country music's ongoing relevance (Isenhour 33).

This balancing of hard-core and soft-shell perspectives is a significant factor in maintaining country music's popularity throughout successive generations. This was made manifest to me on a visit to the permanent exhibition of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum on Feb. 2, 2012. I had just finished getting excited over a display case that featured the original handwritten copy of Dolly Parton's song "Jolene", one of my favourites in the country genre. As I proceeded through the chronologically arranged cases, I overheard a woman who appeared to be in her early twenties gush to an older man that was with her (her father, uncle or grandfather presumably) about a similar handwritten original of Miranda Lambert's "White Liar" (a song she cowrote with Natalie Hemby which peaked at #2 in early 2010). It was the same reaction over two songs written almost 40 years apart by two figures who both occupy ambiguous places along the hard-core/soft-shell spectrum.

Chapter Overview

The following five chapters collectively contextualize the cultural work of Nashville songwriters, though they do so in divergent ways and are able to stand as separate studies of different aspects of this work. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the aspects of Nashville songwriters' back-story that aid in contextualizing my informants, while chapters 4, 5 and 6 represent these informants and my experiences with them in the form of case studies. My aim here is to depict songwriters in their professional and social milieu and to problematize aspects of their work that mostly goes unexamined (both by my informants themselves and others).

Chapter 2 is a historiography of the cultural work of the Nashville songwriter. Country music's antecedents are the diverse styles and genres of music known and widely disseminated in the U.S. South throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What is noteworthy is

the range of origins for these various musics, representing a diverse ethnic mix, a combination of vernacular and mass-mediated sources, a variety of formal and informal performance practices, amateur and professional performance mediums, and a large degree of non-Southern influence. How all of these musics were able to be subsumed under a single banner (though the name of the banner has changed from “hillbilly” to “country and western” before being called simply “country”) has to do with a specific confluence of events that in the early 1950s brought the elements necessary for the production and mass mediation of a popular music style to Nashville. These events also fostered a broad, often contradictory cultural narrative that developed between performers, audiences and producers of the music. This narrative constructed country music as both a vernacular expression of a particular people (without needing to be specific about who these people were) as well as a mass-mediated and commercial music participated in through the purchasing of recordings, tickets and merchandise. Country music, woven into a Southern vernacular tradition even though these connections were from the start and remain contestable, then came to be associated with a single locale, Nashville, a city with one eye on the South, and the other on the North and its power centers of New York and Los Angeles.

Chapter 3 examines the working and social milieu of Nashville and Music Row, positioning songwriters as one of a series of players all collectively creating country music. It was the concurrent assembling of several different players who were finding opportunity in the same place, and the accumulative effect of this over a short period of time (late 1940s to early 1950s) that caused Nashville to become the home of country music. Through this process, songwriters became one part of the social, cultural and economic fabric there. I explore both Music Row’s various players and the ways that songwriters work and are viewed within this milieu. The final part of chapter three takes on the somewhat nebulous task of examining what

perceptions of Nashville songwriters are. Perceptions are important starting points for investigation, in that they are contestable (and can be unpacked accordingly) yet can also become definitive of a group of people in a self-fulfilling rather than inherent way. I examine how individual songwriters both reinforce the roles they have occupied in the past and challenge these roles by using musical and lyrical expectations as departure points in order to tactically distinguish themselves from their peers (e.g. by writing songs with distinctive hooks or writing in collaboration with particular writers who have not worked together before).

The remaining chapters are case studies highlighting specific activities and practices that are definitive of Nashville songwriters' work. In chapter 4 I examine the practice of cowriting, arguing that the recent imposition of cowriting (as a demand of Music Row producers) has had a pronounced effect on the ways that songwriters work and approach their work, and speculating on how it affects songs that are being written. Included here is a discussion of the controversial practice of *artist cowrites*, in which "artists" (i.e. singers) who are looking for material for their next recording, often newly signed and with no or little experience writing songs, write with experienced songwriters through an arrangement made between publisher and manager in many instances. Chapter 5 explores issues surrounding gender and Nashville songwriters by examining the experiences of songwriter Victoria Banks in writing three songs with subjects that align them with other prominent country songs of the past (e.g. "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" from 1952, "Don't Come Home a'Drinkin' With Lovin' On Your Mind" from 1967, "Stand By Your Man" from 1968 and "The Pill" from 1975) that fostered a gendered discourse. Banks's experiences remind us of ways that country music songwriting is normalized as a male profession in spite of the number of women plying their trade as songwriters on Music Row currently. Chapter 6 explores songwriter performances at the Bluebird Cafe, a venue in an

affluent residential neighbourhood away from both the downtown and Music Row that has staked its reputation on this unusual performance medium and has developed a distinct format (“In the Round”) for these songwriter presentations.

My dissertation ends with concluding remarks entitled “The Figure of the Nashville Songwriter.” A figure emerges from the totality of past cultural templates, the collectivity of songwriters such as my informants that have come to Nashville to ply their trade since the late 1940s, their songs that get cut, and their public statements and appearances. This figure’s substance has implications for my study, but more importantly for our understandings of how songs and the people that write them are meaningful even when produced within highly mediated commercial cultures.

Chapter 2: A Historiography of Nashville Songwriters: Three Metaprocesses That Shaped Country Music and Brought it to Nashville

Introduction: The Pivotal Moment

There is no way out of the game of culture; and one's only chance of objectifying the true nature of the game is to objectify as fully as possible the very operations which one is obliged to use in order to achieve that objectification (Bourdieu 1984: 12).

This chapter is an overview of the origins of country music songwriting and of the array of cultural and historical processes implicated in its development (including many which became suppressed in the popular narrative adopted by record companies to promote the music). I engage with selected aspects of country music's back-story that pertain most directly to a specific subsection of its production: that of writing songs. I explore how (and from where) the country music vocabulary originated, what its parameters are, what it means to listeners and detractors alike, and why it is so pervasive and powerful a force, even after several decades of existence. Ultimately, I am concerned with how this force compels songwriters to behave and strategize in certain ways. In effect this chapter serves as a historiography²⁸ of an occupation and type of work, a social history of the work of Nashville songwriters.

²⁸ A comprehensive historiography is needed for the field of cultural and commercial production known as country music. While many depictions of country music practitioners and processes exist and increasingly more scholarly attention is paid to the topic, at the present time there is a dearth of work that contextualizes the many disparate studies of country music and the sometimes-conflicting perspectives they espouse. Music historian Richard Crawford, in the first chapter of *The American Musical Landscape* (2000), notes that the benchmark historical surveys of American music (he mentions those of Gilbert Chase, Wilfred Mellers, H. Wiley Hitchcock and Charles Hamm) all contain points of convergence and divergence that are worth critical examination. He further posits that the act of critically examining a body of separate works in

On June 23, 1923, a fifty-five-year-old fiddler named John Carson came to a makeshift studio set up in an empty warehouse loft in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. He had been invited to record a couple of pieces of music from his repertoire on to a device that could make wax cylinder masters “in the field”, technology that was very recent at that time. Carson recorded two pieces from his repertoire of dance songs. The first chosen was a tune from the Southern oral music tradition called “Old Hen Cackles and the Rooster's Gonna Crow”. The second, “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane,” is a vaudeville song that was written in the 1880s by a Cincinnati-based songwriter named Will Shakespeare Hays with the intention of it being performed by singers in blackface. Carson performed these pieces in the fiddle style he would have employed hundreds of times, primarily to accompany dancers at social or working events (Miller 202-3).

The recording session was arranged between two principle players: Ralph Peer; a talent scout for New York based Okeh Records who was in town primarily to scout African American performers for Okeh’s emerging race label; and Polk Brockman, a furniture merchant who, in his capacity as local agent for Okeh, had recently traveled to New York for meetings with company representatives. While there he had come up with the idea to record Carson, a popular local radio performer and fiddling contest winner (Peterson 1997:25-32).

Bill Malone calls this recording session the moment at which “the hillbilly music industry began its existence” (Malone and Neal 2010:38).²⁹ This single event is a culmination of several

order to gain comprehensive insight crucially defines a distinct field of scholarship (3), a status that “country music studies” has yet to achieve within the academy.

²⁹ Because I am attempting to position country music as a phenomenon with sociohistorical continuity, I for the most part refer to the genre by its current descriptor. This deemphasizes the various names ascribed to the genre over the course of its existence (e.g. “old-time music”, “American folk music”, “country and western music”), particularly because they are primarily marketing categories that were abandoned as they were deemed not useful. Anthony Harkins writes “country music’s identity was so completely entwined with the “hillbilly” concept that between its commercial origins in the early 1920s and its emergence as a major cultural force in

events prior, and the catalyst for what became the country music genre. In order to unpack the significance of this claim,³⁰ Carson's performances on this recording and the music he played must be placed in its particular cultural context, particularly as this context is often poorly understood and misrepresented. Even in the brief description of Carson's recording and the events surrounding it given above there is an evident confluence of influences and factors that brought it about, affected its content, and defined its meaning. His choice of repertoire bears the imprint of a number of musical sources and processes. The events that conspired to create this event involve industrial and social processes relevant on a national scale, but taking on particular significance in this instance due to a history of North/South relations, mass urbanization and the particular time in the nation's history that this event took place. The back-story of this event thus bears the imprint of many different historical, cultural, social, and political narratives that become like threads in a densely woven tapestry.³¹

Initially, Northern record company representatives recognized little of appeal in Carson's recording (Malone and Neal 37-38), while Peer himself called Carson's music "pluperfect awful" (Cusic 2008:8). While the possibility of profit eventually changed this, it bears asking

the 1950s it was nearly universally known as 'hillbilly music'" (Harkins 71). I take Harkins' cue and refer to pre-Nashville country music as hillbilly music throughout this chapter, hoping this serves to clarify rather than confuse. It should be noted that the term "hillbilly" is still in colloquial use in Nashville today to describe particular people, sounds and behavior.

³⁰ There are other events that could arguably lay a rival claim to this distinction, particularly the July 1927 recording, also presided over by Ralph Peer, of both the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers in another empty warehouse building, this one in Bristol, Tennessee. Another is Vernon Dalhart's recording of "Wreck of the Old 97", released only a few months after Carson's. Earlier figures such as Carson and Dalhart are important protagonists in the creation of a public identity for the a set of images and tropes for the recordings they made, preparing the soil for the emergence of later star performers like Rodgers and the Carter Family and those in their wake.

³¹ The ways that race and class issues in particular impinge upon our understanding of this event looms large. The third great sociological field of gender, while implicated even in early recordings made entirely by men, begins to become more of an issue with the emergence of female performers on records within three years of Carson's recording.

what the scores of southern people who eagerly bought it heard. Understanding this involves unpacking a complex dialogue that existed between various players – performers, industry figures, local business people, audiences in both the South and eventually throughout the U.S. – crucial to the formation of country music culture, the production infrastructure (Music Row) that formed in Nashville and thus, by extension, the work of Nashville songwriters.

As Karl Miller explores in *Segregating Sound* (2010), the attachment of racialized categories onto music occurred at the level of mass mediation, and race was used from the early days of the popular music industry as a way to create targeted markets for the consumption of sheet music and later recordings (Miller 2010:4, see also Lawson 2010). Race and ethnicity became primary markers of U.S. popular song types in the later nineteenth-century, particularly with the rise in popularity of Irish (Hamm 1979:42-61, 162-86) and German (ibid 187-200) songs, both of which gained considerable popularity outside of their main target audiences. Yuval Taylor has noted with irony how Northern record companies inscribed the sounds they were hearing from Southern musicians with specific racial meaning, reflecting a musical segregation more typical of Northern cities than the rural South (Barker and Taylor 2007:47). Pre-1920s Southern music was a song tradition formed out of several distinct (albeit interrelated) elements that was retroactively positioned as distinct and culturally homogenous (Peterson 1997: 35-36). And in spite of this — not to mention the many stylistic influences that have been added to the musical stew that is present-day country music — country songs are still positioned in a similar way.

With U.S.-derived popular musics, race was and still is the primary signifier that separates one popular music genre from another (Barker and Taylor 2007:97-98, see also Gronow 1978). I discuss the racialization of musical genre further in the sections about the

American popular songwriter tradition and the early recording industry and more about African American participation in popular music production via minstrelsy in subsequent parts of this chapter, but it is clear even at a cursory historical glance that conceptualizing country music as springing from exclusively white and Anglo Saxon roots is highly problematic. Musical interaction across racial lines in the nineteenth-century South produced what historian Tony Russell has called a “common stock” of tunes (Russell 1970:31), many of which would later resurface on recordings sung both black and white performers (Miller 2010:12, Barker and Taylor 2007:42).

While I wish not to diminish the effects of race consciousness and racist ideologies in the South at this time, especially for those who could not claim affiliation with the privileged races, it seems that social interaction involving music would have been a site with more fluid racial boundaries than other areas of social interaction (Wald 2004: 47-50, Kloosterman and Quispel 1990:152-57, see also Lawson 2010). Recent scholarship (Lawson 2010, Miller 2010, Brooks 2004, Wald 2004) has encouraged a view of nineteenth-century music that was created and listened to by both blacks and whites, however mitigated by the constraints of racialized social mores this may have been³². The incorporation of “non-country” (i.e. non-Anglo-Protestant and non-Southern) musical styles into country music (a characteristic of every successive generation of Nashville songs) is thus not a sully of an otherwise pure historical musical form. No such form ever existed, and when Nashville songwriters today incorporate genre-stretching musical

³² This can be surmised not only by the appearance of common repertoire but also in the opportunities for money making available to black musicians during this period (as entertainers for events and parties and as street performers) when there would have been few similar opportunities for African Americans at the time.

influences into their songs, which they do and are encouraged to do regularly, they are arguably *adhering to* rather than *transgressing* the tradition they work within.

Given the difficulties of isolating a specific cultural group as the progenitors of the music known as country, we must consider how the music came to represent this group of people. If it didn't definitively come *from* them then it has to have been attached *to* them. Interest in the southern music captured on recordings in the 1920s involves more than a voyeuristic fascination with southern culture, and what fueled record company activities in creating the hillbilly genre goes beyond simply creating local markets for new musical products. Revivalist fantasies of 'the folk' dominated much academic and public discourse at the time (Miller 2010:9), and the South began to be seen as a repository of America's musical past, owing to its relative rurality and connection to economic and social practices since discarded in the name of modernity. Folklore scholars began to archive southern music with a specific attention toward positioning cultural material as within a distinct racial lineage (white music as a repository of the British ballad tradition, black music as a link to antebellum plantation life and African origins) (Wald 2004:57). Seminal U.S. Folklorist publications such as John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910) and Cecil Sharp's *English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians* (1917) did much to shape public perceptions of the Southern people and their distinctive music, however simplistic these views now seem (Wald 2004:224).

The academic folklorist movement helped to define and create a fascination for a strain of pure Southern, Anglo-descended whites, and promoting hillbilly songs as the vernacular music of this group. The championing of folklore studies in the academy helped give substance to the public perception of the hillbilly marketed by record companies in the 1920s and 30s, providing "authoritative new ways to talk about racial and cultural authority" (Miller 2010:2-3). Southern

music became a type of folk music in the 1920s, continuing the process of ‘othering’ the South and its people that had persisted for many decades prior. The conflation of folklorist views, the effects of segregation legislation in the South, the rise of the popular song industry in New York and the invention and widespread adoption of the phonograph were key factors in the creation of racialized Southern music genres (“race” and “hillbilly,” as well as others) in the 1920s.

Attributing song styles to racially distinct musical practices is perhaps the most significant effect of folklorist views, encouraging a view of Southern music (whether made by blacks or whites) as separate from the popular styles emerging from New York.

Unlike minstrelsy, which did not restrict racialized musical sounds to specific racialized bodies (see pages 54-57), folklorist views “helped to orchestrate a sonic demarcation [that] corresponded to the corporeal distinctions [of] Jim Crow” (Miller 2010:3), supporting this distinction as a way to justify the anthropological aspirations of this emerging field of study. Miller notes that these two phenomena and their competing claims on musical meaning, which he calls the “messy and incomplete intersection of minstrelsy and folklore,” are still being contested today by “listeners and scholars frustrated with commercial pop fakery and dubious about genuine folk music” (ibid 6), the very issues at stake in the dual identity of Nashville songs as both commercial and cultural products.

In his article *Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia*, Geoffrey Mann notes:

It is perhaps worth considering the possibility that something claiming the status of white culture, something like a purportedly American whiteness – however historically baseless – is not *reflected* in country music, but is, rather, *produced* by it (Mann 105, italics the author’s).

Here Mann asserts that country music neither reflects a tradition that exists or falsely asserts the presence of one that doesn't exist. Rather, it is implicated in the creation and perpetuation of the very tradition it professes to reflect.

Country music's narrative of continuity is largely constructed, and is better understood as a sociocultural rather than an historical or even a musical one. What is of interest is how music with such obviously divergent and varied influences and meanings could be positioned as parts of a unified cultural process. The next section discusses the formative role of three metaprocesses that worked in an interconnected way to bring this recording about and subsequently launch the hillbilly music genre. These metaprocesses are: the existing musical culture (southeastern vernacular music) from which hillbilly music is said to have sprung; a tradition of song production (the American Popular Song tradition and its center of production on Tin Pan Alley in New York); and an array of mass-mediated technological innovations, primarily involving the phonograph and the radio, employed and mitigated by the recording industry in the 1920s through the 1940s.

How all of these influences and factors came together in the genesis of the country music industry in Nashville is the focus of the middle sections of this chapter. It is my contention that the remnants of the nineteenth-century Southern music tradition, the template for song production that Tin Pan Alley originated, and various technologies and the consumptive patterns they fostered all impinged on a series of events in the 1930s and 1940s. These events conspired in the creation of the industrial base of country music in Nashville; established a set of tropes and images for the genre; and also initiated a process of negotiation between producers and consumers, a contested arena characterized by flexibility toward these tropes and the meanings they convey.

While some aspects of Nashville songwriters' profession are traceable to specific events or historical practices (such as those that pertain to work conditions and systems of production), others are more speculative (such as those pertaining to the cultural meaning that country music embodies and how this meaning has changed over time). It is for this reason that this chapter culminates in a discussion of how the various metaprocesses discussed here contributed to what country music has come to mean. Country music is positioned as both a popular commercial genre and a vernacular music of a particular cultural group. Owing to this dual manifestation, country music has, over time and through dialogue between producers, audiences and practitioners, developed its own peculiar authenticity.

Ultimately my purpose here is to shed some light on how what presaged the current generic formation of country music, the fact that Nashville became and remains the undisputed home of the genre, and the meaning and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993:6-8) of the genre all work together to affect the work of songwriters. These meanings and their contestation and reinvigoration — all continually manipulated by, profited from and responded to by gatekeepers in Nashville — largely account for the enduring place of country music in U.S. popular music culture. This arena of contested meanings is a site both physical and discursive that circumscribes and defines the work of a collective of songwriters, who are charged with the often-nebulous task of articulating it through song. In the pages that follow I attempt to untangle and examine the separate elements of the many-stranded back-story of the work of the Nashville songwriter.

Three Metaprocesses Behind Country Music Songwriting

This section outlines several factors that combined to prepare the soil for the country music genre that would eventually spring from it. They include processes that are historical (nineteenth-century southeastern music), economic (the rise of the popular song industry and Tin Pan Alley) and technological (primarily related to the phonograph and radio). The collusion of these processes brought about the commercial, social and musical practices that developed into the country music genre.

1. Nineteenth-century southeastern music

When forming a biographical sketch of the sociomusical formation we now call country music, it seems reasonable to start where it is claimed to have started: with the vernacular music of the white, primarily Anglo-Saxon and Protestant working-class of the U.S. Southeast in the nineteenth-century. Yet the southern music tradition was participated in by individuals representing a broad racial spectrum, including African Americans, Native Americans and various Western and Central European immigrant communities, contrary to narratives that position the descendants of the English and (Protestant) Irish that came to the region as country music's primary source (Hamm 1983:3-46, 111-39, 173-94, 230-60). Taken broadly, the music of the largely rural U.S. southeast that developed in this era and continued through recordings' early era (from 1890-1920) was a conglomerate of ethnic, vernacular, religious and popular musics distilled into a primarily orally transmitted musical tradition (though the proliferation of pianos and sheet music played a significant role as well) (Harkins 2004:72, Miller 2010:23-50, Malone and Neal 1-30, Peterson 1992:37, 1997:33-36, 41-42). It was a complex web of interconnected sociocultural and technological processes, shared through personal contact

between individuals often thought of as culturally isolated and distinct from each other (Miller 2010:9). Music in the nineteenth-century U.S. South was far from the unadulterated expression of an ethnically distinct group that was marketed to consumers in the 1920s.

The historical narrative of country songs as the vernacular expression of a particular people (rural, white, Protestant Southerners) is complicated by two factors. The first is that what we now call country music has always been a mass-produced product largely mediated by individuals and companies with no connection to the ostensible cultural and geographical origins of the music itself (Miller 2010:189, Peterson 1997:34-38). Secondly, the very cultural and geographic origins that country music is commonly thought to be representative of are highly contestable, as Geoffrey Mann asserts: "The common belief that country music is part of an imagined 'white culture' in the U.S. is confused . . . because there is no such thing as a 'pure' white American ethnicity or culture; this is perhaps the only issue on which the now vast and heterogeneous literature on whiteness is in agreement" (Mann 2008:74-75). As Mann argues, claims of country music being a regional and vernacular expression of a particular cultural group is complicated by the lack of ethnic homogeneity of Southern whites, and thus the dubiousness of claims to a distinct culture.

The conventional narratives of country music's cultural lineage are inadequate to explain the complex process through which the generic formation of country music has come to represent the values, mores and lifestyles it now does. Of the three metaproceses that I discuss, the one that pertains least directly to the work of present-day Nashville songwriters is that of the Southern music tradition of the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, yet all country songs are discursively positioned as part of this tradition and lineage, even in the present-day. Certain questions thus immediately arise: Who were the audiences? Who are the originators of

the songs that circulated in and survived from this racially and ethnically diverse region? And perhaps the most relevant question of all considering the genre formation that arose following Fiddlin' John Carson's recording: what unites music sounding and being performed in such a diverse manner by so many different groups of people under the same retrospective rubric, and why does that rubric have the sociocultural associations it does?

Performance venues and scenarios

Early hillbilly recordings captured performances of people who performed publicly in cities and large towns like Asheville, North Carolina; Bristol and Johnson City, Tennessee; St. Louis, Missouri; Dallas, Texas; and of course Atlanta, Georgia (ibid 36-7). Most commonly, public music making occurred at work-related celebrations and social dances (ibid 64-65), the type of scenario in which John Carson would have earned his reputation (and some portion of his income). Though limited, there were other opportunities for music performance: traveling theatre shows (Crawford 2001:478, Miller 2010:33-4); as part of the pitch of traveling merchants' (most notably those hawking medicinal remedies of often dubious efficacy) (Miller 2010:68-70); at political rallies or store openings and sales that engaged musicians for promotional purposes (Peterson 1997:14-16); at church and tent revival events (Crawford 2001:120-24); or on public streets playing for tips (Miller 2010:62-64). Few if any musicians who performed publicly in the south did so as a primary means of income prior to the 1920s (Malone and Neal 28-9).

In the absence of political or religious systems supporting such things, music in America always had an imperative to be a self-sustaining (if not profitable) endeavour from the outset, and public music making, even that of European art and religious music, would have been carried on with an underlying profit motive (Crawford 1993:42-44). A musician's success would have relied on

a broad knowledge of music source material popular at the time, including vernacular and folk material, religious material, and operatic and novelty material that was being written in northern cities and made popular by traveling theatre companies and sheet music transcriptions (Levine 1989:88-9, Miller 2010:63). In this sort of environment, musical versatility was at a premium in order to earn an income. As Richard Crawford describes it: “the creation of a diverse musical life on these shores has been largely the work of musicians seeking to market their services” (Crawford 2001:56).³³ Those who could learn a wide variety of musical material available to them and recontextualize it to suit new performance settings were most successful as performers. These performers were an important catalyst for musical transmission in the era immediately before the advent of recording technology.

Traveling theatrical troupes

A common source for the musical material that was circulated in the South in the nineteenth-century was traveling theatre troupes. These troupes would perform a variety of musical material suitable for staging, including operettas and lighter classical material, and popular songs written in New York and other urban centers (Hamm 1979: 126-34, Miller 2010:27-28). The broad circulation of and interest in operatic material throughout the South in the nineteenth-century was common, as was its circulation (in sheet music form) as popular music, its appearance in minstrel and vaudeville performances, and its inclusion in oral tradition (Crawford 2001:194,

³³ Richard Crawford illustrates this with a breakdown of the earnings of the organist at St. Philip’s Anglican Church in Charleston, SC, in 1753. Though this was by any stretch of the imagination one of the most prestigious musical positions in the city, it seems that this individual (who is not named) would have received little or no remuneration from the concerts he was expected to give, and only about one-quarter of his earnings from his official church duties. Almost three-quarters of his income came from teaching privately, an occupation that has been the most common one for musicians in U.S. history and remains so today (Crawford 47-8).

Hamm 1979:72-88). As demonstrated by the material in Carson's first recording, songs performed by traveling theatre troupes would be encountered and remembered, shared and reworked to reflect local styles.

While much is now made of country music's working class affiliations, music was not yet the site of class contestations in the U.S. South of the nineteenth century that it became later on. Members of all classes would have been exposed to a similar array of musical offerings, including the music of traveling theatre and opera troupes, songs learned through sheet music, and those performed on street corners and in other public venues (Miller 2010:30-31, Lawson 2010:17-18, see also Levine 1988). It was the rise in class anxieties surrounding particular musical forms at the end of the century that had an impact on the generic marketing of music throughout the early era of recording (Miller 2010:160-89), including hillbilly music.

Blackface Minstrelsy

While the distinctive musical traditions of African Americans have been widely acknowledged (Crawford 2001:107), public musical discourse in the U.S. has been framed in terms that disadvantage African American music makers and consumers (Kenney 1999:110). Richard Crawford notes the nineteenth-century "fascination of white Americans — a mixture of curiosity, fear, love, and loathing — with the image of the African American slave" (Crawford 2001:197), and Eric Lott (1993) has explored this phenomenon at length in his insightfully titled study of blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft* (see also P. Fox 2009:8). This combination of fascination and revulsion can be observed succinctly through the transmission and reception of blackface minstrelsy throughout the nineteenth-century, what Charles Hamm calls the "first distinctly American [musical] genre" (Hamm 1983:183). Through this tradition white performers

established a practice of representing Southern African American musical culture to white audiences in grotesquely caricatured form (Lott 1993:15-21).

Karl Hagstrom Miller notes how, prior to minstrelsy, “many associated black soundings not with music but with noise” (Miller 2010:5), and thus minstrelsy ought to be read as a “rhetorical framework” that allowed for an interpretation of black music by white Americans, “a way to identify ‘negro melodies’ as a comprehensible category” (ibid). Miller further argues that minstrelsy “emerged before the folkloric paradigm” (ibid 10) that retroactively gave form to what is now understood as an African American music tradition in the pre-recorded era. Miller offers, “it was in the marketplace that the most electric and enduring debates about music, race and meaning were occurring, and minstrelsy was the lingua franca” (ibid). Minstrel songs established templates for the depiction of both black music and rural musical practice that had no precedent in the minds of those who consumed them.

Miller asserts how “minstrelsy was the primary medium through which nineteenth-century Americans came to understand musical authenticity,” while at the same time establishing how “authenticity was performative” (Miller 2010:5).³⁴ This sense of authenticity was likely heightened when African American performers and songwriters began to participate in this tradition shortly after its inception, and performers regardless of skin colour shared the same

³⁴ Miller’s comment requires some explanation here. Authenticity is a loaded concept when applied to historical musical traditions, and nowhere more so than when applied to country music (P. Fox 2009:3-4). At issue is the tendency in many listeners to want to retroactively hear sounds that are as close to how they might have originally sounded in performance. What occurs many times in practice however is that music is presented as authentic when in fact its relationship to its own predecessors is highly speculative and contestable. Music is often marketed according to how well it can be convincingly linked with older, largely obsolete sounds or how well it can conjure up a feeling of nostalgia in listeners, and is thus *presented* as authentic. Eventually, and in the absence of the real to measure against, the presentation of authenticity comes to stand in for the real, as in Baudrillard’s simulacra (1983). Richard Peterson has traced this process as it applies to country music in his groundbreaking and highly influential study *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (1997).

musical material (Miller 2010:49, Lawson 2010:84, Hamm 1979:268).³⁵ Minstrelsy was, even into the 1920s, the only medium through which many white Americans experienced any trace of African American music making (Hamm 1979:137), and these vestiges were mediated and manipulated by professional songwriters (both black and white) and producers (almost entirely white).

It is easy, or perhaps more comfortable, to underestimate the popularity of minstrelsy throughout the middle decades of the nineteenth-century. The disturbing aspects of its depiction of the Southern slave and the dubious nature of its connection with actual African American music do not, however, change the fact of its widespread appeal. This popularity transcended class and race boundaries, however counterintuitive that may be and in spite of how differently these diverse audiences must have perceived minstrel performances. In an era characterized by massive social upheaval resulting from industrialization, mass migration and urbanization, minstrelsy could not avoid being infused with the contemporary angst of its audiences (Crawford 2001:197-8), and it became a salve to the cognitive dissonance created by the irreconcilability of a desire for the ways of the past and an unstoppable momentum into a changing future (Dormon 1998:465). Similar anxieties underpin country songs even in the present day, and their articulation is a crucial part of the task of Nashville songwriters.

³⁵ The practice of African Americans entertaining audiences by performatively embracing the derogatory stereotypes others had assigned to them foreshadows the response of Southern musicians to the creation of the hillbilly genre. While many have argued that Northern record companies' depiction of Southerners and their music is based more on outdated or fantastic popular stereotypes than reality (P. Fox 2009:7, Harkins 2004:4, Lange 2004:13,14), country music performers adopted and in many cases appropriated the imagery assigned to them. These images have been preserved in some form through time (i.e. the TV shows *Hee Haw* in the 1960s and 1970s and *The Dukes of Hazzard* in the 1980s), sometimes rejected outright in favour of more updated guises (think the Nashville Sound of the late 1950s and early 1960s and Taylor Swift today), and at times are revived in response to later cultural shifts that may bring older depictions back into favour (think of the popularity of the soundtrack to the 2001 movie *O Brother Where Art Thou*).

Songwriters involved in blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville and eventually the “coon song” craze in turn-of-the-century New York (Brooks 2004:25-31, Dormon 1988:450-54) negotiated public sentiment and the impositions of producers while creating original compositions of emotional resonance, effectively foreshadowing the practice of Nashville songwriters. Further, the racialized gentrification practices of early record companies were developed from publishers’ and theatre producers’ attempts to create markets in the postbellum era when race and its concomitant anxieties were in the forefront of the public consciousness. This would shape the future branding of country music as exclusively “white” music (Miller 2010:187-89, Peterson 1997:235), in spite of the limitations of this racial categorization.³⁶

Musical Instruments

The most ubiquitous instrument in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Southeastern U.S. was the fiddle, an instrument that was widely shared (and often used as a form of enculturation) amongst all of the inhabitants of the region dating back to the outset of the colonies (Crawford 2001:107), including African Americans, Native Americans, Spanish Americans, and the gamut of European immigrants scattered through the region (Malone and Neal 4-5). Like John Carson, most southern fiddlers made a name for themselves at fiddling conventions and contests that were ubiquitous (and enjoyed active corporate sponsorship) in the south at the time.

Another instrument that achieved widespread popularity beginning in the antebellum era and escalated in the latter part of the century was the banjo. While it is an instrument of indisputable African origins, its ubiquity was owed to its appearance in the standard blackface

³⁶ In his essay *Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia*, Geoffrey Mann discusses how modern country music incites a similar nostalgic longing as blackface minstrel songs, thus positioning country music as a modern day manifestation of the earlier minstrel tradition (Mann 2008:82).

minstrelsy musical ensemble (Conway 1995:84-119), and indeed it became part of the standard minstrel musical ensemble (with fiddle, tambourine and bones) precisely because of this association (ibid 58-60). As noted above, audiences would have been unfamiliar with the music that Southern blacks might have made on this instrument, and it was virtually unheard of for a white person to play the banjo prior to the 1830s.³⁷ However, by the turn of the century the instrument had largely lost its affiliation with Africa, and by the 1920s it was associated more with Southern whites (Malone and Neal 24-25).

The piano was affordable enough to make an appearance in middle-class Southern homes by the mid-nineteenth-century, and was seen as a marker of highbrow and urban sensibilities in these settings, “the bourgeois instrument par excellence” (Bourdieu 1984:19). Karl Miller notes how the piano was largely a female domain up until the twentieth-century, and how tailoring songs for women to sing and play in the home had two poignant effects on song content and a popular music imaginary, feminizing both (Miller 2010:37-40). On the one hand, songwriters started to bring the concerns of the private domestic space onto the public stage because songs that were intended primarily for home use were popularized and promoted through performances by stage singers. On the other hand, for the women who played these pieces it brought some experience of the public stage to the private home, an experience much welcomed by rural women who were largely homebound in the course of their daily lives (ibid).

Owing to a confluence of manufacturing processes (particularly those of the C.F. Martin and Orville Gibson companies) and distribution networks (especially the Sears, Roebuck and

³⁷ Cecilia Conway (1995) discusses the earliest documented white banjo players, southerners C.J. Rogers and Joel Walker Sweeney, the latter of whom is credited with playing the banjo as early as 1831. They would have had to learn from black banjoists via oral transmission. Dan Emmett and Bill Whitlock, both northerners credited with popularizing the banjo as part of the minstrel ensemble (with fiddle, bones and tambourine), learned from Rogers and Sweeney respectively.

Co. and Montgomery Ward catalogues), guitars and mandolins also became accessible to rural markets in the South by the turn of the century (Cusic 1996:13). These, along with ukuleles, kazoos, autoharps and washboards are included in the array of instruments heard on early field recordings of southern music, before increased standardization at the hands of the record companies took hold (Malone and Neal 43-44).

Current country music, while largely indistinct from rock music in its instrumentation (featuring drum kit, electric bass, multiple electric guitars and electronic keyboards), still retains the audible presence of these older, acoustic instruments and playing styles. In practice, fiddles, banjos and other acoustic instruments act as aural referents to country music songs' discursively positioned ancestors. This reinforces a connection between the past and present that, while historically contestable, serves to establish continuity (Cusic 2008:5). Those who write, record and perform country songs thus access overlapping signifiers of past and present as they combine musical and textual narratives into a song.

2. U.S. Popular Music Songwriter Tradition

Although my task here is not to exhaustively overview the development of U.S. popular song in the nineteenth century, I have chosen to focus on two phenomena that demonstrate certain aspects of this development that pertain most directly to present-day Nashville songwriters. The first is the music and career of Stephen Foster (1826-64), commonly regarded as the first professional writer of popular songs. The second is the song publishing empire known as Tin Pan Alley (1880s-1940s), which both monopolized the industry and affected the content of popular song in an analogous way to how Nashville and Music Row is implicated in the form and style of country songs. These two examples illustrate how popular song production in the U.S. developed

and how it became the pervasive force it did, with influences on the country music tradition often overlooked owing to how the two musics were marketed to appeal to divergently-classed sets of listeners.

Stephen Foster and the early era of U.S. popular song

Stephen Foster was the most influential and widely disseminated American-born songwriter of the nineteenth century. Prior to Foster, English immigrant musicians wrote the overwhelming majority of songs published in the U.S. (Hamm 1979:26-27). What songs that did exist outside of art and religious contexts were modeled primarily after those composed for use in English pleasure gardens (ibid 3), with melodic and harmonic elements comparable to the lieder of European art composers such as Franz Schubert (ibid 194) and showing the influence of the Italian *Bel Canto* vocal style (ibid 22-23, 76, 87-88). The mostly widely circulated song collection in the nineteenth century U.S. (other than those by Stephen Foster himself) was the *Irish Melodies*, a collection of songs setting the poetry of Thomas Moore and published between 1806 and 1807 (ibid 44, 54-57).

These musical vocabularies became familiar to Foster as a child in his native Pittsburgh (ibid 5-11), where he was under the tutelage of a German-born organist and music teacher Henry Kleber, himself a composer of music for popular dances (ibid 203-5). Though his earliest published efforts such as “Open Thy Lattice Love” (1844) and “What Must a Fairy’s Dream Be?” (1847), and even later efforts such as “Jenny’s Coming Over the Green” (1860), are hardly distinguishable from their English templates, his efforts to create music for the minstrel stage were what came to define his style and cement his enduring legacy. Thus through the songs of Stephen Foster we can see the emergence of songwriting unique to the U.S. experience, and I

contend that it is possible to trace formal and lyrical aspects of current country songs back to his work.

Foster began performing minstrel music on stage in 1835 at the age of nine (ibid 206). He was regarded locally as a star performer of the then-young genre, and his performances of “Zip Coon,” “Long-tailed Blue,” “Coal-Black Rose” and “Jim Crow” (at the time the only four widely-known minstrel tunes) brought him much acclaim (ibid 206-7). At this time blackface minstrelsy was still associated with a few star performers (most prominently George Washington Dixon and Thomas “Daddy” Rice), and this was eight years before the first minstrel troupe was formed (Dan Emmett’s Virginia Minstrels).

Foster’s first collection of sixteen songs in this genre, published in 1847, includes the now ubiquitous “Oh Susanna,”³⁸ and his second collection of four songs from 1850 includes “Gwine to Run All Night,” better known as “Camptown Races.”³⁹ Stephen Foster’s Ethiopian songs⁴⁰ collectively defined early minstrel songwriting, “a style that was quickly accepted as uniquely American” (Hamm 1979:224). These songs contained formal aspects that represent important innovations over earlier, ballad-based songs, most notably a harmonized chorus section that was distinct from the verse sections (ibid 210). Foster’s diminishing of the narrative importance of the verses that was a hallmark of the ballad tradition prepared the way for the

³⁸ This song is popularly associated with the California Gold Rush of 1848-59 and often erroneously titled “Banjo On My Knee.”

³⁹ This song was made famous through several placements in Hollywood movies, most notably *Holiday* (1938), *O. Henry’s Full House* (1952) *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and *The Stepfather* (1987, 2009), and through inclusion in TV shows such as *Fawlty Towers* (1979), *Golden Girls* (1991) and *Doctor Who* (2008). Any watcher of Warner Brothers’ *Merrie Melodies* cartoons knows this as Foghorn Leghorn’s theme song, with its familiar “doo-dah, doo-dah” refrain.

⁴⁰ “Ethiopian Songs” and “Plantation Melodies” were both common monikers used to describe these and other similar compositions.

preeminence of the repeated chorus in later Tin Pan Alley songs (and the chorus' presence in subsequent popular styles like country music).

Foster's approach to his subject matter foreshadowed much later popular songwriting, and established two enduring lyrical themes of U.S. popular song. The first of these is the practice of utilizing minstrel songs as sources of humour and sites for social commentary. While early minstrel songs such as "Oh Susanna" and "Gwine to Run All Night," quickly established Foster's reputation for writing standard minstrel fare, other early songs such as "Old Uncle Ned," in which the slave owner's wife mourns the death of the song's subject, and "Nelly Was a Lady," in which a love relationship between two slaves is depicted, are credited with personifying African American characters in popular song for the first time (Hamm 1979:211-12). These were the first widely disseminated songs in which such personification of African Americans occurred.

Yet in making the last point, I do not argue for a view of Foster as an advocate for the uplift of African Americans. Indeed, it seems he was interested in uplift of a different kind. Foster seems to have advocated for a transformation of minstrelsy's class affiliations, as the following quote from the songwriter himself indicates:

I find that my efforts have done a great deal to build up a taste for the Ethiopian songs among refined people by making the words suitable to their taste, instead of the trashy and really offensive words which belong to some songs of that order. Therefore I have concluded to . . . pursue the Ethiopian business without fear or shame . . . (Stephen Foster, quoted in Hamm 1979:215.)

This quote indicates a conflation of race and class in the development of a public taste for popular songs, and how Foster omitted overly negative or violent depictions of African Americans out of an interest in fostering a particular highbrow sensibility for his songs for which these depictions were ill-suited, rather than a concern for more humane depictions of African

Americans themselves. Yet regardless of Foster's strategic interest in doing so, minstrelsy's best-known songwriter is implicated in a rise in class status for minstrelsy as a popular entertainment. And in his removal of the "trashy and really offensive words" of the minstrel stage, he (however inadvertently) implicated himself in a process whereby, slowly and not without great resistance, both popular song and African Americans gained a presence within popular culture.

The second lyrical theme Foster employed heavily in his Ethiopian songs was that of nostalgia. Miles Orvell argues that nostalgia and the tension between a rapid and inevitable march toward an unknown future and anxieties over what gets left behind in such a process have infused public discourse since antebellum times (Orvell 1989:xx), and became particularly succinct in the decades surrounding the turn of the last century (ibid 104). This strain of nostalgia, a longing for a simpler, less equivocal (yet imagined) collective past, affected all of the arts, including such disparate practices as furniture making (ibid 44-50, 166-67) and photography (ibid 71-102), and even fostering the rise of the advertising and public relations industries (ibid xv-xviii, 144-45).

While the idea of nostalgia, an "untutored simplicity [that] could touch the depths of the soul" (Crawford 2001:60), had been present in public discourse since it gained expression in eighteenth century Europe, American songwriters through the middle decades of the nineteenth century established this as the predominant theme in popular songwriting. Three Foster songs written immediately after the second collection was published, "Old Folks at Home" (1851),⁴¹ "My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night"⁴² and "Old Dog Tray" (both 1853), might be seen as

⁴¹ This is now the official state song of the state of Florida, home of the Suwannee River, which Foster not only misspelled for use in his song but never actually saw.

⁴² The official song of the state of Kentucky since 1928, and has been the music played while the horses are led to the post parade at the Kentucky Derby (now performed by the University of Louisville Marching Band) since the early 1920s.

lyrical prototypes of later country songs in their depictions of an abandoned home somewhere in the imagined national past (Hamm 1979:213-4). Nostalgia, or representations of an idealized past the contemplation of which become an escape from some form of present suffering (ibid 214-5), dominated U.S. popular song for close to a century after Foster, and its effects are readily apparent in current Nashville country songs.

In Stephen Foster's songs and the era in which he wrote, we already see important developments in popular song: stylistic aspects that distinguish them as a uniquely American phenomenon; a greater recognition of their place and their performers in the public sphere; the development of lyrical themes that would dominate popular song for decades to come; and the beginning of a song production infrastructure. This industrial model, centered on publishers and promoters and with songwriters in crucial but less powerful roles, would be adopted on Tin Pan Alley, and the structural parameters of such a working process still affect the work of country songwriters today.

Tin Pan Alley and the Golden Era of U.S. Popular Song

Similar to Nashville decades later, the rise of New York as a music production and publishing centre in the latter nineteenth-century was not inevitable, but was a result of a confluence of events and the deliberate intervention of a number of individuals. For most of the nineteenth century larger cities like Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Cincinnati would have had active music publishers and resident songwriters (Hamm 1979:284). This changed with the establishment of the T.B. Harms publishing firm and their release of Charles E. Pratt's "Wait Till the Clouds Roll By" in 1881 (ibid 285). Owing to the increased proximity to both vaudeville

stages and troupes and the transportation networks that facilitated circulation of song material, New York became irresistible to those wishing to compete in the song publishing trade. Very quickly a network of publishing houses congregated in the 28th Street area in uptown Manhattan that “revolutionized the music publishing business and changed the character of American song” (ibid).

One of the defining aspects of popular song production in *fin de siècle* New York (as well as the industrial apparatus that later developed in Nashville) is the role that publishers play in such a milieu. Publishing companies even in this early era of American popular song established a correlation between themselves, songwriters and audiences still relevant on Music Row today. As with Tin Pan Alley, Nashville publishers are employers of songwriters who share in their profits (ibid 289-90) and sustain an active and competitive network of songwriters to fill the needs of their catalogues (ibid 376). Publishers have always been in a disproportionately powerful position relative to songwriters in both milieus, largely affecting the output of the songwriters on their roster. They act in conjunction with producers as the primary gatekeepers of a field of song production, and thus have the means to assert a disproportionate influence on the nature and content of the genre itself. Indeed, my informants all readily agreed that present-day Nashville is a “latter-day Tin Pan Alley” mostly because they imagine themselves working under similar circumstances to Tin Pan Alley songwriters, and this is primarily because of the relationship that exists between publishers and songwriters.

In spite of several technology changes and genre innovations over the course of its history — not to mention the considerable degree of musical literacy and skill level amongst Tin Pan Alley songwriters such as Charles Harris, Henry Clay Work, James Bland, and later Irving Berlin, George Gershwin and Jerome Kern — there developed a notable musical homogeneity in

the songs of Tin Pan Alley (Hamm 1979:254-5), an observation that has also been frequently made about country songs.⁴³ That Tin Pan Alley songs as a whole are observably similar has been attributed to the functionality of the songs themselves (intended as they were for use in theatre productions and in domestic parlours), but there may be other factors at play. Tin Pan Alley is one of the first examples of what sociologist Jennifer Lena (2012) calls an “industry based genre.” In this milieu, “performance conventions are highly codified, driven by industry categories and the production tools that standardize sounds.” She further describes how producers’ “efforts are directed toward codifying, simplifying, and teaching the genre conventions” as a way of separating songs into types and preserving a unique identity for the genre (Lena 41).

As with country music, there was a concern among popular music songwriters and publishers with establishing and creating a recognizable song style and genre that was distinguishable from other areas of musical taste, particularly as recordings began to assert their influence on music markets by facilitating public awareness of new musical genres and providing a format for popular songs beyond theatre and sheet music.⁴⁴ Charles Hamm notes that musical style changes as is necessary, as public taste turns away or songs lose relevance (Hamm 1979:339). Tin Pan Alley, like Nashville after it, became an arbiter of a song style that was

⁴³ I refer here to the theoretical characteristics of meter, rhythm, harmony and melody. The subject matter of Tin Pan Alley songs was far from homogenous, and included temperance songs, sentimental songs, romantic songs, Coon songs (the continuation of the minstrel tradition) and a range of songs aimed at specific immigrant communities in Northeastern cities (for more on this last category see Gronow 1978).

⁴⁴ As the popularity of race and hillbilly recordings attests to, Tin Pan Alley was far from the collective expression of the nation’s musical taste. Indeed, as the later conflict between the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), then the nation’s only performance rights organization, and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) in the 1930s attests to, Tin Pan Alley’s gatekeepers saw themselves as not beholden to the popular taste. Rather, they saw themselves as involved in cultural uplift through their musical offerings (Pecknold 2007:55-57, Miller 2010:159-60).

modified only as the songs ceased to produce the desired reaction in listeners, or no longer reflected the type of taste formation publishers sought to.

While the melodic and harmonic features and instrumentation of Tin Pan Alley songs hearken back to late Romantic art music styles more than they foreshadow Nashville country music (ibid 371-72), there were several practices and formal innovations introduced to popular song in the Tin Pan Alley era that directly impacted later Nashville practices (ibid 378-9). I outline some of these in the remainder of this section.

The importance of the chorus continued from the innovations of earlier writers like Stephen Foster, taking on even greater importance and eventually relegating the verse to a much-diminished status (ibid 359). Country music can therefore be seen to have adopted the musical characteristics (such as verse/chorus structure, harmonic and melodic conventions) of pre-Tin Pan Alley popular styles, and passed around orally (ibid 371-72), but with the attention paid to the chorus as the focal point of the song that is typical of Tin Pan Alley songs (ibid 291-93).

A duration of three and a half minutes to four minutes is commonly adhered to as an ideal song length in Nashville, becoming normalized out of the belief that it is related to listeners' capacity for concentration (which is assumed to somehow break down after two hundred and forty seconds). There is an interesting correspondence between this and a Tin Pan Alley convention, established in 1902 with the introduction of the twelve-inch, 78 rotations per minute (rpm) disc that had the capacity to capture a maximum of four minutes of musical material. While my claim to any link between the two is speculative, it is worth considering how this song length is a convention for popular song that has survived in spite of technological changes rendering it functionally irrelevant.

One of the methods used by Tin Pan Alley writers to increase the appeal of their songs is to develop sub-categories of songs that could be grouped together along racial or ethnic lines. The Coon Song (Dormon 1988) was the most visible of these, but there also developed a distinct set of songs catering to the Irish, German, Jewish, Italian, Swedish and other ethnic communities that had developed in New York and other parts of the country (Crawford 2001:478, Hamm 1979:42-88). A common element in all of these ethnic song styles was an appeal to their listeners' sense of nostalgia for a time in the past when they were less uprooted. Tin Pan Alley lyrics reinforced nostalgia as a central theme of popular music in an era in which urbanization and industrialization caused so many familiar aspects of society to change or disappear altogether. This backward looking to a simpler, if imagined, time came to be seen as a unique phenomenon of American song. The inclusion of this particular form of "escapism" (Hamm 1979:254) became a signifier separating popular song from other genres, and also became an aspect of country song texts that serves to separate them from those of other popular genres (i.e. pop and rock).

3. Technological Innovations

In the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, the piano fostered a large-scale national market for sheet music (Gay 2000:204-32). Through this practice isolated rural dwellers became aware of the songs produced for vaudeville stages in New York and other large urban centers, and popularized by touring theatre companies that traveled to smaller communities. These were also songs written by professional songwriters working in comparable conditions to those of my informants (that is, writing songs catering to a particular target segment of the public). Sheet music, intended to supply a repertoire for amateur pianists, became

the first medium for the mass mediation of popular music. Sheet music's influence on marketing practices persisted well into the recorded era (Miller 2010:33-34).

Two other technological mediums, one in its adolescent stage and the other in its infancy when John Carson made his 1924 recording, are more directly implicated in the creation and sustaining of country music before it made its home in Nashville: the phonograph and the radio. This section primarily discusses the early recordings of hillbilly music that established the genre and its attached meanings in the minds of listeners. Sheet music's popularity was arguably only supplanted in the 1930s by radio's newfound ubiquity in homes nationwide (Taylor 2005: 245-68). Radio's preeminence was challenged by the increased availability of recorded music in the post-War era (Malone and Neal 199, 208-9), while both recorded technologies and radio continue to have an observable influence on current country music practices.

Recording Industry

The music recording industry began in Washington D.C. in 1889 with the Columbia Phonograph Company. Columbia was essentially a group of investors rallying around the work of Thomas Edison, who had successfully reproduced the sound of the human voice onto tin foil masters as early as 1878, and who was now seeing more potential for this new technology than talking clocks and office dictation (Kenney 24, Moore 26-7). It was not likely, however, that the U.S. national capital would continue to be the center of the phonograph industry once playback of recorded music became the phonograph's primary use. For phonograph investors and entrepreneurs alike, New York beckoned.

New York at the time was the centre of both the vaudeville genre and popular song production. It was the most multiracial population center in the world (Hamm 1983:340), and the

activities of the fledgling recording industry reflected this. Like Tin Pan Alley publishers, early recording industry producers exploited both the presence of ethnic communities of New York (ibid 341-50) and the transportation networks that shipping made possible with Europe to create recording markets in the communities and homelands of New York Germans, Poles, Jews, Italians, Finns and Swedes (Gronow 1-3). Tin Pan Alley songwriters developed a repertoire of songs catering to the Irish, Jewish, Italian, Scandinavian and other ethnic communities that had developed in New York and other parts of the country (Crawford 2001:478, Hamm 1979:42-88).

This practice foreshadows the efforts of record companies in the 1920s to create racialized musical genres in order to categorize and market their products (Wolfe 2009:110). While blues music was ultimately marketed as an authentic folk music of southern blacks, its actual identity, like country music's, is much more controversial and duplicitous (Hamilton 2008:25-29, 201-10, Wald 2004:3-13). The tremendous success of the 1920 recording of "Crazy Blues" by Mamie Smith (herself an experienced vaudeville singer, not a former plantation dweller), along with many that came immediately in its wake, can be seen a process of accidental discovery (and subsequent commodification) that typifies the practices of the early recording industry. This discovery is followed by a strategic construction and romanticization of its origins and accompanying imagery (Wald 2004:14-43), intended for the purposes of both marketing the music and touting its imagined ideological significance. Early country music came to be seen as the natural companion to blues music (Wolfe 2009:110), and the binary of "race" and "hillbilly" records came to represent southern vernacular music as a whole, bisected along racial lines, in the 1920s (Miller 2010:187-214). Country music was seen as another form of race music in its early years, and that sense of otherness, of outsidership, would remain as part of its identity as it gained wider public recognition.

Field trips, Early Hillbilly Recordings and the Creation of a Genre

The hundreds of field recording sessions conducted by record companies throughout the 1920s were motivated by the need for content to exploit newly developed recording technology (see Wolfe 2009), which led to the creation of and introduced the bulk of the repertoire for the hillbilly genre. By the end of 1924, three other companies had followed Okeh's lead and entered the newly emerging hillbilly market: Columbia (signing such singers as Gid Tanner and Riley Puckett), Vocalion (most noted for signing a banjo-wielding Uncle Dave Macon), and the biggest of them all, Thomas Edison's Victor Talking Machine Company. By the end of the following year, the Gennett Company (with a young Gene Autry, as well as Bradley Kincaid and Doc Roberts on their roster) was added to this list. By the end of 1927, Brunswick and Paramount had joined them (Wolfe 2009:111-15). Still in a state of experimentation as to how to best capitalize on the hillbilly genre (Peterson 1997:35-36), record companies captured a wide array of musical styles and performers in these years (Wolfe 2009:116-17, 122-23, Malone and Neal 138-45, Peterson 1997:19). All seven of the companies listed above made significant investment in field recordings in the South throughout the latter years of the decade. Contrary to a common perception,⁴⁵ a significant majority of the hillbilly releases prior to the 1930s releases were of field origin, peaking at eighty-five percent in 1928 (Wolfe 2009:113).

While the record companies actively promoting hillbilly music in the 1920s were initially interested in marketing homegrown southern talent to southern listeners, they quickly discovered

⁴⁵ Charles Wolfe recalls submitting a book proposal in the 1970s that would have involved an extensive study of early hillbilly field recordings. His proposal was rejected because the scholar who was vetting the proposal claimed that such a study was without merit as "only a small percentage of country records were recorded 'in the field' and that '85 or 90 percent' were recorded in New York studios" (2009:109). Wolfe's research subsequently discovered that "in fact, nearly the opposite was true" (ibid 110).

that these performers had little appeal outside of the south. The exclusive interest in recording southern talent was compromised by the success of Vernon Dalhart's recording of "The Wreck of the Old 97," released by Victor Records on October 3, 1924. Though born in East Texas, Dalhart had made a name in New York as a light tenor and stage performer. His recordings between 1916 and 1923 were of popular and novelty tunes. The decision was made (it is vague as to the exact impetus behind this decision) to remodel him as a hillbilly singer, and his first release was grouped with a collection of southern pieces including novelty tunes, spirituals, quartet singing, and fiddle tunes.

Dalhart's recording went on to sell more than seven million copies, and in the process nationalized (and geographically decontextualized) the emergent hillbilly genre (Green 1965:217-8). Dalhart's voice appealed to a wider audience than those of Carson and other southern musicians, who were accustomed to singers of his ilk on recordings. More significantly, he was positioned as part of the southern musical tradition, and came to be accepted as such by both southerners and non-southerners alike. In spite of his largely "inauthentic" background as a performer, Dalhart became one of the biggest-selling singers of the 1920s, and "by 1926 Vernon Dalhart was as much in the public domain as Babe Ruth, Rudolph Valentino, and Will Rogers" (Green 1965:220).

What followed the release of and public and industry reaction to Carson's session constitutes the beginning of what sociologist Richard Peterson calls the fabricated authenticity of country music, a process that reveals "the fact that authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered" (1997:3). One of the ways that field recordings made in Southern cities in the 1920s altered perceptions of southern music is by subsuming the material and performers

captured therein under a single banner, essentially ignoring the broad diversity of musical practices these recordings represented. This represents a manipulation of a set of cultural practices by the (non-Southern) gatekeepers of the genre. Recordings decontextualized the music away from its geographical place and its traditional adherents, and through this displacement facilitated the attachment of a constructed narrative onto hillbilly music. The hillbilly genre that morphed into country music was indeed an example of a “socially agreed upon construct,” a series of trial and error experiments by record companies that were in turn based on responses from listeners, responses that confounded expectations as often as they met them (Peterson 1997:67-80).

After Dalhart’s debut, Columbia recorded a version of “The Wreck of the Old 97” with Ernest Thompson (Columbia 130-D), and Vocalion followed suit by recording the tune with Blind George Reneau (Vocalion 14839), both in 1924 (Malone and Neal 36). These recordings taken as a whole, coupled with the success of Dalhart’s subsequent recording, “The Death of Floyd Collins” in 1928, largely established topical songs, a throwback to the British topical ballad style (Malone and Neal 45), as new additions to the hillbilly song tradition that was able to stand alongside older repertoire (Malone and Neal 61-5, Green 1965:218). In this still untried market, these companies were looking for the surest means through which to capitalize both hillbilly music and the popularity of topical current event songs (Green 1965:218-19). They did this by overtly reproducing previous successes, following perceivably emergent trends in a manner not dissimilar to current-day Music Row practices.

Of note in this milieu is the work of Andrew “Blind Andy” Jenkins (writer of “Floyd Collins”), one of several songwriters (including his contemporary Carson Robinson) who were writing songs to cater to the emerging market for recorded hillbilly songs. Jenkins, who penned

several hits of the era with titles such as “Way Out West in Kansas,” “Little Green Valley” and “Carry Me Back to the Lone Prairie,” specialized in the event song. His songwriting strategies of crafting nostalgia-tinged tales of an imagined South of the past to appeal to listeners in all regions of the country both hearken back to Stephen Foster and foreshadow those of present-day songwriters in Nashville.

No hillbilly songwriter attained near the acclaim or had the productivity of Bob Miller. Miller, born in Memphis in 1895 and receiving his musical pedigree as a pianist for a dance orchestras on Mississippi River steamboats, moved to New York in 1928 to work as an arranger for the Irving Berlin Company, eventually establishing the Bob Miller Publishing Company. Of the over seven thousand songs in his catalogue (many of them blues, popular and novelty numbers), his most lucrative were the hillbilly titles of his own creation such as “Twenty One Years,” “Rocking Alone in an Old Rocking Chair,” and the World War Two-era song “There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere.” Accounts of men like Jenkins and Miller confirm the entry of established popular music songwriters into the hillbilly arena was part of the country music tradition from the start, and these men are some of the first direct peers of present-day Nashville songwriters.

The Victor Talking Machine Company, Dalhart’s contract holder, was influential in yet another innovation to the imagery attached to country music when they promoted the cowboy ballads of Carl T. Sprague beginning in 1925 (ibid 221). Though the highly influential singing cowboy and the movie appearances that solidified his popularity and the wide appeal of Western Swing music were mainly phenomenon of the 1930s and 1940s (as I discuss on pages 82-84), Sprague’s popularity allowed for the expansion of the scope of hillbilly music to include western

themes, and indicates another deliberate intervention into the imagined Southern musical tradition by record producers.

In all this activity we see how actual southern musicians were quickly replaced on hillbilly recordings by non-Southern singers singing songs written by non-southern songwriters. These recordings utilized Southern imagery to pluck at the heartstrings of both southerners and northerners who were inclined toward nostalgic reminiscences of the past the music evoked. This of course could also describe Nashville today, and certainly indicates the level of complexity involved with unpacking how songs achieve their desired effect within (and writing songs suited to) the genre.

How Did Hillbilly Songs become Nashville Country Songs?

What follows is an examination of particular events and processes throughout the 1930s and 1940s that crucially affected the musical, physical and sociocultural parameters of Nashville songwriters in the present day. These events and processes are underpinned by the overlapping influences of the metaprocesses I outlined in the previous section, and provide a bridge between the experimental and unstable beginnings of the hillbilly genre and the relatively stable and constructed meanings the genre had attained by the time its production infrastructure coalesced in Nashville. This time period defined how country music is constructed and positioned as it is, and how the meanings associated with it are definitive of the genre yet are paradoxically malleable and contestable.

Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers

The most notorious field recording session in the 1920s was one sponsored by the Victor Company in the summer of 1927 in Bristol, a town straddling the northeastern Tennessee and southwestern Virginia borders. The Bristol Sessions are now known as the “Big Bang of Country Music” (Wolfe and Olsen 2005:17), and coincidentally resulted in the discovery of the hillbilly era’s two biggest recording acts: Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family. As Tony Russell notes rather romantically:

There is something extraordinarily fateful about this, for no two acts testify more explicitly to a deep-cut dichotomy in country music. It’s as if a wild, muddy river, itself funded by the tributes of many tiny streams pouring into it, were suddenly to divide itself in half, flowing one way past green hillsides and leafy valleys, the other through hot flatlands and dusty prairies, by railroad yards and waterfront bars (Russell 87).

The Carters, made up of Sara Carter, her husband A.P., and her cousin Maybelle, sang a repertoire of songs popular amongst the rural population of the hill country around Bristol, a combination of work songs, religious numbers, and former sheet music parlour tunes that had entered this primarily oral music tradition. Jimmie Rodgers, by contrast, was a former (and probably failed) railway worker who was a professional singer based in Meridian, Mississippi. He had been appearing there on local radio after trying to eke out a career as a vaudeville performer. In what Bill Malone describes as “one of the greatest coincidences of country music history” (Malone and Neal 64), both the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers showed up unsolicited in Bristol in the hopes of making a record. These two performers, discovered simultaneously, would become the catalysts for the formation of two archetypical hillbilly performers, and these same archetypes are still being employed in country music to the present day.

The Carters represent a conservative adherence to tradition, and their vast repertoire of recorded songs between 1927 and 1941 came to largely define the hillbilly repertoire, many eventually being canonized as country music classics. A.P. Carter's song collecting expeditions to work camps, churches and street corners within driving distance of the Carter home in Maces Spring, Virginia establishes him as a seminal force in popularizing this vernacular material.⁴⁶

Jimmie Rodgers, by contrast, symbolized the self-reliant rambling man (Malone and Neal 64, Peterson 48-50), a drifter character that captured the imagination of a southern population in the throes of debate about tradition and modernity, spurred on by economic realignment and geographical uprooting. His early moniker was "the singing brakeman" (he had spent time working on trains, even citing this as an early musical education) alludes to the cultural capital accessed by his association with an emerging, powerful technology (Peterson 1997:48-49).

Rodgers' later popularization as "America's Blue Yodeler" reflects another one of the great paradoxes of early country music. Rodgers became the most successful hillbilly recording artist in the pre-Nashville era (by the end of 1928 Rodgers was earning \$2000 a month on recording royalties alone) by playing a combination of sentimental, popular and blues-inflected songs. Before his death in 1934, he had recorded with a Hawaiian band, a jug band, and even with the newly signed Victor artist and great jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong (in Chicago in 1933).

If Rodgers is an archetypal hillbilly performer (and he was certainly the most successful and widely emulated of the era), how do we explain the music he was making? Who was making

⁴⁶ In one of the many paradoxes of the hillbilly identity for this music, an African American musician named Leslie Riddle, a Piedmont blues singer and guitarist, accompanied A.P. on many of these excursions. It was Riddle who was responsible for remembering the music, and who taught many of these songs to Maybelle Carter, who still today is acknowledged as a seminal influence on country picking styles (Malone 2002:67).

the decisions of what Rodgers was to record? The role of the producer as creative decision maker, so firmly established in later country music practice, was not in play in the 1920s (Peterson 1997:46-7). Ralph Peer did not want to record Rodgers' "Blue Yodel #1 ('T' for Texas)," presumably because it did not fit into his idea of the hillbilly sound (ibid 47), yet he was convinced on the basis of Rodgers' claim that the song received favourable response at live shows. Even Rodgers' sister-in-law Elsie McWilliams, believed to be the source of many of Rodgers' compositions, refused to take any public credit for the blues-inflected yodeling tunes that most defined Rodgers' sound, believing them to be indecent (ibid 45). The above would seem to support the idea that Rodgers himself, using his experience from years of absorbing and performing in a variety of musical styles, instinctively crafted his own sound. This sound, in an ironic twist of fate, came to largely define early commercial hillbilly music,⁴⁷ in spite of its apparent non-Southern, non-Anglo origins.

Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor argue, "Jimmie Rodgers personified a particular type of American hero. He had been a hardworking man [a railway brakeman] but he had also traveled and roamed, living the peripatetic life. There was a romance about him that was easy to make into myth . . . Jimmie Rodgers vicariously gave his listeners the freedom they envied while affirming the comforts and values of their quotidian lives" (2007:102). Rodgers' demise at the hands of tuberculosis, the disease that was the leading cause of death in the U.S. at the time, further cemented this reputation. He sang about his upcoming fate in the "T.B. Blues," recorded in January of 1931, a song that, according to Barker and Taylor, constitutes "a fascinating moment — a crystallization of sorts — in the development of personal authenticity in popular music" (ibid 105).

⁴⁷ This is much like Elvis' hybrid hillbilly/rhythm and blues/gospel sound that largely defined the rock and roll genre some thirty years later.

Rodgers left several legacies that still infuse country music today. His combination of rural charm and urban sophistication made him the sort of everyman figure that later country singers would aspire to be, and audiences would support. He established the blues as a foundational sound of the genre, in contradiction of marketing efforts that distort this fact. His songs and the sound of the accompaniment on his records alludes to a popular/blues/hillbilly hybrid form that caught the attention of audiences, but also songwriters, singers, producers and promoters eager to exploit the exciting combination of nostalgia and modernity embodied in his music. Singer/songwriters in his wake such as Ernest Tubb, Hank Williams and Hank Snow owe their identity largely to his legacy. As Nashville coalesced into the home of country music, his ability to espouse both commercial success and personal authenticity was memorialized by a fledgling industry anxious to promote “a recounting of history that supports a particular dynamic of social and political change” (Pecknold 2009:179).

Role of Radio

Radio proliferated in the 1920s, becoming commonplace in U.S. homes by 1930 (Malone and Neal 32). In the 1930s and 1940s it became the medium through which hillbilly music was primarily disseminated and experienced (because of economic downturn and the virtual ban on record production during the Second World War). Owing to programming that catered to the work schedules of rural dwellers (such as early mornings and noon times when farm families would be eating, and Saturday night when they would be relaxing), radio featured much hillbilly music in this era. These broadcasts were largely responsible for the continuing popularity of the Appalachian vernacular music that spawned the hillbilly genre, in spite of the rapid changes that occurred in the country during the Depression and World War Two eras. Country musicians

were able to promote their careers through this medium (though usually not getting paid for radio appearances), and for the first time professional entertainers emerged in the field.

The radio format that most popularized country music nationwide was the “barndance” broadcast, essentially a series of individual musical, comedy and novelty acts strung together in sequence. The first of its kind was a broadcast by WBAP in Fort Worth, Texas of a fiddler playing square-dance music to the accompaniment of a Hawaiian string band (ibid 33). In 1924, the *National Barndance* began broadcasting on WLS in Chicago, and WSM in Nashville inaugurated what would shortly thereafter become known as the *Grand Ol’ Opry*, which took some two decades to overtake the national Barndance and eventually became the most influential barndance broadcast in history.

NBC in New York⁴⁸ was broadcasting a popular show called *Hillbilly Heartthrobs*, while Los Angeles was supporting radio shows such as the *Hollywood Barndance* (beginning in 1932) and enjoying regular radio appearances by such acts as the *Beverley Hillbillies*, *Sons of the Pioneers*, Woody and Jack Guthrie and, out of Modesto, *Maddox Brothers and Rose* (ibid 31). Radio barndance shows sprang up in medium and large cities throughout every region of the country.⁴⁹ In an era in which massive relocation of workers from country to cities and from the South to the North, these broadcasts fostered a sense of continuity in the lives of uprooted listeners.

⁴⁸ The same era saw the Village Barn in Greenwich Village become a country venue that would endure for over two decades, and bands like Louise Massey and the Westerners headlining venues such as the Waldorf-Astoria and the Rainbow Room (Cusic 2008:30-31).

⁴⁹ Many new barndance broadcasts started in the 1930s, in cities including Atlanta, Ga., Wheeling, WV., Louisville, Ky., Fort Worth, Tx., New York, Los Angeles, Des Moines, Io., and Renfro Valley, Ky. These broadcasts were popular with both Southern whites who had relocated to cities for employment and Southern blacks in both urban and rural areas for whom these shows represented some of the only Southern content of any type on the airwaves, according to Don Cusic (2008:29-33).

Sounds heard on the radio and consumed in private spaces had the effect of demarcating social space in an era of rapid change (ibid 261-62). Repeated performances heard in private domestic situations, enhanced by between-song banter and letters exchanged between fan and singer, allowed for a perceived relationship to exist between these performers and their listeners. The Carter Family were perhaps the single early country act that benefited most from this type of performance through their appearances on X-stations in Mexico (Malone and Neal 98-100), broadcast from a massive transmitters across the Rio Grande River and heard from the Caribbean to Canada.⁵⁰

The lack of blues or other African American music on the airwaves at this time also ensured that listenership was not restricted to white working class Southerners in this era, particularly in northern cities such as Detroit that housed large communities of relocated Southern African American workers who would tune in to these broadcasts (Cusic 2008:32). Timothy Taylor has explored how radio, through its identity as an instrument of modernity, was used to construct certain cultural practices and practitioners as pre-modern, and segregating racialized sounds into this category, in a process he coins “technological imperialism” (Taylor 2005:246-51). In this environment, the barndances and other country music programming on the radio can be seen to be responsible for the growth in popularity of hillbilly music. They also forged an ambiguous middle ground between the exoticness of non-white and non-European music and the homogenous parameters of popular music in the public imagination.

⁵⁰ This was done in order to sidestep U.S. regulations restricting broadcast capacity to 50 000 watts (most X-station transmitters were twice that powerful) (Cusic 2008:32)

Depression era country music

In Texas, Bob Wills and Milton Brown formed the Aladdin Laddies in 1930, the first band in the style that was to become the most popular country music subgenre of the war era: Western Swing. Western Swing's savvy cross-pollination of blues, jazz, polka, tejano, string band and Appalachian folk styles became an important force in bringing country music into an urban milieu. Wills, a blackface performer early in his career who learned to play blues music on his fiddle, is commonly cited as the individual most responsible for defining the parameters of the style. He and Spade Cooley were the most successful bandleaders in any genre in Los Angeles by the end of the 1930s, their groups successfully competing with swing bands for dancehall audiences.

Western Swing's syncretic nature ensures that this form of music performed a dizzying array of signifying to both its urban listeners (for whom the fiddle was considered a rural folk instrument), and its rural ones (for whom the virtuosic jazz-like delivery of the songs was appealingly cosmopolitan). Wills, Cooley and the Western Swing performers of the day employed song material that fits the criteria of recorded country songs from the outset of the genre: songs written by professional songwriters with imagery and musical material that has one foot in rural, folk styles and the other in the urban milieu of the time.

Cooley wrote most of his own material, including his signature song "Shame On You," though he pilfered from the Wills catalogue liberally for his repertoire. Wills and his longtime vocalist Tommy Duncan wrote some of his most recognizable songs (e.g. "Faded Love," "San Antonio Rose," "Take Me Back to Tulsa," "Time Changes Everything"), but also collaborated

with professional songwriters (e.g. Cindy Walker⁵¹ on “Don’t Be Ashamed of Your Age”), and sought out the work of well known writers (Walker’s “Miss Molly,” “Cherokee Maiden” and Fred Rose’s “Deep Water” and “Roly Poly”) in a way largely analogous to how country performers interacted with and sought out the songs of Nashville songwriters in later decades.

Los Angeles was also the home of another widely disseminated song style that could be considered a country music sub-genre: singing cowboy songs sung in movies by such stars as Gene Autry, Tex Ritter and Roy Rogers. These songs built upon the popularity of the song style made popular by Carl T. Sprague in the late 1920s, bringing it into the realm of the Hollywood film (Malone and Neal 139). The writers of these songs were charged with the task of infusing their material with fantastical images of wide-open land, campfires at night and unfettered living, all of which serving to reinforce the constructed persona of the singer. Those supplying songs for the singing cowboys directly foreshadow the work of Nashville songwriters, especially in the case of Fred Rose. Rose moved to Los Angeles to write music for Gene Autry. Autry joined the army in 1942, prompting Rose to relocate to Nashville (his wife was a native Tennessean), an act that had a watershed effect that established Nashville as a center of song production.

⁵¹ Cindy Walker moved to Los Angeles in 1940, had her first song recorded by Bing Crosby (the top-ten hit “Lone Star Trail”), pitched her songs to Bob Wills (he recorded over fifty of her songs), and had her best-known song, “You Don’t Know Me”, become a hit for performers as varied as Eddy Arnold (who pitched her the title), Ray Charles, Elvis Presley and Mickey Gilley. She is one of many well-known Texan songwriters (others include Willie Nelson, Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Lyle Lovett) who have eschewed the call of Nashville, returning to Mexia, Texas after leaving Los Angeles in 1954. It is believed that she and her mother spent an average of five months a year in Nashville pitching her songs throughout most of her professional life, though she never took up permanent address there. She had over five hundred of her songs recorded, and over four hundred chart appearances, and was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1997. Her practices and strategies certainly foreshadow those of later Nashville songwriters.

While I have briefly traced technological and stylistic aspects affecting the emerging genre, how all of this ends up in Nashville is not apparent yet. As the nation approaches its entry in the War in Europe, country music (as it was still yet to be coined) was more associated with Los Angeles (as the home of both singing cowboys and Western Swing) and Chicago (as the home of the National Barn Dance and the largest scene of musicians and studios dedicated to country music at the time). The sounds of the Southeast popularized by the early hillbilly performers had been largely supplanted by other subgenres, and the music was losing its early regional associations. The wide proliferation of the music in this era had an important effect of decontextualization, and by the time the industrial infrastructure formed in Nashville and reasserted the sovereignty of the Southeast as the genre's homeland, it did so by subsuming all of the country music subgenres under a common rubric (Lange 2004:256-57), rather than reasserting the preeminence of one particular musical style.

While the Depression had a significant effect on many aspects of musical production, severely diminishing record sales and curtailing opportunities for generating income through live appearances, country music radio programming allowed the genre to continue to establish an identity for itself. Country music in this era seemingly had a cathartic effect on the nation's listeners, allowing them to escape present difficulties through their contemplation of better times, a simpler, less duplicitous life, and the friendly people, and the one true love you left behind back home.

The War Years

The Second World War itself affected country music in a number of ways, some temporarily damaging and others that established the music's lasting power and appeal in the public

imagination. Many musicians and singers joined the war effort, and for those who did not touring was difficult.⁵² On the other hand, radio continued to thrive, and with it the barndance format. The National Barndance in Chicago, with pop country crooner Red Foley as its star, remained the national standard bearer at the outset of the war.

Record production during the War was severely curtailed owing to both the concentration of material resources toward the war effort and an American Federation of Musicians strike that effectively halted all recording from May 1942 through the end of 1944 (Cusic 2008:55-57). However, the government V-disk program insured a variety of music would be disseminated around the globe to where troops were stationed (an early global proliferation of U.S. popular music styles). While the majority of these releases were popular fare, country material was represented, the best known of these being “There’s a Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere,” recorded by Elton Britt and written by Bob Miller, and “Pistol Packin Mama,” written and recorded by Al Dexter.⁵³

The jukebox was largely responsible for record sales in the Depression. By 1941 there were 400 000 of them nationwide, and fully a quarter of the records sold for jukebox use in this era were hillbilly records of some type. Jukeboxes fostered the surge in popularity of yet another sub-genre of country music in this era: honky tonk music. Honky tonk is considered the most sincere form of country music song (see Ching 2001, especially 5-6), dealing with the hard realities of life otherwise avoided in both popular song and other sub-genres of country music. This style is associated with Texas, drinking, honesty, and Ernest Tubb. Tubb joined the Grand

⁵² A few big-name performers such as Pee Wee King, Eddy Arnold and Bill Monroe continued to tour, mostly playing army bases within the U.S. (ibid 50-54).

⁵³ Don Cusic argues that V-disks are the medium “that made American music truly international” (Cusic 2008:55). Country music, though in the minority next to pop and big band offerings, were represented by Gene Autry, Al Dexter, Bob Wills, Roy Acuff and a few lesser-known singers.

Ol' Opry cast shortly after releasing his biggest hit, the genre-defining "Walking the Floor Over You."

The southeastern music tradition had a champion in one of the most popular singers of the era: later-Louisiana governor Jimmy Davis, whose "You Are My Sunshine" became a vernacular staple for several succeeding generations. More significant for future Nashville practices, Gene Autry recorded it, as did pop crooner Bing Crosby.⁵⁴ Country music was not only carving out a niche in the public imagination separate from popular music, it was having an observable effect on the sounds of popular music itself, and popular music performers began to think of country material as potential repertoire.

Women gained more prominence as singers during wartime owing to the absence of many male performers (ibid 53). While the genre up until this time (the popularity of Sara and Maybelle Carter and Patsy "I Want To Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" Montana excepted) had been dominated by male performers, women such as Rosalie Allen in New York and Laura Lee, the daughter of singer Tex Owens (who joined Bob Wills troupe in 1942), can be seen as forerunners of the female performers that country listeners would eventually champion.

A significant recognition of the establishment of the genre in popular culture was the establishment of the Billboard company's Top-10 charts for "American Folk Records" beginning in 1944 (i.e. Hillbilly and its sub-genres) (Malone and Neal 181). Five years later Billboard changed the name of this category to reflect the most common designation for the genre, which

⁵⁴ Bing Crosby, likely the most popular singer in the U.S. through the 1940s, "provided an invaluable service to the country music industry, giving it, in a sense, his stamp of approval and acknowledging its legitimacy" by recording a number of country songs, including "Riding Herd on a Cloud", "The Last Round-Up", "Empty Saddles", "Sioux City Sue" and "You Are My Sunshine" (Cusic 2008:56). In this sense Crosby, as a professional pop singer performing country material, is reminiscent of Vernon Dalhart, but is also foreshadowing a practice that would become and still remains a key strategy for Nashville songwriters: appealing to the pop market and writing a "crossover" hit.

Nashville was about to become irrevocably connected to, when they began to publish their “Most Played Juke Box Country and Western Records” and “Best Selling Retail Folk (Country and Western) Records.” This would remain the semi-official designation of the genre until Billboard dropped the western part of the title in 1962, though the dual descriptor still retains some currency (Cusic 2008:68-69).

Post-War Country Music

There were already three other sites that could argue some claim to being the center of hillbilly recording activity prior to Nashville’s ascendancy (Kosser 2006:2). Atlanta was the first major city where hillbilly recordings were made outside of New York, starting with Fiddlin' John Carson's sessions there in 1923 (Malone and Neal 37-8). Because of the *National Barndance* radio show and other activities in Chicago at the time, several hillbilly recordings were made there in the 1930s and 40s. Finally, fueled by the popularity of Western Swing bands and singing cowboy films, Los Angeles was where several of Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and Bing Crosby’s early western hits were etched in wax.

The wide proliferation of barndance broadcasts from every region of the country made it increasingly difficult to situate country music geographically, or even see these various styles as constituting the components of a unified genre with similar audience appeal. By the end of World War Two there were five or six distinct sub-genres of country music. An informant of mine, Belmont University professor Don Cusic, lists the following five: Western Swing and Singing Cowboy songs (both produced mainly in California), Honky Tonk (associated with Texas but gaining a nationwide identity), Bluegrass (also called Old Time music and other variations of this, and associated with the Appalachian Region and the roots of hillbilly music),

and popular country music (Cusic 2008:57-58). Jeffrey Lange dismisses Singing Cowboy songs as a country sub-genre, places bluegrass under the more general and inclusive “postwar traditional” label, and subdivides the popular country category into three further divisions: progressive (featuring performers in all subgenres who were attempting to create new audiences for the genre by deemphasizing the more rough-hewn qualities associated with it), country pop (a fusion of country with popular styles most associated with Red Foley and Eddy Arnold in this era, both performers being based in Chicago) and country blues (which arose in California and eventually made its way east, influencing the advent of Rock and Roll) (Lange 2004:2). Regardless of how one categorizes these various sounds, it is clear that country music in this era could not be defined strictly according to its musical traits and conventions any more than it could by regional affiliations. These disparate subgenres were seen to have arisen from and been inspired by Southern culture and lore, but not all were directly associated with hillbilly music.

Bluegrass music was seen as the continuation of the same musical stream into which the early hillbilly singers had tapped, itself a complex mix of styles that were retroactively stamped as “hillbilly music” by record producers. This subgenre’s rise in the 1940s is almost entirely owed to the popularity of Bill Monroe and his band the Blue Grass Boys. In Nashville, WSM’s Grand Ol’ Opry⁵⁵ was seen primarily as a protector of this tradition, as was its biggest star, Roy Acuff. Bill Monroe’s success aside, hillbilly and old time music was seen as increasingly antiquated in the 1940s, although it was still popular in large segments of the country. All of the other country music subgenres (Western Swing, Honky Tonk, Singing Cowboy songs, Honky

⁵⁵ Though many position the Grand Ol’ Opry as the primary reason that Nashville became the home of country music production, its presence alone doesn’t explain it. While the Music Row infrastructure coalesced around the Opry and its performers and producers, this didn’t happen for 20 years after the show started, after the Opry had been competing with other regional shows for dominance. Though the catalyst for Music Row was the Opry, this wasn’t inevitable, but came about due to the influence of other factors through the 1940s.

Tonk) had production bases and/or regional affiliations outside of Nashville and (with the exception of Honky Tonk) the South.

Country Music Settles in Nashville

By the time that country music solidified its home in Nashville less than a decade later, vernacular songs in the oral tradition had been abandoned in favour of composed songs that mimicked their sound, which in turn were dismissed in favour of songs that displayed a balance between vernacular popular influences likely to appeal to a wider range of listeners. As a result, many professional and non-Southern songwriters had stepped into the country music ring. Here the story returns to songwriter Fred Rose. Rose, a recovering alcoholic and successful Tin Pan Alley-style songwriter, moved to Nashville from Los Angeles in 1941 to take a job as a session pianist at WSM. He had previously written sixteen songs for Gene Autry, and sensed that Nashville was beginning to blossom as a music center. His instincts were right, as this was arguably when the winds of change started blowing in the direction of Nashville.

When Roy Acuff quit the Grand Ol' Opry to pursue more lucrative live appearances and tours,⁵⁶ a decision was made to lure Red Foley from Chicago. Here was a pop country singer, the most popular in the nation, coming in to replace Acuff, an embodiment of what Lange calls the “postwar traditional” style. It was modern urban chic meeting rural southern tradition head-on, and can be seen as another step through which Nashville became associated with all of the various subgenres of country music and solidified its role as the home of the entire tradition. After Foley joined the Opry, Chicago almost immediately declined as a country music centre,

⁵⁶ The Opry demanded its star performers appear every week, thus restricting the range of touring options to that which could be covered in the intervening six days.

and Nashville quickly developed a scene and infrastructure around the Opry that rivaled and quickly surpassed Chicago's at its height.

Of course Nashville could not become an industrial base for the commercial production of music without recording studios. This need was rectified in 1946 when three WSM engineers started Castle Studios, renting space in the Tulane Hotel in downtown Nashville.⁵⁷ Another seminal moment in the creation of Music City, U.S.A. came in August 1947, when Paul Cohen, the New York-based head of Decca Record's country division, booked a session at Castle. Decca's two top-selling country acts were Red Foley and Ernest Tubb, who were at the time also the two biggest acts at the Opry. Though Castle itself lasted only a few years, it inaugurated a trend toward recording country singers in the same city that (owing to the presence of the Opry) they did most of their work, and closer to where they were likely to have been born or at least would be working the majority of the time (Tennessee and the Southeast). Cohen established the practice of major labels recording their acts in Nashville because the infrastructure that was developing there meant that it made economic sense to do so. The rest of the recording industry eventually adjusted its practices to the extent that Nashville would become the most common place for mainstream country singers to record their songs.⁵⁸

Cohen used a strategy for this session that would become another defining practice on Music Row. Two musicians, guitarist Beasley Smith and pianist Owen Bradley, acted as his session managers, hiring musicians, scheduling times for sessions and arranging the band.

⁵⁷ Upon visiting this site in the present day one sees a particularly plain looking parking garage, in keeping with an unfortunate Nashville trend that allows for the destruction of these historical landmarks without recognition of their significance.

⁵⁸ Cohen's idea to record in Nashville eventually put him in the Country Music Hall of Fame, and he is one of only four producers inducted. The other three producers are Owen Bradley (Cohen's apprentice at Decca), Chet Atkins and Billy Sherrill, all of whom had long careers in Nashville (which Cohen didn't). This gives a sense of the esteem this relative outsider's career is held in Nashville.

Bradley and Chet Atkins (who as Red Foley's guitarist had originally come to Nashville when Foley joined the Opry) eventually became the two most powerful musicians in Nashville by doing this kind of liaison work, eventually being hired by major labels (Bradley by Decca in 1958, Atkins a year earlier by RCA) to produce their country labels. This type of high-level engagement by working musicians is arguably one of the factors most responsible for the longevity of Music Row, and particularly the persistence of studio practices there that have been abandoned in other arenas of popular music production.

The establishment of Acuff-Rose Publications in 1942, the first publisher dedicated exclusively to country music, paired Fred Rose with Roy Acuff, the most recognizable traditional country performer of the time and the undisputed star of the Grand Ol' Opry (Kosser 2006:20). This firm became the backbone of the Nashville publishing industry, and created a successful and widely emulated template for publishing companies in its wake. After establishing the company, Rose devoted his time to his own writing — songs such as “Chattanooga Shoeshine Boy,” “Be Honest With Me,” “Pins and Needles in my Heart,” “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain” were some of his many Nashville hits – and to cultivating young songwriting talent (discussed further on pages 122-24).

In spite of its developing focus on the country and western genre, I argue that Nashville's relationships with other arenas and sites of popular music production are also largely responsible for its endurance and ongoing relevance. Owing to its existing infrastructure, Nashville has been involved in other genres throughout its history in ways that are often lost owing to its discursive equation with country music. On a local level, Nashville has historically had a number of active and varied musical scenes and fostered a vibrant musical community. Further, its studio and publishing infrastructures have supported and been utilized by those working in other genre

areas. Country music has been shaped by and benefited from these associations in ways often not apparent to those outside of Nashville. I briefly mention some of these associations below.

Nashville's musical legacy includes substantial contributions from African American musicians and music making. Nashville's has a long history as a center for Rhythm and Blues (R and B) music.⁵⁹ Gospel music has always had a strong presence in Nashville (Kosser 2006:24). Present-day Nashville supports an active hip hop community that employs its studios as well.

Radio station WLAC was a clear channel (50 000 watt) radio station that, beginning in the mid-1940s, was a rival to WSM. While playing programming as a CBS affiliate by day, in 1946 it began broadcasting African American music late at night to places as far as Canada and Jamaica.

James Brown once stated the following about his time growing up in Atlanta:

WLAC is all we ever listened to. In the daytime they played country music, which we didn't listen to, but late at night Gene Nobles, John "R" Richbourg, and Hoss Allen played rhythm and blues, and black gospel. You could hear the station all over the eastern half of the United States . . . The funny thing was that a lot of people, including black people, thought those disc jockeys were black, talking all this smooth jive, and then you'd go in the station and find out they were white (Brown 53).

Brown's account indicates both how Nashville was a center for more than country music, but also how the music industry there was aware of the income generating potential of African American music. And Brown actually *underestimates* the station's reach above. In the overnight hours, WLAC's signal could be heard in Canada and as far South as the Caribbean.⁶⁰ In spite of this significant legacy, Nashville is not recognized as a center of African American music production, and this part of the city's musical history is perplexingly little-known.

⁵⁹ Nashville's R and B scene was compellingly documented by the Country Music Hall of Fame in their 2004 exhibition "Night Train to Nashville: Music City Rhythm and Blues 1945-1970."

⁶⁰ Randy's Records, the shop and recording studio in Kingston, Jamaica that started in 1958, was named after one of the station's sponsors, Randy's Record Shop in Gallatin (near Nashville).

The late 1940s was a period when Tin Pan Alley was seeing its monopolistic hold on popular music production start to loosen. Though three quarters of hit songs from the mid-30s through 1942 were Big Band arrangements of popular songs,⁶¹ this number dropped precipitously in the remaining years of the decade. One of the factors involved in this decline, certainly in the mind of popular music producers, was the preponderance of many folk and vernacular genres that were catering to and capturing the listenership of particular classed and ethnic segments of the population. As radio and record companies exploited opportunities to reach these target markets, the growing prevalence of country material on the popular charts (mostly as cover versions by popular singers like Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra) diminished the dominance of Tin Pan Alley-style popular music and contributed to a decline in the popularity of culturally homogenous styles of music such as popular songs and the waning of their overall market share (Peterson 1997:187-90).

In the 1950s, when rock and roll supplanted country music in popularity among younger audiences, Nashville profited through its publishing network, often capitalizing on the very music with which it was vying for airtime. When musical counter cultures in the 1960s (folk, psychedelia, rock, Motown) threatened to render it irrelevant, Nashville produced several pop recordings and crossover hits (most notably Roger Miller's "Dang Me" and "King of the Road" and Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man") that, like Patti Page's "Tennessee Waltz" before them, revitalized a then-flagging industry. Bob Dylan sought out Nashville's producers and session musicians to help him create three of his seminal recordings (*Blonde on Blonde*, *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*), and is credited for encouraging many other non-country

⁶¹ The first #1 hit recorded at Nashville's Castle Studios was Francis Craig's "Near You", which remained in top spot on Billboard's Pop charts for seventeen weeks in 1946 (Craig was a local Big Band leader).

singers to follow (including Simon and Garfunkel, Neil Young, jazz fusion group Manhattan Transfer, and more recently indie-rock star Jack White and pop-rock singer/songwriter Sheryl Crow).

In addition, virtually since its inception Nashville has, incorporated sounds and approaches characteristic of mainstream popular music in order to increase the relevance of country music to wider markets. This is as indispensable a part of Nashville's endurance as its activities as gatekeeper of country music's historical tradition. The most often heard descriptor for the current sound of Nashville amongst my informants is "eighties rock," a nod to the tastes and age range of Nashville's current target audience. Recently Nashville songs have continued, and arguably progressed, the trend toward adapting Nashville's products to pop music formats and audiences. This can be observed clearly by watching current Academy of Country Music awards shows, with their propensity for traditional visual imagery but dearth of traditional sounds.

By the early 1950s Nashville had developed into a music publishing, recording and talent metropole that would rival New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, but dedicated primarily to and drawing its public identity from the production of what was known by then as "Country and Western" music. The fledgling Country Music Association (CMA) adopted the designation of "country music" when it was established in 1957, dropping "western" from Nashville's official categorization of its product. The CMA's existence in Nashville further solidified what had become generally recognized by the late 1950s: Nashville was the home of country music, an association it has jealously guarded and successfully perpetuated since. The establishment of Nashville as a specific and almost exclusive site of production has allowed for the genre to

persist in spite of the several social, cultural and musical changes that have occurred over the last six or so decades.

It was through the adopting of Tin Pan Alley production methods, albeit for the production of country music instead of popular music, that Nashville was able to resist outside competition.⁶² Nashville became a sort of latter-day Tin Pan Alley (Cusic 2008:118-19), not coincidentally rising to prominence concurrent with the demise of the New York scene. As singing cowboy movies had faded from the public fancy and Western Swing clubs had waned in popularity by the early 1950s in Los Angeles, and as the sort of music scene that had previously surrounded the *National Barn Dance* in Chicago followed Red Foley, Chet Atkins, Eddy Arnold and others to the Opry fold, Nashville became the home of country music. The congregation of publishers, songwriters, musicians, producers and promoters that began to converge in Nashville throughout the 1940s was a necessary counterforce to the established popular song industry. This concentration of resources at a single site of production had the effect of uniting the various sub-genres of “Country and Western” music under one rubric and in one place: Nashville.

What Country Music Means

There is no single explanation for what country music has become, what it has come to represent to both adherents and detractors, or how it functions in popular music culture. As this chapter has outlined, country music took the shape it did through the interactions of a series of cultural and mass mediated practices and a concomitant set of images and tropes that were accessed and reappropriated by producers and consumers alike. These practices, images and tropes have taken

⁶² Though this resistance was complicated in the late 1950s with the establishment of branch divisions of major conglomerate companies such as Decca and RCA in Nashville, beginning a largely subservient relationship that Nashville has with head offices in New York and Los Angeles that persists today.

on different meaning over time, yet much of their original significance still informs the genre culture. Quite simply, country music and its imagery are vivid referents for a wider array of political, religious, racial and gendered views, and act as a unifying force for those espousing (or resisting) these views. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I discuss two specific ways that country music distinguishes itself from other popular music practices, thus largely defining country music as a genre. I do so in order to indicate the complexity inherent in the work of writing country songs, and to indicate how these songs are contextualized by many factors beyond musical or economic ones.

Vernacular and Popular Music

As I have previously noted (see pages 44-48), country music listeners actually represent less of a distinctive cultural group than is often perceived. Country music is and has always been enjoyed by people across a wide geographical, social and class spectrum (Mann 90-91, Pecknold 22-23). A better way to understand what unites listeners is to focus on common worldviews and shared values, and to position country music's adherence to rurality, family, conservatism and anti-modernity as tropes rather than as identity markers. Country music is depicted as simple, straightforward music, unencumbered by all the trappings of urban, cosmopolitan society. While this depiction can no longer be seen to represent the actual experience of the majority of listeners, country music is still characterized by its antipathy toward the present and a championing of a past, less ambiguous time. Country music is an unabashedly patriotic music in an era when U.S. cultural values are being debated, and country listeners often see themselves as defenders of core beliefs that have been tarnished by others (e.g. liberals, immigrants, power

elites). It is unequivocal in its religious outlook in a time of increasing globalism and secularism, putting it at odds with all who do not endorse its conservative Protestant mindset.

A country song needs to meet certain expectations, first those of producers and radio programmers, then ultimately those of listeners. Daryl Burgess describes how these expectations affect songwriters:

When you come down here, a lot of different people have different influence and talents – and some people are really original talents that you don't wanna mess with – but they come down here, and in the quest to get a number one on country radio, there's a lot of conforming that goes on. At some point in time you have to ask yourself, "Ok, do I want this song on country radio? There's a couple of rules of the road that I have to follow. I may have to sacrifice my originality and my great idea that nobody gets (laughs) to get there." So you find a lot of people in that situation. Some people think of it as selling out I guess (Daryl Burgess, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

Burgess alludes to how songwriters come from musical backgrounds in which they are lauded for the strength of their songwriting, and then are faced with a situation that requires adaptation of their part. Responses vary, and one's unique aptitudes are never identical, but the fact remains that moving to Nashville to become a songwriter involves fitting into established parameters as well as the somewhat nebulous and often-changing expectations of those who decide which songs get cut.

As Brian Davis notes (in self-identifying terms), the themes of mainstream country songs need to represent a series of social practices recognizable to country listeners:

Country music is a reflection of [the] morals/ethics of our people, the working man, the blue collar guy. He abides and lives by some real simple rules, man. It goes back to the Bible and things like that. We are God-fearing people. We have that headspace, and we try to do what's right most of the time . . . I mean we might get a little sideways on the weekend, but most of the time we adhere to working hard and doing what we do, and I think that our music should be a reflection of that (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

Davis' perspective here is closer to that of a typical country music performer, which he himself is, generally songwriting during the week and performing on the weekends. Davis accesses the cultural capital of being part of the same group his audience belongs to, and talks to and about them from this perspective.

Gordie Sampson puts it in a similar light and without the personal affiliation, emphasizing country music's identification with the South but also how its tropes can be related to non-U.S.-born and non-Southern people (like himself). He also notes how Nashville, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, embraces non-Southerners who come to Nashville to make songs:

I don't know . . . I have yet to be able to define it . . . I know what it is, I know how to do it, I don't know how to define it . . . it's culture dude . . . this is culture . . . when you go to Newfoundland and you go to the pub on George St., and you're sittin' there listenin' to them yikyackin' . . . it's that, it's just that we're in a different place . . .
(Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011).

Sampson, who is from the Maritime region of Eastern Canada, argues that the culture depicted in country music songs and enacted through their performance may extend beyond the regional boundaries they are commonly believed to encompass. In the process he alludes to how someone like himself, who does not identify personally with country music listeners as a cultural group, might still be able to come to Nashville and be successful as a songwriter, channeling cultural processes that are relatable to but extend beyond the South.

The above quotes attest to the sort of negotiations between individual creativity and conformity to others' expectations typical of the process of the Nashville songwriter. What constitutes 'real' country has kept pace with an evolving understanding about a particular (classed, racialized and gendered) segment of the population (Fillingim 7-9), and the values they are seen to espouse are reflected in country music lyrics. Indeed Nashville songs over time have

shown more concern with representing the values and desires attributed to this segment of people than with perpetuating a particular set of sounds and texts.⁶³

As this chapter has illustrated, country music's back story is riddled with details that challenge common perceptions of the music and its audience, so much so that it is tempting, especially for those with little investment in the music itself, to be dismissive of the whole tradition as one that was invented in New York by guys in grey suits who scorned the music's listeners, a bunch of dupes who like to wear cowboy boots and go to bars on the weekends. Since Richard Peterson's groundbreaking study *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (1997), all scholarship on country music as a cultural and commercial process bears his imprint while at the same time seeking to further the discussion he initiates, and my work is no exception. However, I challenge Peterson's assertion that country music is a tradition fabricated by those who would want to market songs and related products. I do this not because I refute Peterson's depiction of the constructed nature of the tradition, but because it places too narrow a restriction on who the *fabricators* are.

Peterson privileges producers at the expense of listeners and their agency. Country music has not remained a genre as long as it has because corporate headquarters is manipulating and reinventing it at every turn (Negus 1999:19-21). Whether or not country music itself is perpetuating an "imagined community" (Anderson 2006), this community gains an identity through the transmission of the music that is associated with it. And regardless of the legitimacy

⁶³ A specific set of sounds (steel guitars, banjos) and texts (nostalgia for rural life, simpler times and first love, bemoaning the loss of traditional values and ways of life) have come to be representative of the genre, but these elements are not omnipresent and are not the primary means of authentication for listeners (as anyone who has tried to write a country song by simply reproducing these representative features has discovered). Geoffrey Mann has argued that twangy vocal tones come the closest to being a universal aural signifier for the genre (see Mann 78-81)

of the claim of country music adherents of being of a culture in the traditional sense, the fact remains that there is at least the perception of a group that is identified with certain cultural traits and values, and this can't be entirely dismissed even if country music's origins and claims to authenticity are not exactly what they profess to be.⁶⁴

My contention is that many listeners respond to country music as if it is a vernacular music. Thus while arguably not a vernacular music properly, it effectively serves as one, and its audiences perceive themselves (and are perceived by others) in ways very similarly to a cultural group, even if not actually one. The cultural manifestations of country music are not easily or usefully reduced to mere strategic fabrication, as Pamela Fox discusses here:

Whether associated with sound, a specific cultural, regional, or class identity, visual image, or audience, country authenticity has ensured the sheer *presence* of what Dennis Covington⁶⁵ calls a “peculiar” and embattled people, even as its shifting construction has satirized, as well as idealized, country or folk culture (P. Fox 2009:3-4, italics the author's).

Fox, via Covington, here claims that country songs themselves perpetuate the presence of its listeners as a distinct group of people. Put another way, to both adherents and detractors country music listeners are a cultural group by virtue of the perception of them as such (see Becker 705).

Most importantly for my study, this vernacular identity affects what constitutes a successful mainstream country song, and thus the practice of Nashville songwriters. Bourdieu, according to Karl Maton, asserts “social agents do not arrive in a field fully armed with god-like knowledge of the state of play, the positions, beliefs and aptitudes of other social agents, or the full consequences of their actions. Rather, they enjoy a particular point of view on proceedings

⁶⁴ I discuss the connection between country music and the working class on pages 135-38.

⁶⁵ Covington's autobiographical account (1995) of his experience with a Christian sect that incorporates snake-handling into their worship illustrates how particular Southern people, while not culturally distinct from their neighbours, are distinguished and classed according to their practices and behavior.

based on their positions, and they learn the tempo, rhythms and unwritten rules of the game through time and experience” (Maton 54). Songwriters, whether they feel a personal affiliation with country music culture or not, feel strongly about the need to understand, relate to and be able to express the values and concerns of imagined listeners (a set of individuals regularly positioned as a cultural group).

The modern country song does acknowledge current concerns and trends, but must do so within a recognizable musical and textual context. The rich and varied Southern musical tradition that has been distilled into commercial country music provides the context, though its specific shape is determined by a variety of changing factors dependent on then-current musical and market conditions. As a result of the enduring relationship between Nashville, country music and the South and its culture, country music functions in ways similar to a vernacular music (that is, music attributed to a distinct cultural group which acts as a space for multi-layered individual, regional, national and political identity negotiation). The field of country music has become a type of vernacular/popular musical culture, in which identifiably sociocultural responses are exhibited in the consumption and reinterpretation of mass-mediated musical objects (Holt 2007:63-5, Fox 2004:21-24).

Country Music Authenticity

There is crucial significance placed on authenticity in country music discourse, a fact that takes on new meaning when considering the malleability of this discourse through the decades since its inception. The notion of country music authenticity is not that of the folklorists of the first half of the twentieth century, seeking examples of cultural practices and objects unfettered and untainted by modern capitalist influences (Miller 2010:85-120). Instead, it is an *authenticity of experience*,

one that can incite particular responses at the moment of hearing a song, seeing an image or having a recollection. Country music both establishes the presence of a cultural group as its listenership and idealizes this same group through performance. Country music authenticity is thus a performed authenticity; one that requires continued reinvigoration and even reinvention (Isenhour 45-51).

Country music is produced and transmitted with considerable input from listeners, a group of people who collectively put their stamp of approval on (that is, authenticate) Nashville's output (Hughes 188). Authenticity needs the endorsement of adherents and detractors alike, and thus while it is a construction, country music's particular authenticity is one that is identified with and recognized by adherents. Producers and listeners alike are in turn reactive to the music's perceptions in the wider culture, at times tailoring songs and their surrounding discourse to make the music more widely palatable, and at times aggressively defending country music's supposedly sacrosanct core elements. While this view overlooks the influence of radio – still country music's primary conduit – and thus the input of decisions made by radio programmers, I nevertheless argue that listener response matters in country music more than in other popular North American genres, and thus contest Peterson's production of culture perspective (Peterson and Anand 2004) for putting too much emphasis on those in power (and thus diminishing the 'cultureness' of country music and its transmission process).⁶⁶

Country music's cultural identity is as crucial to its meaning and its longevity as the influence of its industrial gatekeepers, as Keith Negus comments:

[Present-day Nashville cannot be characterized by a] tension between “art” and “commerce,” but has [become] a situation in which notions of “family” and “community” have rubbed up against a particular way of doing business and come

⁶⁶ Peterson himself suggests that the production of culture analytic could be usefully modified to incorporate ways in which “reception can be better understood” (Peterson and Anand 327).

to *mediate the interactions* between those creating country and corporate headquarters (Negus 1999:104, italics mine).

The ways that particular sociocultural associations attached to the music “mediate the interactions” of those who create it is central to understanding the peculiar nature of country music as a “genre culture” (Negus 1999:103). Negus argues that we cannot understand how country songs foster the type of consumption and enact the responses they do by using outdated analytic paradigms. Rather, country music is an industrial product whose parameters are largely defined and mediated by a specific set of cultural values.

Country songs enable a complex interaction in which listeners mitigate the actions of producers, who in turn influence the preferences of these same listeners. Country music’s cultural meaning has evolved into a complex classed, racialized and gendered discourse involving producers, adherents and detractors, played out largely in various forms of aural, visual and print media (Harkins 2004:71-2). It is not only audiences and producers who have framed the meaning of the genre and shaped the discourse surrounding country music over time: this perception is perpetuated and shaped as much (and some would argue more) by those who don’t affiliate themselves with country music (detractors) as by those who do (adherents). Those marketing the music have largely attached country music’s imagery and tropes to it, but these signifiers only acquire meaning when recognized by adherents who embrace or expropriate them to suit their own purposes. This has happened repeatedly throughout the genre’s history, thus creating a complex and fluid cultural dialogue over time.

Country music is not authenticated through any particular sonic markers as much as it is aligned with a particular cultural narrative, the content of which was normalized long before my informants arrived in Nashville. The presence of so many normalized and largely unquestioned

aspects of the music and its transmission are reminiscent of Foucault's idea that "all manifest discourse is secretly based on an 'already-said'," as he elaborates on here:

This 'already-said' is not merely a phrase that has already been spoken, or a text that has already been written, but a 'never-said', an incorporeal discourse . . . everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in that semi-silence that precedes it, which continues to run obstinately beneath it, but which it covers and silences (Foucault 1972:25).

Country music songwriters tap into the already-said, the legacy and narratives that sustain the tradition, while at the same time perpetuating the tradition by supplying its "manifest discourse, [which] is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say . . ." (Foucault 1972:25). I am drawn to Nashville songwriters as a subject largely because they are able to produce songs that embody so many ambiguities (if not outright contradictions) and reconciling widely disparate textual elements, all the while reinforcing country music's peculiar orthodoxy through these songs.⁶⁷

Songwriters are involved in cultural production regardless of the commercial motives behind their creativity, and the ways that my informants embody both cultural and commercial concerns in their work largely defines their milieu. Recent scholarship (Auslander 2008 [1999], Barker and Taylor 2007, Holt 2007, Lysloff and Gay 2003, Porcello 2005, Radano 2003), following in the wake of the work of Simon Frith, Stuart Hall, Reebee Garofalo and Keith Negus, has continued to challenge the Adornian view of popular music as a debasement of Western Art Music ideals, wrestling with how popular music reflects and informs larger cultural processes. Thus while not dismissive of the contestability of the culture associated with country music, I argue that country music has authentic cultural meaning both to adherents and

⁶⁷ Exploring how the "already-said" affects the practices and processes of present-day Nashville songwriters is one of the purposes of the next chapter.

detractors, and it is this meaning (i.e. what factors authenticate a song as country music) that I explore as it pertains to the work of my informants. I position country songs (their production, transmission and reception) as the focal point of a cultural process that is authenticated through mass mediated interactions with listeners, and I examine the writers of these songs as they are implicated in this process.

Chapter 3: How Music Row and Nashville Shape The Process of and Perspectives on the Nashville Songwriter

Introduction: The Process of the Nashville Songwriter

I'm very methodical about everything I do. I don't jump into anything . . . if you're going to be a successful businessman; you have to know the business . . . (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

When discussing my research I am often asked which famous people I have interviewed, and my reply is usually something like “nobody famous, because my informants aren't supposed to be famous.” But why is this the case? It is not as if my informants are hidden away in underground bunkers or office cubicles. They are well known locally, widely admired and often have incomes that exceed those of all but the upper echelon of producers and performers. Nashville songwriters are not famous in part because it would shine light on the deliberately calculated and constructed nature of songs that are depicted as authentic, vernacular expressions, coming from the mouths of performers whom audiences imagine to be the sentiments' source.

A Nashville song achieves its intended effect at the moment of performance, not according to the reputation of its writer. And in order for a song or a singer to be “country,” it must be recognized as such by country music listeners (Mann 2008: 78-83), a recognition that is often hard to predict. For those who wish to write country songs for a living, an acknowledgement of these basic tenets is crucial.

I asked Gordie Sampson if he could tell me about what the parameters of a mainstream country music song was as it pertains to songwriting:

I want to answer that question, I honestly do . . . there's not a hard list of them . . . you have to go by feel . . . when your cowriter says "what about this for the second line of the second verse," and your gut says "no, that's not gonna fly" ok? So it's . . . they are rules that apply 75% of the time, you know what I mean? . . . It's all about instinct, man, it really is . . . to *me* it is . . .

I think there's coupla things in this genre . . . If you and me are sittin' down now and writin' a song, and somebody suggested the first line of the song was "I'm not the kind of guy who" . . . nobody wants to hear that, I don't think . . . nobody wants to hear about what kind of guy you are . . . they wanna hear about *why* you're in love with the girl you're in love with, or "*where* is she?" or "*who* is she?" . . . there are a coupla little things like that . . . that's just somethin' I pulled out but that's an example of right off the bat where I think you've lost 50 points by startin' the song with that . . .

When we make our artsy records, we can say that, you know what I mean? . . . I hate to use that word artsy, it's one of my least favourite words . . . when we make those records, that's why we make those records and we can talk about ourselves and try to give someone insight into who we are . . . all that fuckin' thing, you know . . . this is *so* not about that . . . this is about makin' people dance and makin' people screw and makin' people fall in love, and honestly, hurtin' people's feelings. We're in the business of hurtin' people's feelings . . . (Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011).

The above quote reflects both the immensurable nature of the Nashville songwriter's craft ("it's all about instinct, man"), and also a tendency amongst Nashville songwriters to withhold trade secrets ("I want to answer that question, I honestly do") or simplify the complexity of their occupation ("you have to go by feel"). Sampson illustrates the confluence of psychology and marketing that drives songwriter decisions, and how songwriters wrestle with finding the balance between – and the elegant articulation of – both motivations in their songs.

Producer, songwriter and ASCAP⁶⁸ representative Ralph Murphy demonstrates a similar analytical perspective here, but uses "10 at night vs. drive time radio" descriptors instead of Sampson's "artsy vs. Music Row" (parenthetical comments inserted by the author):

⁶⁸ ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers) is the oldest of the three major Performance Rights Organizations (P.R.O.'s) in the U.S. The purpose of a P.R.O. is to collect royalties from music licensees and distribute them to composers, songwriters and publishers.

What they [radio listeners] want is a familiar, comfortable song, they don't want to be challenged . . . You are actually giving music to someone who doesn't want to hear it [because they are tuned in for traffic and weather], at the worst time of day possible [because they are dropping kids off at school on the way to work, or just wanting to get home after work] . . . that's your job, and that's where the money is . . . See, my dog could write for 10 o'clock at night . . .

As creators we want to be cathartic, we want to tell the world about us. The world doesn't care about us. Every song that you fell in love with when you were growing up was about "you" . . . The writer gave you "you" as they saw you. You fell in love with that song, fell out of love with that song, drove a car to that song, skated to that song . . . whatever you did to that song, it was your song . . . that means the creator of that work did their job,⁶⁹ which is to give you "you" as they saw you, not to give you "them," ok? (Ralph Murphy, personal communication, August 25, 2011).

Largely conflated in the previous statements are the concerns of the imaginary recipient or listener (particular to the time of day they are listening), those of the music industry producer (who wants to deliver a song that holds the attention of the radio listener) and those of the radio or venue manager (who wants content that attracts listeners who will then hear advertisements). This conflation of listeners as both a cultural group and a demographic is a further manifestation of the inseparability of commerce, culture and creativity in country music, a trio of descriptors I return to as an analytic tool throughout this writing.

Contrary to common perceptions, a literal retelling of a familiar story or a rehearing of familiar sounds is generally treated with disinterest on Music Row. Music Row producers tend to prefer a country song that reflects wider trends in popular music and culture because of Nashville's historical concern with crossover into pop markets, as well as the perceived need to refresh the sound of the genre to appeal to successive generations of listeners. A third statement on the process of writing a country songs is instructive here as a companion to Sampson's and Murphy's. This is songwriter Jim Photoglo:

⁶⁹ I discuss one particular writer's process of turning her very personal experiences into a broadly consumable country song in chapter 5.

I've known Ralph [Murphy] since I first came to town. I wrote with Ralph. When I went to my first Folk Alliance⁷⁰ conference, I was called in advance and asked to be a mentor, so I went to Ralph and I said, "Fill me in. What do I tell them?" And he went on his rant about "You've got this much time in the intro, the song should be this and this and this and this [slaps the back of his one hand into the palm of his other with each 'this']." And I thought, "I'm not gonna go out there and tell them that. I don't *believe* that." Anybody can . . . listen to songs on the radio and figure out *a formula*, but . . . if you're a person trying to figure out how to write those songs, and you're listening to the radio trying to emulate that, by the time you get your shot, that whole train has passed. I'm about encouraging people to find their own "isms," their own voice, their patterns, whatever it is that makes them unique (Jim Photoglo, personal communication, February 25, 2012).

Photoglo directly challenges Murphy's perspective on the formulaic nature of successful country songs, and supports Sampson's idea that songwriting is an instinctive process (without contextualizing songs in a genre-specific way like Sampson does). In fairness to Murphy,⁷¹ I suggested something similar to what Photoglo implies here when I spoke with him: that country music turns on particular definitive songs that changed the future sound of the genre and altered the rules for how country songs are written. He acknowledged that these songs might exist, but that "there are always exceptions to the rule," and in spite of their notoriety he doesn't view these exceptional songs as definitive (Ralph Murphy, personal communication, August 25, 2011).

Photoglo and Murphy both realize that the question of how to write successful country songs has

⁷⁰ Folk Alliance is the biggest annual trade show of the North American folk music industry. The website of the Folk Alliance International (FAI) states, "Since 1989, Folk Alliance has served as the headquarters for Folk Music and Dance. With over 3000 members worldwide and an annual conference that is one of the five largest music conferences in North America, Folk Alliance . . . has grown to include record companies, publishers, presenters, agents, managers, music support services, manufacturers and artists that work in the folk world." (<http://www.folkalliance.org/about-fai/>, last accessed May 2, 2014).

⁷¹ Ralph Murphy has been in Nashville since the 1970s and has had success in many aspects of the music industry (as songwriter, publisher, producer and executive). He is spoken of in quasi-sage like terms by many, as is evidenced by Photoglo seeking him out for the type of advice he did.

always been and remains without a definitive answer, though they disagree on the fruitfulness of attempting to quantify it.⁷²

In this chapter I explore how country music exists as a malleable sociocultural construct that has been subject to continual tweaking and adaptation to current musical and social trends. These adaptations are viewed as crucial for country music's continued relevance, and therefore marketability. Learning to react to and understand the elusive nature of these parameters and strike a balance between perpetuation and innovation is definitive of the craft of the Nashville songwriter, as the above statements give us a sense of. Their craft involves the ability to synthesize musical elements that are constantly changing (affecting the *sound* of country songs), while reflecting and reinforcing sociocultural values and concerns that resonate with country music audiences (through the *sentiment* of these same songs).

Regardless of genre, popular songwriters' craft is defined by adaptations they make within the parameters imposed upon them. For the Nashville songwriter, this means responding to the parameters of Music Row, understanding the tropes that exist for the country music genre and their role in forming audience and industry expectations, and acknowledging cultural processes that are implicated in how songwriters are widely perceived. Nashville songwriters must navigate this complex mix of genre, sociocultural meanings and commercial priorities to produce sellable country songs. Songwriters often attempt to bend or refresh common genre parameters in order to get a song noticed, but this genre-bending risks producers or listeners viewing such songs as brazen rather than refreshing. A songwriter's subjective perception of the listener is thus implicated in the eventual success (and profitability) of a song. And it is not only

⁷² Murphy's quantification of the act of writing a hit song is documented in his book *Murphy's Laws of Songwriting: The Book* (2011), the most crystalline attempt I have encountered to explain this seldom-addressed phenomenon.

the reactions of these imagined listeners that is of concern to songwriters, but also those of producers, agents, publishers and performers who will ultimately push the song through the production and transmission process.

In the following sections I examine pre-existing phenomena that contextualize and form common perceptions of Nashville songwriters. My informants collectively comprise a range of views on the issues and debates surrounding the impositions that affect their work and daily lives. There is no set of rules that Nashville songwriters follow, and many of my informants work in ways unique to themselves alone. There are, however, some practices that are widespread. I trace how the meanings and processes incumbent upon country music and Music Row affect and are tactically responded to by songwriters. I intend to outline how perceptions of the Nashville songwriter have taken the form that they have, and how the members of the songwriting community in Nashville both perpetuate and challenge these perceptions through their work, their songs and their daily practices.

Music Row

A Nashville Songwriter's continued success depends on negotiating the Music Row apparatus and learning to operate within overlapping networks of a somewhat dizzying array of industry figures, all of whom are a part of the process of getting songs cut.⁷³ The following parts of this chapter examine the figures that are part of the Music Row apparatus that most impact the work

⁷³ As well as the instrumentalists, singers, singer representatives, record producers and publishers that I discuss below, this list can include label artist and repertoire (A and R) directors, radio programmers, booking agents, songpluggers, performance rights organization (PRO) employees, lawyers, and auxiliary touring staff (bus drivers, caterers, wardrobe and makeup workers). When I told an informant, songwriter Tommy Lee James, of my intention to describe the complexity of Music Row as it pertains to songwriting practice, he quipped that after 25 years in Nashville his wife continually tells him she has no idea how the whole thing works.

of songwriters. I do not exhaustively chronicle the various players that make up the Music Row apparatus; rather I attempt to demonstrate how a number of factors involving various workers who collectively comprise Music Row impinge on my informants' work.

As my informants are generally happy to point out, Music Row producers are not in their positions because of their musical abilities, and are not the ones likely to anticipate or invent the next song that influences the next sound for the genre. This task falls to songwriters, and is one that is demonstrably complex and fluid. No overseer comes down from the top floor offices every morning with a list of the demands that the songwriters in their cubicles have to satisfy. Nevertheless, Nashville songwriters are obliged to at least acknowledge the stated demands of Music Row producers and managers, however begrudgingly, as songwriter Brian Davis' comment here alludes to:

Oh yeah, we're constantly being told "positive uptempo," I ask people what they are looking for, "positive uptempo" . . . why are you looking for that? . . . "Oh cuz radio says we need that so they don't turn the station" . . . It's the tail wagging the dog. (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

Davis acknowledges both the effect that constraints imposed by Music Row producers have and also their dubious and volatile nature. Nevertheless, he also alludes to the songwriter's inability to escape these constraints in spite of how they might feel about them. Music Row and the various players who inhabit and work within it are inextricably linked with a songwriter's process and chance for success.

There have been several studies that attempt to depict Music Row and its methods of production. Three books have been particularly helpful to me in this regard: *How Nashville Became Music City U.S.A.: 50 Years of Music Row*, by songwriter, journalist, editor and professor Michael Kosser; *Nashville's Unwritten Rules: Inside the Business of Country Music*, by

songwriter, producer/engineer, journalist and author Dan Daley; and *The Songwriter's and Musician's Guide to Nashville*, by publisher Sherry Bond (who is also the daughter of Western star Johnny Bond). It is largely owing to their help⁷⁴ that I have pieced together the workings of both the Music Row industrial apparatus and the wider Nashville musical community with respect to their effect on Nashville Songwriters.

Dan Daley (1997) demonstrates that the complex phenomenon of Music Row can only be understood by examining it as a collectivity fueled by the activities of and relationships between several types of players within a specific field.⁷⁵ The unique musical culture of Music Row and Nashville is formed through the ways that these various sectors operate as individual scenes and interact with other scenes, and songwriters occupy one of several positions within this wider collectivity. I focus here on three broad categories of individuals: those most focused on the *performance* of country music (i.e. instrumentalists, singers and their representatives); those whose task is the *publishing and pitching* of country music (i.e. publishers); and those involved in the *production* of country music (i.e. studio staff and record producers). As I intend to show, various players in the industry have imposed specific demands on writers, to which they must continually adapt. None of the various sectors that make up Music Row act alone as they pertain to songwriters' practice and process, and all are tacit influences on current Nashville songwriters' work.

Music Row was established in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as distinct sectors of the country music industrial infrastructure began to locate their operations within a few blocks of

⁷⁴ I interviewed both Bond and Kosser for this writing.

⁷⁵ I use "field" here in the sense that Bourdieu does (1984:29-40), as a group made up of individuals all ascribing to similar goals and collectively defining itself through their shared behavior and beliefs, a system of "position-takings" whose "unifying principle" is "struggle, with all the contradictions it engenders" (ibid 34).

each other in a residential area just west of Nashville's downtown area. Music Row's development was not inevitable. So how and why did it happen? The answer to this reads like a novel, full of plot twists and unlikely coincidences, culminating in perhaps the most distinctive site of popular music production that has ever existed. The story continues where we left off in the last chapter: with the decline of Tin Pan Alley in New York and the big band era it helped sustain, the singing cowboy fad and taste for Western Swing music fading in Los Angeles and the West Coast, and the besting of the National Barndance in Chicago by the Grand Ol' Opry in Nashville. These events, as well as the activities of a set of entrepreneurial men who recognized what was developing in central Tennessee and jumped on the train that was headed there, culminated in the creation of Music Row.

Instrumentalists, Singers and their Representatives (Managers, Agents)

It was indisputably radio station WSM⁷⁶ and its Saturday night broadcast the *Grand Ole Opry* that established Nashville's place on the hillbilly map, and it allowed Nashville to eventually supplant Chicago as the home of the barndance format. While Opry performers were paid little, the exposure generated from Opry appearances (WSM had the strongest signal in the southeast outside of Atlanta prior to the 1940s) ensured that the top performers of the genre were eventually making their way to Nashville for their big break in the industry. As a result of this talent accumulation, various business interests related to music production began to work out of Nashville, many setting up offices there beginning in the 1940s (Malone 2002:210, 256). Thus it

⁷⁶ "WSM" is an acronym for "we shield millions", the moniker of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company that sponsored the station and the show.

was instrumentalists and singers⁷⁷ that initially established Nashville as a center for the performance of country music, and it was around performers that the initial part of the industrial apparatus that became Music Row formed.

Owing to the diversity of its musical community and the allure of work opportunities not available elsewhere, Nashville has always fostered and sustained many working session and touring musicians (Malone 2002: 256-57). In the 1950s and 1960s a group of session musicians – including pianists Floyd Cramer and Hargus “Pig” Robbins, guitarists Hank Garland, Grady Martin and Ray Edenton, bassist Bob Moore and drummer Buddy Harman – garnered most of the top level session work in Nashville studios and largely shaped the sound of these recordings. This group of instrumentalists became collectively known as the “A-Team,” and they cemented Nashville’s reputation for producing recordings efficiently and with the highest standards of musicianship available.⁷⁸ These men would establish studio practices and standards still adhered to today, including most famously a system for making charts of songs called the Nashville numbering system⁷⁹ that has been widely adapted in other popular music practices.

⁷⁷ Neither of these terms is in common use in Nashville. What I call ‘instrumentalists’ are more likely to be called ‘players,’ ‘pickers,’ or simply ‘musicians.’ Here I chose a more general term to encapsulate anyone who works by playing an instrument (as opposed to a singer), and I shy away from referring to instrumentalists generally as ‘musicians’ because of the implication that singers are therefore *not* musicians. The most common term in Music Row parlance for what I call ‘singers’ is ‘artists,’ a term that is borrowed from Tin Pan Alley. I don’t favour its use because of the apparent industrial strategy of reputation uplift such a coinage manifests, and also because of how it strongly implies that the singer is the source of the songs she or he sings, not the songwriters that actually wrote them. In the following chapter I do employ the term “artist” as nomenclature for a particular type of singer, as this is the term used on Music Row for the specific practice I discuss (artist cowrites).

⁷⁸ Other sets of instrumentalists have briefly attained identities due to their association with particular locales and recording studios (e.g. Muscle Shoals, Alabama and FAME Records and Muscle Shoals Sound Studio; Memphis, Tennessee and Sun Records, Stax Records and American Sound Studio; Detroit, Michigan and Motown Records).

⁷⁹ The Nashville numbering system numbers scale degrees (i.e. I is a tonic chord, V7 is a dominant seventh chord and so on) and lays out chord structures on an easy to read grid. It also

Nashville instrumentalists have remained a distinct and definitive part of the Nashville production process since Music Row's early years. In spite of changes in production method throughout the music industry since the time of Music Row's inception, Nashville continues to be the inevitable destination for aspiring country instrumentalists. Both Nashville's studios and its touring infrastructure mean that there are work opportunities not available elsewhere, thus ensuring a steady local supply of outstanding instrumentalists as well as a stream of newer ones always trying to supplant them.

Owing to the nature of country music as a genre largely reliant on the playing of instruments on stage and in recording studios (as opposed to relying primarily on computer programming and similar digital technologies), talented instrumentalists have always contributed to and largely affected the sound of country music (Malone 2002: 256-57). In the 1950s and 1960s the A-team's work was so prolific it could be argued that its members contributed toward a "sameness of sound that inhibited creativity within the country music field" (ibid 257). Nevertheless, studio and touring work has always been plentiful enough in Nashville that the pool of musicians who have relocated there has grown and diversified. Yet even though there are more studios and studio musicians working in Nashville than there was in the 1950s and 1960s, the numbers have not been steadily climbing since then, and are smaller now than fifteen or even ten years ago. However, the availability of studio work continues to foster a community of instrumentalists of the highest caliber, with competition for work ensuring that the best of these players have few if any rivals.

has a number of symbols that designate particular techniques and musical figures in particular spots in the arrangement. Often studio musicians (mostly the designated session leader) will make these charts themselves. An example of the use of these charts can be seen at the following URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWMKAX8Chuc#t=25>, last accessed May 5, 2014.

Nashville studio musicians are known for contributing ideas and suggestions for the songs they record, affecting both their sonic and formal aspects. The contribution that session players make to songwriters' work is seen most succinctly in "songwriter demo" sessions.⁸⁰ Demonstration recordings (or "demos") are radio-quality recordings of songs that a songwriter and her or his publisher agree are worthy of pitching. Songwriter demo recordings sessions are made more affordable by the formidable speed and efficiency session players are able to work with.⁸¹ Further, the quality of the performances is such that the song is deemed more impactful, strengthening a songwriter's chance at getting a cut from it.⁸²

Songwriters also benefit from relationships they make with the singers during these demo sessions. Demo session singers are often aspiring artists themselves,⁸³ who often get signed to record deals and seek out their songwriter colleagues to write with or as sources of potential hit songs. Indeed, the fact that many Nashville songwriters are themselves performers, and that singers without previous songwriting experience routinely collaborate with songwriters (a controversial practice I discuss at length on pages 176-86), means that the distinction between instrumentalist, performer and songwriter on Music Row are often hard to make.

Singers who have established their reputation for garnering hits have some sway over what songs they would like to cut. Beginning in the 1960s, star performers such as Patsy Cline and Ray Price fostered the rise to prominence of a number of songwriters (e.g. Don Gibson, Roger Miller, Bill Anderson, Harlan Howard, Hank Cochran, Mel Tillis, Willie Nelson, Kris

⁸⁰ I have observed some of these sessions in Nashville, and a documentary of one is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWMKAX8Chuc>, last accessed April 29, 2014.

⁸¹ A typical session will produce 5 songs in four hours.

⁸² This is confirmed by stories I heard about Los Angeles or New York producers who fail to make their recordings sound as good as songwriter demos recorded in Nashville, often then flying to Nashville in order to finish recording work started elsewhere.

⁸³ Trisha Yearwood and Gretchen Wilson are two examples of prominent artists who worked as demo singers in their early years in Nashville.

Kristofferson). This practice was mirrored in the 1980s with Kenny Rogers and songwriter Don Schlitz, and in the 1990s with the rise of Garth Brooks, who ignited the songwriting careers of Tony Arata and Earl “Bud” Lee. Current writers such as Tom Douglas and Liz Rose have benefited from their association with Lady Antebellum and Taylor Swift, and having this sort of direct relationship is highly sought after.

Carrie Underwood is certainly on a small list of current singers who have this kind of decision-making power, and Gordie Sampson, cowriter of two of her early and biggest hits, “Jesus Take the Wheel” and “Just a Dream,” discusses his relationship with her below:

GS: I’ve had Carrie Underwood cuts where we sat down, we wrote that fuckin song for Carrie [taps counter with his finger as he says this].

CW: Is that true of “Jesus take the Wheel?”

GS: No, but the next . . . I’ve had two number ones . . . “Jesus Take the Wheel” was the first one . . . we didn’t know who Carrie was when we wrote that . . . but the second one, which was “Just a Dream” . . . we sat down and wrote this for Carrie.

CW: You knew she was looking or she asked you to do something?

GS: No, we knew she was looking. I think we even called and said, “What do you think she wants,” and they said, “You guys do your thing” . . . I guess the point being, it works both ways (Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011).

The kind of direct intervention that Sampson describes between he and Carrie Underwood (he also told me that she has even contacted him to talk about the types of songs she is looking for) is possible only between established performers and songwriters who have a history of success together.

Yet only the very upper echelon of performers enjoys a degree of autonomy in making these types of career decisions. Most singers who record Nashville songwriters’ songs are under the tutelage of a manager or management team, and the process of song selection may or may not include the singer her- or himself. Thus the more common way for songwriters to pitch songs to

performers is through their publishers and though a performer's manager or management team, who add more layers to the songwriter's process of getting a song heard and cut on Music Row.

One common way that songwriters take advantage of the relationships they have developed with touring performers who also write songs is to go on the road as part of their touring entourage and writing songs in the otherwise idle time performers have between shows. My informant Deric Ruttan has travelled with Dierks Bentley and has had six cowrites cut by the singer, including "What Was I Thinking," Bentley's first hit (from 2003) that went to number one on the charts, and "Lots of Leaving Left To Do," which reached number three in 2005. Tebey Ottoh, another informant, traveled with Big and Rich, which garnered the song "Radio," a cut on their 2007 album *Between Raising Hell and Amazing Grace*. Scotty Emerick has written several songs with Toby Keith while the two of them travel (though in these cases Emerick is also working as Keith's lead guitarist). Most songwriters, similar to Ruttan, Ottoh and Emerick, are reluctant to pass up the opportunity to travel with touring artists. Such chances are rare, and are often the most likely scenario in which a songwriter will write a song with an influential artist.

While it is not unheard of for singers to gain notoriety without signing to major labels and by promoting themselves through non-conventional channels (e.g. advertisements, online social media), independent artists hold little sway on Music Row and in mainstream country music to this day. Further, those singers that do gain some notoriety without the aid of a major label's resources invariably have to sign with a major label at some point in order to become more widely known, owing to the majors' exclusive access to national and global distribution and promotion channels. Thus songwriters, while happy for almost any cut, are particularly hoping that singers with major label affiliation will cut their songs.

The diversity of the industry and the decline in sales of conventional recordings (which I discuss in the next section) compels songwriters to promote their songs in non-traditional ways. Some of these include pitching their songs for use in product placements, TV and film, or ringtones; writing for unsigned but promising singers; going to events called “song camps” (where label representatives assemble writers to produce material for a specific album and singer); and performing as a way to promote their own song material (which I discuss in the final chapter of this dissertation). Yet in all these activities, songwriters who forge relationships with a variety of different people and types of workers, and who think in creative ways about how to promote their songs, are deemed more likely to succeed in the highly competitive arena of Music Row.

Publishers

Ralph Peer worked for Okeh and Victor Records in the 1920s, supervising some of the earliest and most important field recordings expeditions of hillbilly music. He also initiated a practice of securing authorship copyrights over all of the songs he recorded for the purposes of building a publishing catalogue (and claiming future royalties). In other words, while seemingly acting as a talent scout on Southern recording field trips – for which he was only reimbursed for expenses (Cusic 2008:18) – Peer’s personal purpose for these field recordings was establishing a publishing business around them (Peterson 1997:37).

Peer foresaw a publishing entity that was essentially a holder of copyrights. While he did copyright some songs from oral and traditional sources, one of the significant effects of Peer’s activities is his privileging of original material that could pass as traditional (but was easily copyrightable). He did this in spite of the origins of the song being unknown or attributed to

another source, and insisted on it as a prerequisite to an artist making a recording in the first place (Malone 2002:67). Peer's Southern Music Company (eventually joined by the M.M. Cole Company in Chicago) both profited from and preserved hillbilly music in the public imagination through the war years (Malone 2002:178), and Southern Music remained the largest single catalogue of hillbilly and country and western material by the time Nashville became the home of country music in the early 1950s.

By contrast, the first publishing company based in Nashville, Acuff-Rose Publishing, employed a far more hands-on approach. Acuff-Rose signed promising writers, nurtured their skills and mentored them, provided them with a work environment, and pitched their songs (Kosser 2005:5-8).⁸⁴ In this business model a publisher is an employer of a stable of writers and her or his function is to pitch these writers' songs and recoup royalties. Fred Rose was an early champion of the professional Nashville songwriter, an occupation that has through boom and bust survived to the present day, and seen other sites of songwriting production come and go.

In the wake of Acuff-Rose, several companies would set up shop on Music Row, and become entrenched as part of the infrastructure that mediates country music to this day. Music Row developed according to the division of labour model for song production developed by Tin Pan Alley publishers. Thus while successful writers such as Roy Acuff, Hank Williams and Don Gibson were also successful performers, this phenomenon became more exceptional than standardized as professional songwriting solidified as part of the Music Row apparatus.

Through pre-Nashville country songs such as "Pistol Packin Mama" (a wartime hit for Al Dexter that was a chart-topping single by Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters in 1944), the

⁸⁴ One practice that they did not champion but were forced to eventually adopt in order to be competitive with other publishers was the giving of draws (advances against future earnings that serve as a de facto salary) to the writers on their roster. It was left for others to institute this practice.

commercial potential of songs that sold to non-country fans as well as country fans was realized. This impetus toward “crossing over” to the pop charts continued in Nashville after the huge success of Patty Page’s “Tennessee Waltz” (Malone and Neal 2010:245). Because of this success, producers began to seek out songs that bore the imprint of a broad range of musical styles to appeal to as many types of performers as possible. Don Cusic claims that “until the 1970s, country music was primarily a singles business” (ibid 122), and Music Row profit making strategies revolved around the promotion of songs rather than singers. He argues that it was only when the biggest country stars in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Kenny Rogers, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Ronnie Milsap and Dolly Parton) rivaled the biggest pop music stars that Nashville made the transition from a “songwriters’ town” to a “music business town” (Cusic 2008:122). Prior to this, Nashville’s primary manifestation to non-country audiences was via crossover hits (ibid 69), and it is through these that songwriters are still most likely to become known outside of Nashville.

Fred Rose’s concept of publishers as both active in the songwriting process – Fred Rose himself was an editor and mentor to younger writers, most famously Hank Williams – and aggressively pitching the songs of its writers became a template for future publishers on Music Row (Peterson 1997:37-39). Unlike Peer’s Southern Music, Acuff-Rose Publishing was never intended primarily for the printing and distribution of sheet music (though this practice had not entirely disappeared when Music Row was developed), nor did they intend to acquire other catalogues as many larger Nashville publishing companies (including Acuff-Rose) eventually did. Rather, Acuff-Rose was envisioned as a conduit through which the local songwriters’ work would get recorded (Malone 2002:210-11).

Alongside this, larger corporations created publishing divisions in Nashville, and have continued to buy catalogues of smaller companies, acting according to the business model championed by Ralph Peer and Southern Music. To this day Nashville supports a complex system of major publishers (divisions of major corporations with other entertainment industry holdings), smaller publishers (which likely used to be independent companies but now have affiliation with the larger companies), and independent publishers (either upstart companies trying to graduate to be a division of a major company or those that have been able to maintain themselves as independents over a longer term and have chosen to remain unaffiliated). There is still an active perception of the two business models for publishing companies that Southern and Acuff-Rose respectively represented: “passive” publishers who seek to maximize profits by acquiring valuable catalogues and collecting royalties, and “active” publishers who foster the careers of the writers in their stable and pitch their songs.⁸⁵

The typical path of an aspiring songwriter is to move from smaller companies that may have first recruited them to progressively bigger companies that can offer them more potential connections. Yet this ideal trajectory is not as easy to maintain as it once was, and many of my informants have voiced how the profession has been degraded in recent years by a shrinking market and the budget slashing that inevitably ensues from this. Compared to the heyday of country music production in the 1990s, it is now more difficult for smaller publishing companies to employ songwriters, and many independent publishers have merged with larger companies (mostly not based in Nashville), causing many songwriters to be shackled to publishing deals

⁸⁵ These two types of publishing entities are not mutually exclusive. Larger companies such as Sony ATV are both actively nurturing the songwriters in their stable and passively acquiring others' back catalogues of songs.

with companies they didn't negotiate their deals with, and who do nothing to actively promote their songs. Victoria Banks describes how these tensions affected her career:

I'm not re-upping with BMG. In fact, my contract was dropped there mid-term. I had fulfilled 2 years of a 4-year contract. The first 2 years were solid (no options to drop on either side) and then BMG had an annual option not to renew our contract after that. I signed originally with Chrysalis publishing, and Chrysalis was acquired by BMG 6 months into my contract, so BMG only held onto me until they had the first opportunity to let me go. I knew that was a strong possibility because there had been no action pitching and plugging my songs during the acquisition, and although I had fulfilled my obligations in writing lots of songs to submit to them, I had not recouped their investment in me because they hadn't been able to secure me enough cuts on records to do so (during the "no mans land" of the acquisition BMG lacked a plugging staff with a priority of pitching songs, so nobody was shopping my material).

Therefore, they weren't motivated to keep me because of my "red balance": accumulated unrecouped draw and demo debt.

Unfortunately that is very common in an acquisition situation. For one thing, the acquired songwriters often become numbers on a spreadsheet to someone in a financial office. Even though there was a new staff of songpluggers in place for the last 3 months of my time there, and they were very excited to work with me - we even have a major cut in the pipeline from one of the songs I wrote last February - their heavy lobbying to keep me had no effect on the final decision because it came down from "head office." Secondly, songwriters are often kind of crippled by acquisitions because they are stuck without proper songplugger representation (often they lose the people that they originally worked with, which happened to me when BMG fired all of the original Chrysalis staff who signed me in the first place) and are dropped due to a lack of cuts, no matter how hard they work.

This will be the second time in a row that I have been dropped from a major company after 2 years of a 4-year contract, and in both cases there were serious personnel shifts involved. I also lost my "cheerleader" - my songplugger who had originally signed me to the company - in both cases (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 27, 2012).

Banks situation as describes here is not unusual. The tension between local (and typically smaller) publishing houses that are dedicated to songwriter development and larger companies with only a small stake in Nashville, and who scrutinize the bottom line more than they engage in the speculative practice of signing writers, has never been more keenly felt on Music Row than in the present day.

While it may seem that many songwriters would be inclined to set up their own publishing company) in order to not have to split their royalties with another party, this practice is still the exception on Music Row. A songwriter may self-publish if she or he is between publishing deals and wants to continue to be active as a writer. In a small number of cases songs written by writers who are self-published will get cut, but this happens because their fellow writers who are signed to publishing contracts use their connections. In 2011 songwriter Terry Sawchuk cowrote what became a number one song for singer Jake Owen called “Barefoot Blue Jean Night.” Sawchuk told me about how, after every publisher he could find on Music Row had rejected him, he had to choose to either stay in Nashville without a publishing deal and carry on writing, or abandon his songwriting aspirations (Terry Sawchuk, personal communication, March 8, 2012). Once “Barefoot Blue Jean Night” became a success, he of course was the envy of other writers in town because he would receive twice the cut of the royalties that his cowriters (Dylan Altman and Eric Paslay) would.

Perhaps ironically, given that this is a preferable financial arrangement for a songwriter, he told me he would likely seek another deal based on his success with “Barefoot Blue Jean Night.” Self-publishing is typically not a tactic so much as it is motivated out of necessity. It is mostly older, established writers who have seen their publishing deals expire but want to continue writing and living in Nashville that will release songs under their own publishing company, and Sawchuk feels that he does not have enough of a reputation on Music Row to continue to remain independent of any publisher. And in any case if a writer gets a prominent cut like Sawchuk did, a publisher hoping to share in the royalties would likely court her or him.

One exception to this is Hillary Lindsey, a self-published songwriter who is without a doubt one of the most successful writers working in Nashville.⁸⁶ Lindsey is widely known and her songs highly sought after, yet even for someone like Lindsey the decision to become self-published represented a huge risk, as her frequent collaborator Gordie Sampson discusses here:

CW: Is there any reason for someone like you to start your own publishing at this point?

GS: Yeah there is . . . You know Hillary Lindsey . . . one of my best friends and the person I've had the most success with as a cowriter . . . she's just on fire now. I can't even get her on the phone, ya know what I mean, and I'm one of her best friends. She decided, I don't know, four or five years ago, maybe more, that she didn't like her deal where she was at, [and] when the time came up and they wanted to re-sign her she's like "Nah," and she just kinda ate Kraft Dinner for a year or two and just wrote and wrote and wrote. People thought she was crazy, and now . . . she's 35 old, single and has a virtual empire . . .

CW: Because she started her publishing?

GS: Ya . . . She owns her publishing so if I wrote a song with her and it becomes a huge hit . . . she would make at least twice as much as I do on the same song. It's a ballsy move but in this climate you're kinda seeing it more because the notion of the grandiose publisher is sorta not what it used to be . . .

CW: But you have to be Hillary Lindsey or Gordie Sampson, don't you, to do that?

GS: Ya, it's a huge investment in yourself . . . As a writer that's what it is: you are investing in yourself. You're investing in the idea that you are about to write . . . That's your style, the song you didn't write yet . . . it's pretty cool . . . (Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011)

What Sampson indicates is that self-publishing is only possible for someone who has attained the level of recognition that songwriters like Lindsey enjoy. Managers and producers don't often solicit songwriters directly, instead relying on their publishers to do crucial promotion work. Thus while self-publishing has always been an option for Nashville songwriters, it remains an

⁸⁶ She has cuts with country performers such as Terri Clark, Sara Evans, Martina McBride (who recorded her first #1 song, *Blessed*, in 2002), Carolyn Dawn Johnson, Carrie Underwood (who has had four #1 hits with Lindsey's songs, including *Jesus Take the Wheel* and *Just a Dream*), Faith Hill, Trisha Yearwood, Lady Antebellum, Emerson Drive and Rascal Flatts and with pop singers Michelle Branch and Miley Cyrus. She has won a Grammy award and been nominated for Academy and Golden Globe Awards for her songs.

exceptional scenario. Nevertheless, Lindsey's example is one that will perhaps become more emulated in the coming months and years on Music Row, as the industry reshapes and reorients itself. In the future it is likely that there will be very little that publishers can do to promote songwriters in Nashville that songwriters cannot do for themselves using savvy, dedication and diligence, qualities that Nashville songwriters possess in abundance.

Getting a song cut on Music Row is very often a result of a complex array of relationships conspiring to allow the song to be heard by a particular producer, manager or artist at a particular time. Such a listening can come about through the various connections and networks particular to the different individuals who might be collaborating on a song. Cowriting, which I discuss in the next chapter, has become standard practice largely because three songwriters who have three different publishers stand a much greater chance of their song being heard by the right person at the right time. In order to encourage productive cowrites, publishers often act as songwriters' scheduling agents, ensuring that their writers are regularly collaborating with other good writers, or with singers with whom they have connections.⁸⁷

Publishers may encourage cowriting either inside or outside of their roster of songwriters. For instance, Brian Davis' publisher, Curb Publishing, fosters relationships amongst their own roster of writers on a regular basis, as well as pairing their writers together with singers who are trying to come up with content for an upcoming recording (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010). By contrast, Gilles Goddard of Ole Publishers prefers that his songwriters have a wide range of cowriting partners, and encourages their writers to form their own networks as they see fit (Gilles Goddard, personal communication, August 20, 2010).

⁸⁷ I discuss singer (or "artist") cowrites on pages 176-86.

Owing to the unpredictability of the path any given song will travel in order to be recorded and sold, the current Nashville songwriter is less reliant on their publishers' efforts to pitch their songs and is more involved with the actual pitching of her or his songs than at any time in the past. In effect songwriters and publishers alike are tasked with finding new avenues through which their songs can be monetized, and songwriters have been forced along with their publishers to diversify their strategies.⁸⁸

Studio Staff and Record Producers

As the Opry continued to build its fan base throughout the 1940s, various employees and associates began to capitalize. Three WSM engineers developed Nashville's first commercial recording facility, Castle Studios, in 1947 (initially as a way to record jingles for the station). Shortly thereafter, session pianist Owen Bradley (with help from his guitar-playing brother Harold) built a studio in a Quonset hut behind a house on 16th Avenue South,⁸⁹ and Music Row, and along with it the Nashville recording industry, was born (Cusic 2008: 79).

Owen Bradley (Cohen's protégé at Decca), Chet Atkins (RCA Victor) and Billy Sherrill (Columbia-Epic) have become legends of the genre as much as its famous performers. Many of

⁸⁸ While beyond the scope of this discussion, it should be noted that radio represents another layer of gatekeeping in the country music industry, and radio is arguably more influential in this field than other popular music formats (Cusic 2008:143-48). I examine one instance in which songwriters interact directly with radio programmers on pages 211-12, but this type of interaction is rare, thus my omission of radio's role in the aspects of the production process that are most impactful on songwriters.

⁸⁹ This site is currently owned by Mike Curb and houses the Belmont University Music Business Program headed by Professor Don Cusic. Though not visible from the outside, the interior of the Quonset hut studio has been preserved and is used primarily by Belmont students. Americana singer Chuck Mead recently made a notable recording there, consciously assembling many of the Quonset Hut's session players who are still alive and recording cover versions of songs they had played on the original sessions of. For obvious reasons, he called his album *Back At The Quonset Hut*.

Nashville's prominent producers were musicians like Atkins and Bradley, people who wrote or cowrote the songs they produced, and who dictated when and by whom they were recorded.

These producers acted as talent scouts, arrangers and songwriting coaches to young singers, and booked all aspects of recordings sessions. Nashville's operations have relied and continue to rely on relationships between a few individuals that are granted insider status, and make most of the necessary creative decisions on behalf of their employers. Their powerful positions meant that they manipulated the sound of the genre to a considerable extent, often compelling songwriters to respond accordingly.⁹⁰

Figures like the four men mentioned above (all four in the Country Music Hall of Fame as producers) are more exceptional in Nashville today.⁹¹ A producer is more likely to be beholden to the person in an executive position above him, who is not likely to be involved in the details of the recording studio. Indeed, producers are often not employees of record companies and recording is often contracted out to independent studios, while the major companies focus on artist development and publishing. Independent record companies perform an important function by scouting and recording new talent, yet the most successful of these companies have almost inevitably ended up under a larger corporate umbrella, while others have been bought out

⁹⁰ In saying this it bears remembering that the greater responsibility for placing the right song with the right producer has until more recently been the domain of publishers and songpluggers, not the writers themselves.

⁹¹ Allen Reynolds is a songwriter with a long list of cuts that became hit songs, but he is best known as Garth Brooks producer. Paul Worley is a former session guitarist who became a music executive at Warner Brothers and later Capitol Records, yet he is mostly known as the person who discovered and produced the Dixie Chicks and championed and later produced Lady Antebellum. On a recent trip to Nashville (in May 2014) I observed my acquaintance and informant Brad Stella acting in a producer capacity, a role that he parlayed his playing and songwriting activities into. By contrast, the current king of producers on Music Row is Scott Borchetta of Big Machine Records (who count Taylor Swift as the biggest artist on a roster that currently also includes Tim McGraw and Rascal Flatts), who learned about the music business primarily from his father, a record promoter in Los Angeles and Nashville.

entirely or folded. This pattern has been repeated several times over through the decades, creating a corporate climate that is highly in flux.

Before November 2011 there were four major recording companies worldwide (all with significant representation on Music Row): Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, EMI Group and the Warner Music Group. The sale of the EMI Group (the recorded music division was sold to Universal and their publishing division to Sony) announced that month brought that number to three.⁹² As of 2008 less than 30% of the music market was not related to one of these major entertainment corporations,⁹³ but it is not clear what the industry will look like once it has adjusted to recent market realities.

A prevailing sentiment on Music Row is that the coming shift in the industry will favour the savvy independent labels and artists, as the following excerpt from an article by Erica Morphy in the *E-Commerce Times* (published in late 2011) discusses:

The silver lining . . . from EMI Group's sale will be a strong independent music community. "The independent labels will continue to become a welcoming home for former major label executives and home to talented artists who need the guidance of a supportive record company," [Eugene Foley, an agent at Foley Entertainment and author of *Artist Development -- A Distinctive Guide to the Music Industry's Lost Art*] predicted.

In turn, a stronger independent music label community will further bolster the growing trend to digital music distribution and marketing. "The industry has been consolidating for over 20 years, but the components always remain in place, just in different form," Daylle Deanna Schwartz, a music industry consultant and author of the book "I Don't Need a Record Deal," told the *E-Commerce Times*. "EMI's sale will

⁹² Only one of these three companies is U.S.-based. The Universal Music Group, owned by French media company Vivendi, was merged with the General Electric Company (GE)-owned National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in 2004 to form NBC Universal. The Sony Corporation of America, a subsidiary of the Japanese-owned Sony Corporation, controls by Sony Music Entertainment. The Warner Music Group is not part of the Time Warner conglomerate, having spun off as a separate entity in 2004, but has been owned since July 2011 by Access Industries, a U.S. industrial group with interest in natural resources and chemicals and real estate as well as media and telecommunications.

⁹³ See Cumberland 2010, <http://www.bemuso.com/musicbiz/recordcompaniesandlabels.html#noteaboutrecordlabelmergersandacquisitions>, last accessed April 26, 2014.

make independent music that much bigger, because artists will have less opportunity to be signed to the big labels.”

The independents, she went on to note, have been far ahead of the major labels in their use of digital music and the Internet for distribution. “At first the music labels didn't take the Internet seriously, then they were afraid of it, and then they started their legal actions against it,” Schwartz explained. “Meanwhile, the independent artist started grabbing domain names and websites where they can sell their music. They have been very aggressive in using the Internet to promote themselves, to sell their music.”

The indies, Schwartz concluded, have a better grasp of what the Internet can do for their industry. “They are younger and hungrier and not married to the old system,” she said. “They don't have the rules or gigantic budgets and complex deal-making processes weighing them down (Erica Morphy, E-commerce Times, <http://www.ecommercetimes.com/story/73745.html>, last accessed May 1, 2014).

The quote posits a scenario in which independent musicians have greater capacity for self-promotion than previously available, and that it is major labels, overburdened with unwieldy and costly production methods, which will have a greater adjustment to make to align with new market realities. While such sentiments may have some major label employees worried and independent companies' employees excited at the possibilities, it must be noted that this shift is far from complete, and the fact that Music Row has always been notoriously “behind the times” in terms of its production methods might preserve the status quo in country music longer than in other genres.

The current Nashville songwriter has had to begin to adjust to a seismic shift in the music industry on a global scale. Music Row is experiencing what the rest of the recorded music industry is: a massive decline in overall sales (with global sales declining from \$14.6 billion in 1999 to \$6.3 billion a decade later) (ibid). This decline is largely the effect of digital downloading, which has caused a massive change in how music is sold and consumed. Rob Cumberland, creator of the Music Business blog site *Bemuso*, describes the shift this way:

At the start of the 20th Century record companies controlled recording and sales by owning technology patents. With recordings of their work performers reached beyond

theatre and music hall to a new mass market. This made record labels central to mainstream music, and they dominated the music business through manufacturing, distribution and retail.

After World War Two they gave up their monopoly in recording technology and their last home-grown formats (78s and vinyl) became standard recording media which opened the door to independent record labels. As recording technology became available to their competitors they based their business on popular artists and popular songs. A&R men (Artists and Repertoire) working for record companies matched artists with repertoire from music publishers. Eventually record companies outsourced recording technology entirely. Now, record companies still dominate the music industry but they are simply a service supplier to the artist, among many others.

In 2010 CNN Money reported Forrester Research using RIAA figures in an article titled “Music’s Lost Decade.” The combined impact of the Internet, the big labels’ slow response, the availability of single tracks instead of albums, more access to music listening online and unlicensed copying have put a 50% dent in music sales. The big labels also seem less able to find artists with broad appeal.

In spite of this Billboard reported that in 2010 albums still account for three quarters of music sales and NPD Group reported that in 2009 CDs still represented 65% to downloads’ 35% with a break even point between the formats anticipated by 2011 (Cumberland 2010, <http://www.bemuso.com/musicbiz/recordcompaniesandlabels.html>, last accessed April 26, 2014).

Full-length recordings are a convention of the popular music industry dating back to the introduction of the long-playing record (or “LP”) in the 1950s. They have been an important factor in the income of most Nashville Songwriters, who benefit from strong album sales even if a cut doesn’t become a charting single. One effect of digital downloads is a return to how recordings were originally sold: as single tracks (or “singles”). Thus the Internet has fostered consumptive patterns beyond those endorsed by industry producers.

The country music field is somewhat exceptional in this regard. CDs still account for a healthy percentage of country music purchases. This is due to the older average age of its listeners generally, but another factor more specifically: seventy-five percent of country music CDs are sold in what Don Cusic calls “mass merchandisers,” and particularly Wal-Mart:

In 1979 Wal-Mart sold \$1 billion worth of merchandise in its 230 stores . . . [in] 1995 Wal-Mart had 1995 stores and did \$93.6 billion in business and by 1997 Wal-Mart had over 90 million customers each week and annual sales over \$100 billion . . . And

nobody sells more country music than Wal-Mart. Indeed, if the truth be known, the explosion in country music . . . is due almost as much to Sam Walton as to Garth Brooks, Randy Travis, George Strait, or any other country singer (Cusic 2008:130).

Cusic suggests fascinating and underexplored connections between U.S. mass-merchandisers and country music listeners, positing one succinct way that country music as a commercial culture is perpetuated and easily manipulated. Though Cusic discusses the 1990s, and sales of country CDs have declined significantly since then, a disproportionate amount of overall CD sales happen in large corporate stores like Wal-Mart, K-mart and Target. Thus in country music, the split of sales between downloads and physical product would favour CDs more than in other genres. One effect of this is the continued ability to shape the country music industry the three major music corporations maintain.

As significant as such a shift is it pales in comparison with the effect of illegal downloading. The music industry has miscalculated in its response to non-monetized transferring of digital music files. After initially ignoring the issue, “record executives acted like elephants to mice, roaring in anguish and attempting to stomp any adversaries who dared pilfer their profits” (Clark 2014) through legal action. This strategy failed largely because the practice had already become widespread and commonplace. The lack of effective response has forced a restructuring of all major music corporations, which has in turn destabilized a songwriter’s working environment and placed greater pressure on writers to write money making songs, stoking debates about the quality of the songs produced in such a profit-driven marketplace.

Perspectives on the Nashville Songwriter

This section examines preexisting sociocultural phenomena that contextualize and affect perceptions of Nashville songwriters and their work. These are generic categories (e.g. country

music, Tin Pan Alley, singer songwriters) that contain their own meanings and histories, yet work together to form a perception of Nashville songwriters and inform how the profession of the Nashville songwriter developed as it did. While I am being somewhat speculative here in terms of the relevance and respective impact of these phenomena, all are demonstrably relevant factors in shaping perspectives on, and perceptions of, the Nashville songwriter.

Country Music and Class

I share Pamela Fox's view of "country authenticity as a gendered⁹⁴ and racialized⁹⁵ class construction" (2008:11), intending to complicate common associations of the music with the lowbrow and the working classes. I wish to ally this writing with recent scholarship (Ching 2001, A. Fox 2004, Fox and Ching 2008, P. Fox 2009, Harkins 2004, Lange 2004, McCusker and Pecknold 2004, Mann 2008, Miller 2010, Pecknold 2007, Pruett 2010) that positions country music as a complex cultural process involving overlapping classed, racialized and gendered discourses that take on different meanings and functions over time.

Song material was by and large shared among all strata of U.S. society until the end of the century (Levine 1989:86), when mass upheavals caused by rapid industrialization and urbanization (not to mention a bitter Civil War) upset the established class order of earlier American life and caused a greater scrutiny of and anxiety about class conflicts (Miller 2010:163, Orvell 1989:104-5). It was at this time that songs came to be associated with particular (working, moneyed or elite) classes, and songs intended for "cultural uplift" (see Miller 2010:159-67), in essence those of the Western Art Music tradition, were ascribed greater value than those of "the folk" (Crawford 2001:475-79, Hamm 1983:339-41, Ignatiev 1995:130-

⁹⁴ I discuss country music songwriting and gender in chapter five.

⁹⁵ I discuss country music's racial legacy and meaning on pages 54-57.

34, 148-49, Levine 1989:100-04)⁹⁶. Popular song, as I discussed on pages 44-45, occupied a strategic middle ground somewhere between these imagined poles of art and folk, absorbing elements of each and eventually realizing its own distinct musical and textual parameters (Hamm1979:109-40). This composite nature of popular songs is reflected in the discourse about whether Nashville songs are commercial (i.e. “popular”), cultural (i.e. “folk”) or creative (i.e. “art”) products even to this day (Miller 2010:55).

Class anxieties manifest in earlier minstrel practice, negotiated throughout the postbellum era as popular music and recordings were becoming significant factors shaping U.S. cultural practices, also prepared the ideological climate for the marketing of early hillbilly recordings. Furthermore, the image of Southern whites promoted by record companies in order to create a market for these recordings was a confounding mix of popular cultural tropes that did not accurately reflect who these audiences were made up of (Harkins 2004:78-87, Lange 2004:3-4, Peterson 1997:75-77). Indeed, the connection between country music and working-class Southerners exists (and persists to this day) in spite of evidence that the audience for country music largely transcends regional and class boundaries (Malone and Neal 431, Peterson and DiMaggio 502), and songwriters are implicated in the perpetuation of this strategic connection.

Country music is promoted as a manufactured popular product, suitable for mass consumption but not for more discerning and sophisticated listeners (Miller 2010:159-67). Thus from the perspective of the privileged classes country music was and is a form of lowbrow music on a number of fronts, stained by its commercialism and unable to rise above the derision

⁹⁶ In the late nineteenth-century the coincidental formation of the Metropolitan Opera Company and the popular song industry around Tin Pan Alley, both in New York City, relates to a specific class-based renegotiation of musical cultures. Moneyed classes sought to preserve certain musical realms beyond the reach of the masses that were gaining a distinct and collective musical voice through popular song (Crawford 2001:194-95, see also Levine 1988).

reserved for poor Southern whites (ibid 55). These depictions have been widely embraced but also had their meanings reclaimed and continually contested by country music adherents mindful of the scorn with which they were widely regarded, and with no small amount of contrary opinions about those who would look down on them. This tension helps explain why the sentiments expressed in country music songs are defiantly working class in spite of evidence of country music's diverse audience.

As can be seen over and over again throughout the history of the genre, performers both embrace the stereotypes placed upon them and refuse to treat these limited depictions as restrictive, instead recontextualizing the available imagery to resonate with audiences in a way that often escapes the recognition of non-adherents (Malone 1985:40). Pierre Bourdieu has written that "a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded"; he also writes that one "cannot move from the 'primary stratum of the meaning we can grasp on the basis of our ordinary experience' to the 'stratum of secondary meaning', i.e. the 'level of meaning of what is signified', unless he possesses the concepts which go beyond the sensible properties and which identify the specifically stylistic properties of the work" (Bourdieu 1984:2-3). Bourdieu points to ways that we can misunderstand cultural processes not only through our ignorance about them, but particularly by not understanding how practices are contested through different understandings of what is being depicted. It is important to examine the preconceptions that are commonly held about country music, not only because they may reveal more about the bearer of the opinion than they do the music in question, but also because these types of judgments themselves play into how country music has taken the form it has through its history.

Nowhere does class awareness affect Nashville songwriters more than when their songs get cut by non-country popular singers (referred to as a “crossover” song) something that has happened with regularity throughout the history of Music Row (Peterson 1997: 191-92).⁹⁷ ‘Crossover’ practices include both getting songs cut by non-country singers and making country recordings that can fit into pop radio formats. This is of course related to the fact that a large percentage of mainstream country music is made by the Nashville divisions of large international corporations for whom country music is but one subset of their vast portfolios. Songs that can be cut as pop songs have to largely be rid of typical “country” referents to rurality and nostalgic longing, largely because this would taint them in the minds of the producers who market them. As crossover practices evidence, country music producers have always had a keen awareness of wider popular music practices, often exploiting them to both promote certain songs and performers and to refresh the sound of the country music genre itself.

Songwriters and the Country Music Tradition

Whether they know it or not, the new guys, they may have never heard of Jimmie Rodgers, but they’re definitely influenced by [him]. They have to be if they’re singing country music (Waylon Jennings, quoted in Burgener and Obstfeld 138).

Though the quote above refers to singers, it could apply equally to songwriters. Adding elements of other musical styles and genres to mainstream country songs is natural for Nashville songwriters who have exposure to and experience with writing non-country songs, yet staying within recognized parameters of the genre is still vitally important. After all, my informants all identify themselves as writers of something called country music, and live and ply their trade in a place called Nashville.

⁹⁷ I discuss crossover hits more on pages 109, 123 and 138.

I argue that the many economic, historical and social processes implicated in country music's legacy has direct relation to the work of any current songwriter regardless of the extent to which they would acknowledge, espouse or champion it. Many aspects of their work had become normalized before my informants even thought about coming to Nashville. The presence of so many unquestioned musical, textual and cultural features of the music means that songwriters are beholden to country music's legacy regardless of their conscious knowledge or acknowledgement of it, or their ambivalence toward it.

Though knowledge of the musical and textual vocabulary of country music is a must for a professional country music songwriter, my informants arguably could have learned much of this vocabulary without ever going to Nashville. They are all capable musicians, many with performing careers before they came to Nashville and became songwriters. While many didn't play country music prior to their Nashville lives (or played a hybridized form of it like Photoglo describes above), they were certainly familiar with it on some level. After all, country music has been on the airwaves for several decades now and is readily accessible to anyone wanting to seek it out (and even those who are trying to avoid it).

Is coming to Nashville imperative for someone wanting to write commercial country songs then? Is there something about Nashville and country music that requires a process of conditioning or reorientation on the aspiring songwriter's behalf? As songwriter Pat Alger says, "Most people that come here from New York or Toronto or any place that isn't really immersed in what's going on here has an idea of what they think country music is all about and it's usually wrong" (Pat Alger, personal communication, April 25, 2012).

Alger's observation is not simple dismissal of outsiders who are too lazy or scared or talentless to make the move to town. It reflects a sentiment that I heard uniformly from my

informants: Nashville operates by its own rules and codes, most of them unapparent to the uninitiated and yet crucial to understand in order to be part of the musical community there. Some of these rules and codes can be classified as impositions on the process from the gatekeepers of the industry (in Nashville and elsewhere), but many more relate to country music culture and the ways it determines how things are done in town, or simply on the fact that country music is produced by people who live and work close to each other and interact face-to-face.

Nevertheless, claiming that the origins and parameters of the generic formation they are associated with are significant to the work of current Nashville songwriters nevertheless requires some scrutiny. Songwriters in Nashville don't always view themselves as part of a historical continuum that they are beholden to reify and submit themselves to, and often do not feel particularly loyal to it even as they write Nashville songs for a living. Many writers I spoke with profess ignorance about country music history in conversation, more with dismissal than shame. Nashville songwriters tend to see themselves as independent agents in town for career purposes, and are concerned with how they are going to sell their next song more than with how Hank Williams or Kris Kristofferson might have done it before them, or where the music they write originated from.

This approach to their own livelihoods has bred a working culture that is informed by a broad history of songwriting, yet is occupied by individuals who blend a variety of generic markers together as a way to innovate on pre-existing musical styles.⁹⁸ Jim Photoglo elaborates on this idea:

⁹⁸ The latest trend in Nashville songwriting is to appropriate elements of hip hop, as seen in recent songs by Brad Paisley, Jason Aldean and, most prominently, Florida Georgia Line, whose hit song "Cruise" was remixed by the rapper Nelly.

I grew up in Los Angeles listening to pop radio . . . when I was really conscious of listening to the radio was when I was five up through my teens, and pop radio encompassed all sorts of things. You could hear Skeeter Davis, *and* the Everly Brothers, *and* Eddy Arnold, Tennessee Ernie Ford, Jimmy Dean, Brenda Lee, next to the Drifters, the Kingston Trio . . . it was wide open. It was just called “popular music.” So that was my exposure to country music. Later on in high school I worked in a machine shop, and the owner was a big fan of West Coast country music, and so I learned a lot more about it. In the seventies when I was stumbling around as a backup musician playing bass, there were a lot of those “Eagle-esque” country rock bands. We would cover Merle Haggard and George Jones songs. But as far as I [am] concerned, songs are three-minute songs, and I’ve always believed it doesn’t matter what you call it. You can take any song and arrange it any way . . . a good song is a good song.

I’ve always believed that classic songwriting is classic songwriting. Stephen Sondheim says the hardest thing to do is write a three-minute song. So it’s never mattered to me what you call it. Gary Burr is not what you’d call traditional country, Mike Reid is not what you’d call traditional country, Tom Douglas is not what you’d call traditional country, there’s a bunch of ‘em . . . If you look at what’s come out of here over the years . . . I just think the lines have always been blurry, and again I think it always comes back to songwriters and songwriting (Jim Photoglo, personal communication, February 25, 2012).

Photoglo’s perspective as expressed here is not unusual amongst Nashville songwriters, as my own interviews with Gary Burr and Tom Douglas, two of the writers he mentioned and two of the most successful writers in recent Nashville history,⁹⁹ confirmed. These songwriters demonstrate how the connection between the origins of the genre and the work of current Nashville songwriters is not as inevitable as one might assume. Indeed, assuming that all songwriters in Nashville possess knowledge of this history is like expecting a professional athlete to know the history of the sport they play. It may be the case, but it should not be surprising when it isn’t.

⁹⁹ Tom Douglas has had his songs turned into #1 hits by Lady Antebellum (“I Run To You”), Miranda Lambert (“The House That Built Me”) and Tim McGraw (“Grown Men Don’t Cry”, “Southern Voice”). His song “Coming Home”, from the soundtrack to the 2010 Hollywood movie *Country Strong*, received Grammy and Golden Globe nominations for Best Original Song. Gary Burr has had cuts with performers as diverse as Ringo Starr, Juice Newton, Kelly Clarkson, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Reba McEntire, Tanya Tucker and LeAnn Rimes. He is already a member of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, though he remains very much active.

Here is Scotty Emerick, a songwriter and guitarist who is best known for his ongoing collaborations with Toby Keith, picking up a similar theme:

SE: I listened to a lot of . . . I *love* simple, old school pop. Paul Davis, James Taylor . . . old-school 70s pop.

CW: What about all that California stuff (Jackson Browne, The Eagles)?

SE: I got into the Eagles big time. I got into them when I was 16. “Peaceful Easy Feeling” . . . all that. I really got into that. I was wore out of country by then, and kinda started branching out. Eagles, Lynyrd Skynyrd . . . Southern rock stuff. [My parents] always had Linda Ronstadt, Emmylou Harris, and that’s all California, but still country. And the Eagles were country, so I didn’t branch out too far. James Taylor I got into, but other than that not too much rock.

CW: You’re a Southern boy.

SE: Yeah (chuckles). I never got into too much distortion. We had *Time Pieces* (Clapton’s Greatest Hits) (Scotty Emerick, personal communication, April 4, 2012).

Emerick grew up in Florida listening to country and gospel music, and expanded his tastes in his teenage years (as many people do at that age). While Emerick didn’t stray too far from country music, his response reinforces Photoglo’s comments about there being a time in the 1960s and 1970s when country music was more influential upon a broad range of rock and pop subgenres than it is presently. Further, Emerick’s views align with most of those expressed by many of my informants: that Nashville songwriters are more likely to pay as much attention to a broader history of popular songwriting and its many generic manifestations than to that of country music exclusively.

Songwriters are not precocious upstarts with an exaggerated sense of themselves and no respect for tradition. However, their task is not to preserve but rather to be the source of invigoration in a genre often associated with resistance to newer sociocultural trends. If, as Michael Hughes asserts, “meanings embodied in country music have emerged out of the ongoing interactions between producers and consumers over time” (Hughes 186), then songwriters provide the songs that fuel this interaction, and ultimately determine the future direction of the

genre. They provide the texts that reinvigorate and refresh a much broader and longstanding discourse, and give voice to an imagined community of listeners. In the milieu of country music the songwriter looms large, even if a songwriter's role in the production process is often deemphasized and little understood.

My informants' work thus reflects the legacy of both the genre and their own particular place within it as songwriters. All Nashville country music songwriters, whether it is in their consciousness or not, are part of a process that began long ago, due to a confluence of factors I explored in the last chapter. In one way or another all of my informants describe an acculturating process involved with coming to Nashville, always as a result of needing to correct a previous misconception (or lack of conception in the first place) they had about how country music is made.

Yet while the country music legacy is a significant and unavoidable factor in their work, writing songs in Nashville is about both learning the parameters of "the biz" and also how to be personally productive as part of a songwriting community. This community is in turn one of a series of overlapping social and commercial networks that constitute a songwriter's broader milieu. This milieu involves interaction between individuals espousing a wide range of views on and varying degrees of allegiance to country music as a genre culture. Further, a Nashville songwriter is tasked with innovation on as much as perpetuation of their chosen tradition, and their songs ideally display an awareness of current popular styles beyond those of country music. My informants' accounts of their learning curve once arriving in Nashville provide ample demonstration of this complex blend of personal, sociocultural and economic factors involved with songwriting specifically and country music production more generally.

Tin Pan Alley, Singer Songwriters and Songwriter Authenticity

Gary Burr: . . . my business card says: “I’m Gary Burr and I make shit up.”

CW: So is there no place for sincerity in the songwriting process?

GB: Not in mine! No good can come of that! [I laugh loudly, a reaction he clearly intended] No seriously . . . [I] let my muse take me wherever I want to go. I never sit back and say, “What am I going through?” I *never* do that. The only song I’ve ever written that had anything to do with me is “That’s My Job” [a song written about his father in response to his death].

CW: Even back when you started?

GB: Oh definitely. Those lyrics didn’t mean anything, other than “That’s My Job.” That’s the only time I’ve exposed myself to the children of country music (Gary Burr , personal communication, , April 23, 2012).

The above is songwriter Gary Burr’s frankly hilarious description of his own writing process.

Burr’s contention is that his songwriting is goal-directed toward selling in the marketplace broadly speaking – and indeed he has had numerous songs placed with non-country singers – rather than any sort of cathartic release of his inner feelings.

In the last chapter I discussed the popular song tradition in the U.S., which dates back to the mid-nineteenth-century, and which culminated in the development of Tin Pan Alley in New York. The template of Tin Pan Alley production methods, which were deliberately adopted in Nashville, is thus the source of the idea of songwriting as a professional activity, and a view of the songwriter as a worker and part of an industrial process. Songwriters on Tin Pan Alley were also compelled to create according to a market, and were beholden to this market’s parameters and expectations. Songwriters on Tin Pan Alley and Music Row quite literally manufacture products that are later sold.

As well as being a product-producing labourer, the Nashville songwriter could be seen as a kind of shadow figure in mainstream country music, and indeed the historian Jimmie N. Rogers has described country songs as “ghost-written love letters” (Rogers 1989:10, 16). This descriptor

could also apply to Tin Pan Alley songwriters, who also wrote for a commercial market but achieved poignancy through their commentary on and artful articulation of issues and longings of relevance to intended listeners, all the while obscuring their own subjectivity in the song's lyrical content. While some may dismiss such a practice as commercial exploitation of the deeply personal, it bears noting that there is a particular type of cultural intimacy¹⁰⁰ at work here on behalf of songwriters, who are able to speak to real concerns in poetic and often-formulaic ways. Gary Burr's "making shit up" is perhaps better understood in terms like this: his lyrics do mean something to many people, even if the person who wrote them was just imagining the scenario he wrote about.

So what silent charge is Burr defending himself against in the interview excerpted above (and am I alluding to in my question about sincerity)? The following quote by twenty-year-old Belmont University songwriting major Liza Anne caught my attention because it articulates a widely held belief about songwriters as those who access and articulate inner longings and deeply held beliefs that are not otherwise acknowledged by listeners:

As songwriters, we're the people upon whom nothing is lost. It's a burden in some ways, but it's such a beautiful burden. We get to be the voice for all those people who don't know how to put those things into words (*American Songwriter* 29, no.4).

In essence, this quote positions songwriters acts as a voice for or epitome of the "people," and the young age of its source indicates that this perception is one that is inherited as soon as people begin consuming songs and applying them to their own lives.

¹⁰⁰ Herzfeld (2005) discusses cultural intimacy in terms of embedded knowledge and insight (i.e. beyond that which is articulated or commonly understood) that reaches into the realms of nostalgia and embarrassment about how one's cultural group is represented to outsiders. Martin Stokes has thus far written the most direct application of this idea to the realm of popular music, *The Republic of Love: Cultural Intimacy in Turkish Popular Music* (2010).

But why would Liza Anne or anyone else suppose that a popular song might be or should be autobiographical? Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor trace the origins of the autobiographical song to the 1930s,¹⁰¹ and claim that its pervasiveness is an even more recent development:

The change only began in the 1960s because of the explosion of singer-songwriters, with Dylan and the Beatles leading the pack. It was only then that it became not only acceptable but required for singers to write their own songs (Barker and Taylor 129).

Barker and Taylor claim that songs that both took on the appearance of and were lauded for being autobiographical are most associated in the popular imagination with *singer-songwriters*. The modern figure of the singer-songwriter arose out of the so-called “folk revival” that happened in the U.S. in the 1960s, a counter-cultural phenomenon most typified by Bob Dylan that had precedents in blues and folk singers in the 1920s and 1930s. Some popular and rock performers became known as singer-songwriters after the emergence of The Beatles’ Paul McCartney and John Lennon, who were more influential on iconic singer-songwriters such as James Taylor, Paul Simon and Bruce Springsteen than earlier folk-inspired singer-songwriters like Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie were.

In spite of its fairly recent arrival as a narrative strain in popular song, the autobiographical song has proliferated widely, as Barker and Taylor further argue:

By now, it’s almost de rigeur to sing about one’s own life, even if one has nothing to say. In 2004 alone, superstars Ashlee Simpson, Usher, and Alicia Keys all had number-one hit albums entitled, respectively, *Autobiography*, *Confessions*, and *The Diary of Alicia Keys*. Artists ranging from Kurt Cobain to Jennifer Lopez to Fifty Cent have used songs as the equivalent of press releases, telling their fans exactly how they want their real lives to be perceived (even when they didn’t write all the songs themselves). Of course, this is exactly what [Jimmie] Rodgers and [John] Lennon did too. But while it was once rare, now it’s the name of the game (Barker and Taylor 129-30).

¹⁰¹ Barker and Taylor suggest that Jimmie Rodgers’ “TB Blues” might be the first song which listeners were conscious of being autobiographical. (Barker and Taylor 103-05)

The writers suggest that the ubiquity the autobiographical strain in popular song lyrics has allowed for a lack of scrutiny of the claims made in them, claims which are not consistent with the real lives of the performers of these songs. Thus songs that appear as autobiographical become vehicles through which performers construct their professional identities, personas that likely bear little resemblance to the private life and behavior of the performer her- or himself. It has also allowed singer songwriters to use the autobiographical song as a powerful framing device for their songs owing to the emotional impact of the self-exploration and self-confession they appear to depict.

Through the singer-songwriter figure, romantic notions of the artist, standing apart from yet representative of the madding crowd, and able to access an all-encompassing view of its collective discontents, are perpetuated in popular discourse (arguably beyond their relevance). The singer songwriter mythos encourages making connections between a song and its creator. This mythos, with much older roots in Ancient Greece and European troubadour and African bard traditions, also ascribes particular wisdom to the songwriter as the bearer of acute insight into the culture, and who is able to express this insight in song form (Brackett xix).

Mythic notions persist about outlaw Nashville songwriters, unaffected by commercial pressures, who wield “three chords and the truth” to represent the yearnings they ostensibly share with their audiences. This prototype could be said to derive from legendary writers such as Willie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson who are the closest things to singer songwriters in the Nashville pantheon that stretches back at least to Hank Williams. The most notorious country music singer-songwriter other than Nelson and Kristofferson is Merle Haggard, but his depiction is devoid of the countercultural trappings of the folk singer that the other two are infused with. Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn have both had multiple hits with songs they wrote that were

perceived to be autobiographical. Steve Earle comes close to singer-songwriter status, though he has written more songs that were cut by others than he has turned into hits himself. Brad Paisley and Alan Jackson are both country performers who write most of their own material, but, like Haggard, they are not usually understood as coming from a tradition typified by Bob Dylan. Then there is Taylor Swift, who at her young age has already written and sung several chart-topping songs, but who in so many ways is in a category of her own, not entirely country, pop or singer-songwriter.¹⁰²

In fact, since the beginning of Music Row, instances of mainstream country performers who write the best or even the majority of the material they record are the exception, and though many individuals are engaged in both activities, songwriting and performing have always been treated largely as distinct occupations. As I discuss in chapter two, the model for Music Row song production was Tin Pan Alley, a confluence of publishers and producers that arose in New York in the 1880s to supply the burgeoning vaudeville theatre scene. In this model, song production is largely mediated by publishers who respond to the demands of producers who are constantly trolling for new songs, not by singer songwriters.

This separation of the tasks of writing and performing country songs is, Aaron Fox argues, part of a “real, locally salient understanding of musical and verbal art” in which ordinary speech is denaturalized as song lyrics, only to have this speech renaturalized in performance, in that the performance act is “the bold assertion of the relevance of such ‘denaturalizing’ poetic movements in the context of ‘ordinary’ discourse and experience.” (Fox 2004:230). While Fox is careful not to draw too rigid a distinction between the act of writing country song lyrics and performing a country song (in that there are many examples of the same individual doing both),

¹⁰² I discuss how the singer songwriter archetype affects perceptions of Nashville songwriters further on pages 232, 265 and 285.

he does reinforce the fact that these two tasks are comprised of somewhat oppositional yet intricately related impulses. This aspect of country music songs and their performance is implicated in the task of writing songs in Nashville, in that there is a multi-stage process of bringing a song that is reflective of (and thus resonant with) country music listeners, and songwriters who don't perform the songs that they write can nevertheless work toward providing the text that will animate an eventual performance.

Returning to singer songwriters, it is arguable that since Bob Dylan, James Taylor and their ilk, there may be a tendency to uncritically place the subject of a song into the context of the 'real' life of the singer her- or himself (even though this real life is largely imagined). Put another way, since the early 1960s singers singing their own material and ostensibly singing about themselves have been prevalent in popular music to such an extent that common perceptions of those who write popular songs (including country songs) will inevitably be largely informed by the figure of the singer songwriter.¹⁰³

Since the late 1940s Nashville has been the natural and inevitable destination for every country singer, songwriter, producer, instrumentalist or agent who aspires to her or his maximum potential. While producers on Music Row have attempted to establish country music as an industry and to market this industry's products to as wide an audience possible, institutions such as the Country Music Hall of Fame attempt to both assert an image of Nashville as the culmination of the hillbilly tradition, and the protector and arbiter of a longstanding musical culture. This negotiation between tradition and innovation extends to how songwriters and the work they do are perceived. At the conclusion of this dissertation I examine the figure of the

¹⁰³ Many of my informants had performing experiences prior to coming to Nashville that would have qualified them as singer-songwriters themselves. This is no more apparent than when Nashville songwriters perform in front of audiences as they do at songwriter venues in Nashville such as the Bluebird Cafe and Douglas Corners.

songwriter that emerges from the confluence of Music Row's demands, pre-existing cultural phenomena and practices that inevitably contextualize their work, the expectations and tastes of country music listeners and the individual agency employed by songwriters as they account for these factors while they create songs. For now I hope this chapter has helped illustrate the variety of ways that songwriters, as the source of country music's principal commodity and cultural artifact, the country song, are forced to work and position themselves within a shifting terrain of musical and cultural meaning in order to get their creations recorded and sold.

Chapter 4: Writing By Committee: Co-writing and its Effects

Introduction: Cowriter Country

In the series of overlapping professional networks that constitute Music Row, no network is more important to songwriters than that comprised of his or her fellow songwriters. It is noticeable how supportive and encouraging Nashville songwriters are toward one another, at least on the surface. Those who try to climb over the backs of their fellow songwriters, ignoring some and endearing themselves to others in order to favourably position themselves, are viewed with suspicion, derision and even censure. Conversely, stories abound of established writers mentoring younger ones that show promise, and of longstanding promises being honoured amongst collaborators. Perhaps the most tangible manifestation of the reciprocity that exists within the Nashville songwriting community is the tacit agreement that writers' royalty¹⁰⁴ shares are divided equally amongst all who participate in a song's creation (i.e. those who are in the room when it was written or are asked to contribute at a later time by mutual agreement amongst the other writers).

This lack of overt competitiveness may seem counterintuitive given that there is a large pool of writers and relatively few opportunities available for placing their songs with performers, but there are hidden factors in play. Richard Peterson and Howard White have explored how peer

¹⁰⁴ Songwriter royalties are divided into four types. The most prominent of these are *mechanical royalties* (for songs recorded and sold on some form of media) and *performance royalties* (for songs played in concerts and other live settings). Increasingly, *synchronization royalties* ("sync rights") factor into songwriters' incomes owing to proliferation of original songs in TV shows, movies, web-based media and cell phone ringtones. The final type of royalty paid to songwriters is *print royalties*, which are typically negligible compared to the other types of income a song might generate.

groups of workers employed within informal occupations such as songwriting (i.e. those whose work conditions are not imposed from without) will form seemingly non-competitive work environments. This outward veneer of reciprocity masks how these workers form cliques – the two scholars term these formations “simplexes” – through which they “discipline and reward each other through gossip and the exchange of favors,” seek to “control the relevant people in the task environment by shaping the flow of information,” and reward members who “support, rather than challenge, the simplex” (Peterson and White 18-19). Songwriters in Nashville have fostered an observable culture of peer support, yet this support has its limits, and is not extended toward just anyone out of simple benevolence. Rather, this overt camaraderie masks a deeper process of informal peer selection.

For at least a decade now, the vast majority of songs written by Nashville songwriters and cut in Nashville studios have been collaborations between two or more writers (most often three, and sometimes up to five). Though Nashville songwriters have written together throughout the history of Music Row, in these instances cowriting was generally prompted by a desire for inspiration more than by economic strategizing. By contrast, it is expected that current country will be cowritten.

The current expectation placed upon Nashville songwriters to collaborate with other writers compels them to take advantage of this expectation in any way they can, and in this sense forging good relationships with other writers makes practical sense. Phil Barton here talks about his perception of the tactical importance of being friendly and outgoing as a Nashville songwriter:

CW: [Being good at] interacting with other people . . . that’s a big bonus here, right?

PB: Oh yeah. Crucial. Especially when you’re a starting songwriter here it’s important obviously to make friends . . . and [if you want to get] in the room with [other more

established songwriters] for the first time, it's not like you can just run into them and shove a CD and say, "Let's write tomorrow."

The thing about Nashville is that there's so many things going on, like showcases, and you can bump into people a lot. If you connect with a person I'd say three to five times, they're gonna ask you to write, probably, you know? And then you get in a room, and it's not forceful.

I mean, there's a lot of people that just come and shove CDs. I mean, maybe that works [for them], but . . . (Phil Barton, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

Barton is an Australian who has had a lot of success in a short time on Music Row — less than four years as of our interview — and is known for his work ethic and high levels of productivity. He is a very engaging person with a warm and friendly demeanor, and his observations indicate how he leverages this to create cowriting opportunities (which, by his own account and according to his local reputation, he never seems to lack). Generally speaking, increasing one's body of potential collaborators allows a songwriter to be selective about which cowriters bring the best expectations of good results. The advice songwriter Rivers Rutherford gives to songwriters who are new to Nashville is "go play your songs for anybody that'll listen . . . listen to as many people as you can, and write with as many people as will sit down with you" (quoted in Brown 2014:vii). An aspiring songwriter is always looking to write with better known writers and find reliable collaborators as their careers proceed, both to improve the quality of their own songs and to tap into other writers' connections.

Keeping in mind that each of the songwriters in a cowriting session (or "cowrite") might likely be an employee of a different publisher, cowriting has the effect of dispersing any potential income amongst a wider set of recipients (songwriters and their publishers). However, the tradeoff is that a larger net is being cast for the song and thus a much greater chance that one of the parties involved will find a way to get the song cut. This situation is desirable enough for publishers that only in the most exceptional cases will a song written by a single writer receive

consideration for a cut¹⁰⁵ (and that usually because of artist or producer interest as opposed to being pitched by a publisher). Due to this arrangement, those songwriters who are used to cowriting or who adapt particularly well to it vastly increase their chances to succeed.

Beyond the pragmatic explanations for the prevalence of cowriting on Music Row, there are many opinions and justifications offered for the practice by songwriters and industry figures alike. More significantly for my study, there is a wide and impressive array of responses enacted by Nashville songwriters to maximize the potential of their songs. In this chapter I examine how cowriting affects songwriters' views, practice and output, positioning cowriting amongst Nashville songwriters as an imposition¹⁰⁶ placed upon their practice by Music Row, but also looking at the ways that songwriters have responded to this imposition in order to maintain or enhance their ability to write sellable songs. In the final section of this chapter I explore a range of songwriters' perspectives on the controversial phenomenon of "artist cowrites,"¹⁰⁷ which have become an almost unavoidable aspect of a Nashville songwriter's work in recent years. As is observable throughout this chapter, Music Row's demand for cowritten country songs elicits multi-faceted responses from songwriters. These responses demonstrate how commerce, culture and creativity are all continually and inevitably interconnected in their work, and interwoven into the songs they write.

¹⁰⁵ "Cut" here refers to getting a song recorded and released on an album. A distinction is then made between an "album cut", which earns royalties whenever the entire album is purchased, and a single, which sells separately from the album.

¹⁰⁶ I persist in my characterization of cowriting as an imposition placed on songwriters simply because to work this way is now an expectation of Music Row producers and publishers. The fact that many happily embrace the practice, and may choose to do so regardless of Music Row's demands, does not change the fact that cowriting is imposed.

¹⁰⁷ In the previous chapter I avoided using the industry nomenclature of "artist" as a synonym for "singer" that is commonly conflated in Nashville, feeling that this casual equation is misleading. Here I use the term "artist" in its specific sense: to describe a singer or band that is signed to a recording contract.

Effects of Cowriting

I separate the types of effects that the practice of cowriting has on my informants and all current Nashville songwriters into three general categories: the effects on songwriters' philosophical and psychological approach to their work; effects on songwriters' practice or procedure for writing songs; and the effects on songs themselves. While certainly a non-exhaustive synopsis of the practice, these sections allow for a greater understanding of the many factors involved in cowriting, and how a variety of creative adaptations to the cowriting regimen is vital for the success of those wishing to make a living as a songwriter in Nashville.

Effects of Cowriting on Songwriters

To many of my informants, cowriting has become synonymous with the act of songwriting itself in the context of Nashville and Music Row. More than being simply tolerant of the practice, they wholeheartedly embrace cowriting with others as a way to write songs. Gordie Sampson here describes how he cultivates the environment for a cowriting session before he has even arrived for an appointment with his collaborators:

You don't wanna be the guy who shows up and says "Ya know I gotta verse and a chorus," which is really 80% of the song . . . not mathematically 80% of the song but you got 80% of the work done . . . you've got the vibe mapped out . . . you kinda don't wanna do that cuz that kinda excludes . . . songwriting is about vibe . . . you must always be very . . . there's respect . . . I think that alone would be disrespectful, slightly disrespectful, to your cowriter . . .

CW: So do you ever write on your own?

GS: No . . . I abhor writing on my own . . . I honestly don't even think about it . . . I used to do it but it was so hard . . . there's something about the dynamic of collaborating that I was just born to do . . . it's such a bizarre dynamic. It defies all kinds of laws of gravity and everything else . . . (Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011).

Clearly Sampson – who had written songs with Ashley MacIsaac, Bruce Guthro and several other Canadian singers before he made the move to Nashville – relies on collaborators to provide incentive and inspiration for productivity.

Songwriter Brian Davis seems to share Sampson’s keenness for cowriting:

CW: You must like it when you can just write with the other writers.

BD: Love that . . . that’s my favourite . . . that’s what the retreats are all about, you go and it’s just the guys, and the song quality goes through the roof . . . we wind up in a situation where we’ve been writing so much with people that we feel like we’re having to fight for it, that we actually sharpen ourselves up so much, and we also want to write with each other so much that by the time we get together it’s like, “Bam!,” it just flows out . . . it’s beautiful . . . that’s some of the coolest parts . . . (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

Davis is here talking about working with his regular collaborators, all of whom are signed to publishing deals with his publisher, Curb Music. His “fight for it” comment alludes to how so much of a songwriters’ task is to work with people who are less skilled as songwriters (singers with little songwriting experience or those who are visiting Nashville to gain this experience)¹⁰⁸, and thus how getting together with the other members of his cohort seems effortless and even cathartic by comparison.

Scotty Emerick also talks with enthusiasm about writing songs in collaboration with others, something he equates with Nashville and his decision to move there:

CW: Do you ever write by yourself?

SE: Most of the time I cowrite, I collaborate.

CW: You like [doing] that?

SE: I do . . . I never really had a bunch to say. I naturally didn’t have something I need[ed] to express. Not saying I wouldn’t have ideas. I never was a kid who was just, like, jotting pages of poetry down. I was always playing and singing songs, figuring out the simplicity of what made that song great . . . I spent my whole childhood playing by myself. I get bored . . . I like the camaraderie and the togetherness and the security of it, the confidence booster it gives by talking it out, making it right. [I] never

¹⁰⁸ I discuss artist cowrites in the final section of this chapter.

got a thrill by myself doing it (Scotty Emerick, personal communication, April 4, 2012).

Emerick reinforces the view of cowriting that Sampson, Davis and many others I spoke with have: it is a positive aspect of their professional regimen that increases their productivity and makes songwriting more enjoyable at the same time.

Songwriter Phil Barton describes his cowrites as opportunities for reputation and relationship building, and is concerned with making a strong impression on first time collaborators.

The most important thing when you get into a write for the first time with someone is, you bring something, like a great idea. You inspire them. You know what? If you can get one of the best songs they've ever got in the first session, they're always gonna write with you. That's been key to me. I just know I gotta absolutely nail the frickin song on that first write. Then you're forever gonna have a great writing relationship with that person (Phil Barton, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

Here Barton positions cowriting sessions as tactical exercises, any one of which could potentially lead to a cut. The differences that characterize these songwriters' approach to cowriting do not represent contradictions so much as the and proclivities and personality traits of the individual writers, yet serve to illustrate how the methods of writing a Nashville song are as varied as the songwriters who attempt to write them.

While many songwriters effortlessly and enthusiastically embrace it, cowriting forces some songwriters into entirely unfamiliar territory. These writers struggle to find their voice in cowriting sessions. Victoria Banks here gives a sense of the emotional and psychological hurdles that she had to overcome:

When I first moved to town . . . cowriting is a huge deal here, and I moved here thinking I better start cowriting now, cuz that what people do . . . I hadn't done it before . . . I tried to cowrite for the first coupla years I was here and it was a real struggle because I wasn't confident enough to really express myself. I would censor

everything to the point where everything would sound stupid in my head so I wouldn't say anything, I'd clam up . . . or I wouldn't stand up for what I thought, you know . . . so the songs would be someone else's idea or nothing at all . . . (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

Banks alludes to how certain songwriters, owing to their own insecurities and preferred working processes, may find cowriting difficult.¹⁰⁹ Songwriters are required to find ways to make cowriting productive in spite of such obstacles, and as I examine in chapter 5 of this dissertation, Banks' experiences themselves serve as an example of how this might be done.

I contend that, more than mere camaraderie, cowriting sessions like the ones described here are used as a way to mitigate factors that might affect a songwriter's output in a counterproductive way. These factors are both personal (i.e. relating to inner doubts and struggles that might impede a songwriter) and professional (i.e. related to the fact that songs are inevitably tied to the commercial marketplace, though they are intended to sound sincere and portray intimate longings and inner struggles). The experiences of the songwriters quoted above, and the many more that I have talked to, suggest a particular sociality that Nashville songwriters collectively create and foster during cowriting sessions, a temporary and short-lived yet remarkably intimate safe zone.

This social space allows songwriters to write songs based on plausibly real life scenarios and sentiments that are also intended to be sold and widely consumed. Songwriters often reveal personal thoughts and experiences not typically shared amongst acquaintances or work

¹⁰⁹ I discuss Banks' particular experiences as a cowriter, their gendered implications, and how she was able to use the supportive environment of cowriting sessions as a way to remain productive during a time of emotional trauma (due to the sudden death of her mother and the demise of her marriage) in the following chapter. In her case she did this by being selective about her collaborators (limiting them to certain women or the few men which she felt comfortable opening up to), something that came with professional risks (in that it restricted her field of potential collaborators) and was a temporary strategy.

colleagues, yet these are just as quickly left behind once one such recollection produces a workable idea for a song. The social space of the cowriting session is especially notable given that many collaborators are not previously acquainted, and many have been placed together at the behest of managers and publishers. While more ethnographic work on cowriting sessions needs to be done on this under-examined phenomenon, songwriters indicate how cowriting sessions are a creative and empowering environment in which they collectively create songs. They are pervasive to the extent that they are intrinsic to the work of Nashville songwriters, and thus a significant factor in how songwriters, through a mass-mediated meta-conversation with listeners, perpetuate the country music genre.

Effects of Cowriting on Songwriting

Cowriting alters how songwriters make decisions and approach the task of writing songs in tangible ways. Cowriting has come to define the ways that Nashville songwriters organize their professional tasks, to the extent that many of my informants could not imagine being productive otherwise. Those that do write songs alone do so for largely personal reasons, and with little or no expectation of getting those songs recorded. Particularly to songwriters who have arrived in town over the last five to ten years, and increasingly for all songwriters pitching their songs on Music Row, cowriting *is* songwriting in Nashville.

Scheduling

Songwriters use their cowriting sessions as a way to organize and schedule their working day and week. The act of committing to a time to meet a cowriter, and traveling to that place in order to work, represents a way for songwriters to measure their time as productive. Here Brian Davis

alludes to some of the ways this works in his songwriting process, and how he balances his time between performing and writing, using each to inform the other.

CW: So what is your business? Artist vs. songwriter, are you 50/50? How does that work?

BD: They actually in a weird way intertwine because every time I leave and go on the road I become re-centered with . . . what I need to be writin' about, what I need to be doin' . . . so when I get back Monday or Tuesday, get back in town and go to work, go writin' songs again, I know the people, and . . . that's somethin' that has fueled . . . that's been a huge resource to me . . . So many people in this town who are writers never go out on the road and see what matters . . . They can sit here in town and think up a cool song about corn fields, but if they go play in a corn field and meet the guy that's plowin' it, that's a whole different song . . . so to me [being an artist and a songwriter are] closely intertwined, and I probably work 100% at both, you know what I mean? I wish I could say . . . my wife would love me if I could say that, ya know, "I do 50/50" . . . or "I do 30/30 and give them 40" . . . but for me, it's always on . . . I field questions or decisions all day long about both, ya know what I mean?

CW: So you tend to just go out on the weekends and then write during the week?

BD: Yep. Typically speaking, Thursday through Sunday, that's what I got set aside for shows, and then Mondays through Thursdays in town writin' . . . (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

Obviously Davis has a full schedule, balancing his responsibilities as a husband and father of two young girls with his seven-day-a-week musical activities, necessitating a tightly organized daily agenda. Writers such as Victoria Banks are not as diligent about organizing their time, but have adapted to the cowriting regimen to suit their own particular habits and strengths:

For a while I set up sessions every day, 5 days a week, 10 o'clock in the morning with different people . . . that quickly became very exhausting. I went from that to still five days a week but I would have regular weekly cowrites with a couple of people, so I'd have Rachel Proctor every Tuesday, and Tia Sillers every Wednesday, and then I'd have new people the other days, and that worked for a while . . . (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010)

The rigours of a steady schedule involving cowrites with many different writers did not suit Banks, who found a way to be productive with a balance of exploratory cowrites with new collaborators and regular, recurring sessions with more familiar ones.

Phil Barton finds under-utilized collaborators and works at unusual times of the day as a way to increase his own output. This approach to scheduling has garnered him a reputation for productivity and hard work even amongst his notoriously hard working colleagues.

You know what's great about this town is . . . there's a lot of cancelations that go on in Nashville, and if you can be a guy that can maneuver stuff, that's the key. If I get called now [that] my eleven o'clock is sick today . . . A lot of people would go home, take the day off. But there's a bunch of guys I know that I can call, that we can make something happen. After an amount of time, those writes get better that you can pull together in a day. Which means the songs are gonna be better, you know? I mean, that's what it's all about.

I'll mostly just book one write for 10:30 or 11, sometimes have an afternoon 3:30ish tentative, you know? And then something will fall together in the evening. I write with a lot of Canadian artists that come down. I write with a lot of Australian artists obviously that phone me. I've got a Danish producer in town today so I'm writing with him this evening. There's just opportunities that come in from out of town.

CW: Ok, I get how you can write three songs a day, but this isn't what most people are doing.

PB: There's a few key ingredients. I'm really a melody man, and so I find a couple of great lyricist guys – there's a guy in town Kris Bergness that's a great lyricist guy – and you just become friends with these guys. If there's an artist coming through town . . . Say it's a Canadian artist. I know I can call Kris, and he'll write at 7 o'clock at night, and we've got a chance to make their record, so it's like, "Let's do this." I can just do my thing, the melody thing and the vibe thing, and he can just put a lyric on it, and we can talk to the artist and get whatever they want – they can have whatever amount of creative input they want – but me and Kris together . . . we can just do our things and it's *natural* for us.

You know what? People say, "Oh, you write three songs a day!" I feel like you walk into a new song and it's like you're fresh again (Phil Barton, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

While Barton is somewhat exceptional, his account suggests that there are a variety of possible approaches to scheduling issues amongst my informants. These approaches reflect their varied personal traits and work habits, and are geared to maximize the number and quality of songs that each songwriter is able to produce.

Generally speaking, most songwriters will book a writing session with a cowriter (if one has not already been arranged for them) rather than leave too many gaps in their weekly

schedule. Songwriting is what one of my informants refers to as a “numbers game,” wherein a songwriter knows that she or he may have to write a hundred songs to get one cut (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010). In this context, the scheduling of a cowriting session is a way to mark productivity in a practice that requires a large amount of work that will not produce any direct benefit. If a particular session does not yield a cut, at least it is one of the other ninety-nine out of the way.

Sharing specialties

Every writer has strengths . . . a lot of times people pull me in the room cuz I do uptempo . . . (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

When I came to NV I was the sort of art rock guy, where the lyrics all had to be . . . there was much poetry . . . deep . . . (Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011).

My informants subdivide the task of writing a mainstream country song into different components: generally speaking these are the lyrics, the melody and the “hook” (i.e. the musical or lyrical idea that sparks a song’s creation). Some of them are quite clear about what their primary contribution to a songwriting session is, while others are reluctant to declare a specialty and claim that they have acquired the skills to contribute to every aspect of the songwriting process equally well. These specialties or lack thereof become part of the professional reputation of a Nashville songwriter, as the above quotes indicate.

In the following excerpt Gordie Sampson details a typical writing session, but also sheds light on how songwriter specialties might interact together in such situations to move a song’s creation forward:

CW: What do you start with? Do you start with a hook?

GS: It's really different every time . . . the way I tend to do it almost every single time is I write from the title . . . I always actually assumed that most people did this but I . . . just lately have come to realize not everybody does that . . .

I remember [chuckles] readin' this book that Tiger Woods made one time about golf . . . and he has this things where . . . probably a lot of golfers talk about it this way . . . they envision shot, ok? So you step up to the tee, you know whatever, and they I guess envision the flight path and where it lands, and that to me, I know it's kinda corny but . . . that is kinda what the title is . . . when I start out to write a song I'm picturin' the fuckin' CD . . . "What's cut number one called?" . . . And I see the title, and then I work from there . . . that's not to say that I *do* that every time, but that's the way that I come into it.

You know, I *cowrite*, I don't write songs by myself, so I might come in and say "I got a title for a song called "Second Wind" . . . I just took that outta my hat . . . and we might write that or my cowriter might say "That's cool. I gotta little guitar riff . . . and he'll start playin' and I'll be like "Oh my god, I LOVE that, that's great" and I start pacin' around the room [I laugh] but I'm still in Titleland, I can't spread my wings on this song until I . . . the first thing I'm tryin' to do is figure out what it's called . . . I know a lot of guys do it that way . . . but a lot of guys do it a lot of other ways too.

CW: Do you have a scratchpad notebook?

GS: Ya . . . mostly titles. I almost never write lines. I write lines once I know that we're in a song . . . ok, we're sittin' down, I got that guitar thing . . . "I like "Second Wind."" "Alright," BANG [slaps his hands together] "this is called "Second Wind" . . . we have no words yet, just a title. We start jammin' . . . that's 90% of the time how I write (Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011).

Sampson describes an interactive process wherein one writer's title might spawn another writer's hook, which in turn may spark a tune or more lyrics, thus providing a demonstration of how the different aspects of the songwriting process inform each other.

While my informants were generally hesitant to admit to having any gaps in their skill set, they did allow that they had certain preferences or specialties, as Tommy Lee James does here:

I used to think I was more of a melody guy . . . I think that's kinda what I was aiming for in the beginning. I like to write with people that can write good lyrics, but I'm comfortable writing with someone who doesn't write lyrics too . . . when I'm writing pop music, I'm usually the main if not the only lyric guy . . .

My hardest thing is coming up with country concepts. That's hard . . . it takes time, and when you're 150 songs a year . . . am I gonna develop something . . .

CW: 150 songs . . . why'd you say that?

TLJ: I write between 100 and 150 songs a year (Tommy Lee James, personal communication, August 12, 2010).

James clearly believes that he is capable of contributing to all aspects of the songwriting process. However, he is more easily productive in some aspects more than others, and when time constraints and productivity levels are important factors, tactically utilizing one's strengths (and choosing collaborators with different and complimentary ones) is prudent.

Often songwriters will choose collaborators for their particular strengths in lyric, melody or hook writing, hoping to recreate an environment similar to the one Sampson describes above. However, this is not always the case, nor is it possible when cowriters are unfamiliar with each other. Phil Barton here indicates how the versatility of a well-rounded songwriter allows for adjustments in approach to suit the varying demands of each cowrite, allowing for successful collaborations no matter who the cowriter is:

It's more about recognizing your role in a write like that. If I'm writing with Mallory [Hope], say, . . . You know, I can always be the ideas guy in whatever write, but she just flows, and she'll spit out stuff . . . and I am more just like her filter. Everyone has different things, and I think I'm really good at, "What's my role today?" (Phil Barton, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

Barton's comments demonstrate how having a broad skill set that includes being able to write a memorable hook, a singable melody and coherent and relatable lyrics allows that writer to be able to contribute to any cowrite. The most successful cowriters are ones who can identify what needs to be done on a case-by-case basis, and contribute creatively and practically in a variety of situations and with a number of different collaborators. Thus Nashville songwriters are compelled to intuitively adjust how they are contributing to a cowriting session, and these

adjustments constitute individual and collective tactics adopted in an attempt to maximize the potential of a particular cowrite to yield a cut.

Teams of Collaborators

It is instructive to know that some of the so-called professionals, they work much, much harder than any of the pre-modern songwriters I could imagine – people like Leiber and Stoller or Rodgers and Hammerstein – because they’ll do two or three writing sessions a day! With different groups of people, different *constellations* of people. It’s really not a matter of trying to write the absolute best song that you can, it’s a matter of writing a whole lot of songs with people who are in position to record them or see that they are recorded . . . You’ll notice that a lot of songs are written with three or four people on one. When I came to town, very seldom did you see one with three people. Usually two, and quite a few solo writers. You see very little of that today (Michael Kosser, personal communication, May 16, 2012).

In the above quote, Nashville songwriter and author Michael Kosser indicates both the concentration of work that songwriters often pack into a single day, but also how songwriters are forced to forge productive relationships with several different collaborators in order to maintain high levels of productivity. In the numbers game that is Nashville songwriting, songwriters are compelled to put as many songs in circulation with as many different cowriters and publishers as possible, hoping to increase their odds of landing a cut.

One tactic songwriters employ to this end is to form regular teams of collaborators. Approaches vary as to how and why this is done. Some writers seem to choose their collaborators based on whoever provides them with inspiration or just a desired familiarity. Brian Davis describes how he works with his cowriters in his practice:

There’s a group . . . it’s me, Joe Leathers, Lee Brice, Kyle Jacobs, Arlis Albritton, Vicky McGehee, Tammi Kidd . . . there’s a group of us that . . . we all hang, man, we . . . it’s kinda like [Craig] Wiseman, [Jeffrey] Steele, all those guys kinda had that thing together . . . they all kind of worked their way up together . . .

There's power in numbers, man, and that always will be the case. I mean MuzikMafia,¹¹⁰ as crazy as that was, and what they were able to accomplish just based on numbers alone . . . that's kinda the situation. And so, we've got kind of a close-knit group that I always work inside of . . .

Ultimately, what I try to . . . what I like to do is cut down the number of writers coming in because ultimately . . . I mean, it's business. If I bring home 50% of a song instead of 33%, that helps everybody in my family. And on top of that, it helps to build my reputation, relationships, and of course my Curb family . . . Every time anybody in our group wins . . . gets a single on the radio or something happens . . . everybody in that group kind of builds up a little . . . (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

Davis makes a compelling case for the benefits – the camaraderie, healthy peer competition and potential for writing songs that are likely to be cut – that result from having recurring collaborators. It is certainly understandable that writers would want to write regularly with collaborators with whom they have had previous success, particularly if they are also people that you enjoy spending time with. Davis here describes such a situation:

The prime example is me and Bobby Pinson, Lee Brice, Vic McGehee, Kyle Jacobs and Joe Leathers, the six of us went down to an island off the coast of Cancun . . . actually two yachts off the coast of Cancun . . . those were really good times . . . the first day wrote 5 songs, but that's me Vicky McGehee and Bobby Pinson, the three of us in a room, and it'd been forever since we'd written, and it just came out, man . . . [the group Rascal] Flatts . . . [has] one on hold for the next record . . . as soon as we got back 4 of the 5 went on hold, so they're quality songs, it's not like we're just blowin' through songs . . . I mean all of us are in it to win it . . . (ibid)

It is experiences like this that solidify the reputations of particular teams of collaborators, which in turn creates new opportunities for cowrites for all of the individual members of that team.

Thus songwriters treat their network as a type of calling card, parlaying previous success into

¹¹⁰ The MuzikMafia is the name of a group of very successful Nashville performers in the first decade of this century. It was comprised of headliners Big and Rich, Gretchen Wilson and Cowboy Troy as well as a collective of lesser-known singers and musicians that for a time attempted to operate as a co-operative venture, both in performance and financially. For more on this phenomenon, see Pruett 2010.

opportunities to write with increasingly more reputable writers in order to strengthen their local profile and improve their professional standing.

Songwriting teams form a large part of the professional identity of Nashville songwriter on Music Row, and a songwriter is often pursued or noticed on the basis of how they answer the question “who else have you written with?” as Gordie Sampson and Brian Davis respectively attest to below:

Hillary [Lindsey] . . . Brett James was the third writer on *Jesus Take the Wheel*, and Steve McEwen [on *Just a Dream*] . . . they’re both three-ways . . . these are all guys that are kind of ‘in my wheelhouse’ . . . most of the activity I get are with the same 5 people . . .

CW: Hillary, Steve McEwen . . .

GS: Troy [Burgess], Radney Foster . . . Kaitlin Smith lately (this girl we’re gonna be producing) . . . (Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011).

The community that we have in place . . . I’ve been in town long enough to . . . had enough success now that we’ve kind of graduated up to, I wouldn’t say the upper echelon of what we do by no means, that’s still your Jeffrey Steeles, your Craig Wisemans and your Tony Mullins, those kinda . . . that headspace. You know, we’re probably a click or two below that, and our generation of writers, the community that I’m involved in, we’re fast reaching that level, but it’s because we absolutely love what we do . . . (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

These two songwriters, whether by design in retrospect, clearly feel that the writers they write with most regularly bring them the greatest chance of success. Most of my songwriter informants noticeably perked up when describing their favourite collaborators, clearly delineating between those within and outside of their immediate network of cowriters. Those within a songwriters’ inner circle were referred to using familial or otherwise intimate descriptors, and it is clear that my informants were very invested in maintaining the quality and health of these relationships.

When I asked Sampson to describe the writing environment he shares with his collaborators, he describes the benefits of familiarity with collaborators using times in the day as referents to the writers’ state of mind:

The people I really like to write with, the people that are in that . . . upper echelon . . . the people that you can't wait to get with, your buddies . . . that's what I live for . . . a small group of people . . . those are the kinds of people I wanna write with on a Sunday night or Tuesday night over a bottle of wine . . . it could be a little less inhibiting lyrically, you can just sort of . . . it's just so relaxing . . . but it can be equally as great at 10:30 on a Monday morning (Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011).

Sampson's final interjection alludes to the unpredictability of cowriting sessions and the many intangibilities — such as the mood of the writers, whether or not they are drinking while they write, what time of day it is — that might affect each songwriter present. In short, he allows for how each cowriting session is unique. Examples abound of successful songs written by friends and longtime collaborators, or by pairings of people made through these types of relationships. However, first-time collaborators routinely write successful songs as well, in sessions that are arranged between songwriters or between publishers and producers. And these sessions do not have to be free of tension or awkwardness in order to be fruitful.

Many of my informants made the distinction between familiar and unfamiliar collaborators in terms of the degree of difficulty (and thus amount of hard work) involved in these pairings, and the relative ease and pleasure associated with being with familiar and preferred writing partners. Victoria Banks describes how this works in her experience:

CW: You mean the people you had every week you'd kind of pick up [with] where you left off the last week?

VB: Ya, and you had a relationship with them, so that you don't have to do the ground work . . . it's almost like blind dates a lot of the time, so you don't have to do that ground work . . . it's a lot of emotional work to get to know someone to the point, within five minutes basically, to get to know you to the point that I'll spill my life out on the table for ya . . . and I guess I got good at doing that, but . . . it's like when you go through something . . . and you sit down next to the person on the bus and you tell them everything, no filter . . . (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

Banks here is making a distinction between her personal comfort level in each type of session (that is, with familiar versus unfamiliar collaborators) rather than the potential for productivity that results from each type. When she says “I guess I got good at doing that” (i.e. having success cowriting with unfamiliar collaborators) she is speaking from experience, as I discuss on pages 206-21 below.

It is not unheard of for songwriters to get cuts from cowrites with first-time collaborators, or even when these collaborators had open conflict during the cowriting session. One of my informants relayed a particularly enlightening story about a cowrite that was booked at the last minute, and in which there was tension between the songwriters, but the result of which was a number one song (I have deleted specific references to the song and songwriters in question).

It’s a pretty interesting story how that day happened. There’s so many funny things. [I was havin’ issues with my work visa, and my lawyer] said, “You gotta take two weeks off. You can’t write any songs here cuz your visa’s run out, so no work.” Anyway, it came early, so I called one of my good friends, [songwriter A] . . . and said, “Man, can I write with you next week? I’ve got an open week.” And he said, “Yeah, let’s do Tuesday.” Anyway, he double booked that day . . . with a guy that I’d written one time with and it hadn’t gone well. Ya know, I don’t have many bad writes, but me and [songwriter B] just clashed a little bit. I guess we didn’t know each other well; it was just one of those writes (but I don’t have many bad writes). Anyway, I turn up and [songwriter B] is there and [songwriter A] had double booked, and he slept in for three hours!

And the funny thing is, if we were writin’ with [songwriter A], [he’s] got this soaring, great voice. We would have done some kind of Rascal Flatts melody, instead of the melody we have on [that song].

Me and [songwriter B] just sat there for three hours gettin’ this melody and riff while we were waitin’ for [songwriter A] . . . we were ringin’ him cuz we were uncomfortable with each other! He’s such a bully writer. What I mean by that is he loves all his ideas. And you know, I was hittin’ that melody in the chorus, and he was hittin’ another melody . . . and he usually will only use his own stuff . . . we basically had this duel, where we were both singin’ our choruses while we played the choruses over each other. For an hour! Like on repeat. And finally he said, “Yeah, I think your melody’s pretty good actually.”

So we had all this music and stuff by the time that [songwriter A] got there, three hours later. He rang and said, “Sorry guys I slept in. Is it worth me coming?” But you know, it was perfect timing. We started the lyric all together, and it was beautiful (Informant with name deliberately omitted, personal communication).

Just because a situation is comfortable and one's cowriters are familiar, it does not mean this is the cowrite that will produce a song that will perk the ears of producers and listeners. The above illustrates how songs can come during cowrites that might least be expected to yield them, can be written under circumstances that are less than harmonious, and often come about through a confluence of events that seems unlikely in retrospect.

Songwriters cannot always choose whom they write with. Publishers will regularly intervene into the ways that a songwriter on their roster will organize her or his cowriters rather than leave these decisions entirely to the whim of a songwriter. A balance between regular and new collaborators is thus typical amongst my informants, with the ratio between the two varying depending on a variety of factors, including publishers' manipulation of their songwriters' schedules. While it is important to return to the well of familiar cowriters if it is still yielding water, it is equally important to keep digging new holes with new collaborators because you never know where the next water is going to be found.

Effects of cowriting on songs

I need to be told, "That's good." I'll second guess it out and paralyze myself (Scotty Emerick, personal communication, April 4, 2012).

Picasso didn't copaint (Peter Cooper (personal communication, March 16, 2012, quote attributed to songwriter Roger Miller).

The ultimate goal for publishers is to provide the environment in which their roster of songwriters can be most productive. There are instances where working alone might be more beneficial to particular songwriters' processes, and it is occasionally possible for a songwriter to convince their publishers that they are best writing on their own, as Victoria Banks describes doing here:

I took my first couple of compilation tapes to my first publisher during my first deal, and we were going through songs trying to figure out what should be demoed and what shouldn't, and they said "We like numbers 3, 5, 6, 7, 9 on this." "Well those were the ones I wrote by myself. Everything else I cowrote." And they were like "Well, it looks to us like you just need to write by yourself . . . Most publishers wouldn't do that . . ."

CW: Now who was the publisher?

VB: It was called Fame Music. They were affiliated with Fame Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama and they had a branch here . . . They were great that way cuz they said "Just . . . explore your own creativity for a while and see what you come up with cuz we're really digging what your doing. . ."¹¹¹

And if it is often the song that refreshes the country sound that becomes a game-changer on Music Row,¹¹² then perhaps the next game-changing song will be written entirely from the imagination of an individual songwriter, and why would publishers not want this to be written by one of their writers? Though in the scenario Banks describes here it seems perfectly reasonable that she would be encouraged to write on her own, the events she describes happened over a decade ago, and currently publishers would only endorse such an approach very reluctantly, if at all. Publishers and the producers they collude with insist on having the songs they are considering cutting be cowritten songs in all but very exceptional circumstances.

My informants encompass a wide range of experiences related to cowriting in Nashville. Some are seemingly reliant on it while others endure it in spite of any personal reservations they might have about it. No active songwriter I spoke with condemned the practice (though some came close to doing so when discussing artist cowrites, which I detail in the final part of this chapter). This is likely because to my informants it is inconsequential how cowriting sessions

¹¹¹ Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010.

¹¹² Songs such as Hank Williams "Lovesick Blues" (1949) and Tennessee Ernie Ford's "Sixteen Tons" (written by Merle Travis) are early examples of this, and in recent years songs like The Band Perry's "If I Die Young," Kenny Chesney's "You and Tequila" and Miranda Lambert's "The House That Built Me" have become hits in spite of their unusual take on the mainstream country sound.

might affect the songs that come out of them, or pointless to speculate on how such songs might differ from others that were written by only one songwriter. Nashville songwriters, or any other workers for that matter, might like to change their work conditions in various ways, yet time spent pondering such changes while being powerless to affect them seems largely futile.

While criticisms of the practice of cowriting may have little use to working songwriters on Music Row, there are others who are not so accepting or approving. Some Nashville songwriters, particularly those who have worked in Nashville long enough to have had cuts come from their solo-written songs, are suspicious of the practice. For instance, Tom T. Hall never understood why anyone would cowrite. To him it represented giving half of your money away with no return for the sacrifice.

If you're cowriting you're kinda up to something, you know? Two people sitting down with one idea, trying to express it, I always thought that's a committee. I mean, there's been some wonderful songs written [by] cowriters, . . . but I never cowrote because if I had a good idea for a song I don't see the reason to form a committee and finish it . . . I feel five people writing a three-minute song, that's not many words left over for each guy, and if you look at it musically it's not many notes to divide up between that many people. I never understood it, and I didn't know anybody who wanted to write any songs with me. You know, Harlan [Howard], he was off on his own, and Willie [Nelson]. Roger Miller? It would have been impossible to write a song with him. [You] couldn't find him in the same room long enough to finish a song (Tom T. Hall, interview for the Country Music Hall of Fame, May, 2000).

Hall's views are not surprising given that he began his career in the 1960s, an era when it was standard practice for writers to work alone (as his references to his famous colleagues indicate).

Further, his solo-written songs are considered amongst the finest ever written in Nashville.¹¹³

Hall alludes to a deeper issue regarding the effect that cowriting has on songs themselves.

Professional songwriters in a cowriting session provide a continual vetting of ideas not possible

¹¹³ These include "Harper Valley P.T.A.," "That's How I Got To Memphis," "I Love," and one of my favourite country songs, "Margie's At the Lincoln Park Inn."

when a single writer is working alone. This act of vetting through one or two others produces a very distilled result in a short period of time, a situation that is ideal for the constraints of writing for Music Row.

Yet is there a conservatism that creeps into the process as a result of this vetting process? And if one were to have an unorthodox song idea, would this be likely to be discouraged by one's fellow writers? This is a concern about the songs currently being written on Music Row that *Nashville Tennessean*¹¹⁴ music columnist Peter Cooper clearly and eloquently articulated when I interviewed him in the Five Points neighborhood of East Nashville where he lives. Cooper, as a journalist, lecturer and Americana songwriter, is not only more inclined to be critical of the cowriting practice than my informants are, he occupies a professional position that requires it. His views on the practice form a clear counterpoint to those expressed by the majority of my informants, and as such I quote from our conversation liberally.

The big change in country music is not "Pop Country" or "Rock Country" or "Hip Hop Country," it's "Cowriter Country." In 1961 . . . of the Billboard number one country songs . . . there were 1.2 writers per song. So one person, every now and then there's two [writers] . . . In 2011, there was not one number one Billboard country song that was written by a single person, the number is much closer to three than it is to one, and there are [many] written by four and five [writers] . . . Out of the people you hear on the radio, the only ones who have demonstrated the capability to solo-write an entire album for themselves are Alan Jackson and Taylor Swift. They don't always do that, but they can and they have. Otherwise, *no one*. Once in a great while there's a hit, like The Band Perry had a song called "If I Die Young" that was written by their singer (Peter Cooper, personal communication, , March 16, 2012).

Cooper's critique of cowriting sheds light on how much Nashville songwriters have normalized the practice, and how in a short period of time cowriting has gone from being a voluntary decision made by an individual songwriter to the inevitability it has become. Cooper feels that

¹¹⁴ The Nashville Tennessean is Nashville's only daily newspaper.

the effect of all this is far from benign, and he goes on to elaborate on how he believes this practice alters a potentially good song for the worse.

Most of the classic country songs that we hear, not all but most of them, were written by one person, and [it's] the quirks of singularity that can occur that is really different. Roger Miller, who also said "Picasso didn't copaint," [didn't] write *Dang Me* with other people, because if you're writing with other people and you write "Here I'm in this bar getting high, woman sittin' home with a month-old child," your cowriter goes "Oh no. Ok, the barroom thing's fine, but now you're a bad person," . . . and who's gonna sing that anyway cuz you have to be a hero on the radio. By the way, we were talking about the Matraca Berg, Deana Carter song *You and Tequila*. I think that's a fine cowritten song, but there are some songs that don't get written [with cowriters]. "Sunday Morning Coming Down" does not get written that way . . . Tom T. Hall has a song called "Trip to Hyden," and he says "tossed and turned the night before in some old motel/ Subconsciously recalling some old sinful thing I'd done," and then he . . . never gets around to the sinful thing he'd done. In a cowritten song that would always get written back around and it would become the point of the song. "You started with this, what about that? It has to circle around (ibid).

Cooper bemoans the homogeneity of recent commercial country songs and directly implicates cowriting in this shift. Cooper goes on to contrast some past writers who have had mainstream cuts with those in the past who enjoyed similar success, and with his East Nashville (i.e. Americana) colleagues whose songwriting is stylistically similar to theirs but whose songs are generally not considered for mainstream inclusion.

Most of our classic country songs . . . not that many of them were cowritten. Some were. It used to be that Rodney Crowell could sit in a lonely room and write a song in the 70s, a sad song like "Till I Gain Control Again," and he had a legitimate shot at somebody covering that. Even if he didn't in that era get to be a star, there was a shot at that happening. When [East Nashville singer songwriter] Kevin Gordon sits and writes a singular song here that is of what I consider to be the level of "Till I Gain Control Again," he has no thought that that is somehow going to land in George Strait's lap because it's not (ibid).

Further, Cooper argues that creative considerations get ignored in favour of commercial ones.

Almost every song that's cut now is cut through a major publisher [by] somebody on staff at the publishing house, and they're cowritten because that's the mandate. It's

like, “Hey you’re a really talented writer. I love these songs you brought to town. We need to set you up with Craig Wiseman.” Instantly. It’s not even considered . . .

CW: “Now that we know we like you’re songs, we’re going to make you do something you’ve never done before.”

PC: Right. And Craig Wiseman cowrote one of my favourite songs with Chris Knight, “It Ain’t Easy Being Me.” Phenomenal song. So we’re not picking on people here, I’m just saying that in the commercial world every now and again [a single writer] will get to write a song that somebody cuts . . . but it’s incredibly difficult to sit in a lonely room and write your heart and have that song be recorded now by someone who has a shot at the radio (ibid).

I include Cooper’s views here to suggest a way that cowriting might be a definitive factor shaping the content of the songs written in Nashville at the present time (though such a claim is only speculative given that the songs they might be compared with don’t exist). This is a particularly valuable critique given that so many solo-written songs tend to now be regarded by listeners as essential elements of the country music canon, and the writers of these songs are referred to in Nashville as amongst the best in the history of Music Row. While my informants resist critique of or wholeheartedly embrace the practice of cowriting, it is instructive to question its effects, to understand how and why the marketplace affects such changes to the way songs are written in Nashville, and to examine how songwriters adapt to these shifts.

Artist Cowrites

It’s all gone to singer-songwriters¹¹⁵ as you know. There is still room for the non-performing songwriter to be successful, but that person has to be a good networker, because he’s gotta find a way to write with singer-songwriters. It’s always been somewhat important. Now have I known successful songwriters that don’t have social skills? Absolutely. If they’re good enough, they find ways to link up anyway. And

¹¹⁵ Here Kosser uses the term “singer-songwriter” in an analogous way to how I use “artist,” to denote an individual who is signed to a recording contract as a singer but also writes her or his own quality material. This type of singer songwriter is comparable to but different than the figure of the singer-songwriter I discuss at the end of this dissertation.

some have no social skills except for that one: to find [singer-] songwriters and work with them (Michael Kosser, personal communication, May 16, 2012).

Artist cowrites are something you cannot say no to (Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011).

Increasingly prevalent on Music Row are cowrites between established songwriters and performers themselves. The fact that many of these performers are young and have little writing experience makes the practice controversial, and one of the most pronounced impositions by Music Row on the practice and process of Nashville songwriters in recent years. Songwriters and singers have been mutually exclusive specialists throughout the history of Music Row, largely not overlapping into each other's work. Though the genre's singer songwriters are widely revered,¹¹⁶ there have been relatively few mainstream country singers who write most of and the best of their own material, and the vast majority of country songs produced in Nashville have reflected a division of labour that has existed since Tin Pan Alley and the early days of Music Row.

Artist cowrites have become increasingly commonplace recently, but with a significant modern twist. The artists in question are often unknown and new to Nashville, and their presence in writing rooms with Nashville songwriters is at the insistence of their managers and producers, not through relationships developed between the songwriters and artists directly. The recent restructuring of the music industry (which is detailed on pages 132-35) has brought about this pronounced change in strategy; producers, many of whom also have publishing company

¹¹⁶ Hank Williams is the template for country singer-songwriters, while others include Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Dolly Parton, Alan Jackson, and Steve Earle. Performers such as Vince Gill, Brad Paisley and Kenny Chesney have distinguished themselves as successful writers, and the three members of Lady Antebellum and singer Taylor Swift have gained reputations for the songs they have written, but all of these more recent performers collaborate with Nashville songwriters to write their songs.

interests, now prefer to have their artists also sign publishing deals and write with established songwriters. Victoria Banks explains how this has affected songwriters' livelihood and brought about the practice of artist cowrites on Music Row:

[There are many performers] who basically come to town, get a deal as an artist, and then are told "We're gonna set you up to write now because that's where the money is" . . . there's a recognition now that there's a great income stream in that that wouldn't otherwise be tapped into . . .

CW: Ya, whose income stream? Songwriters!

VB: Ya, well that's the thing! Rather than giving an artist a big advance from the record label they'll set them up with a publishing deal which gives them a salary, so that keeps them going in the meantime, and then the publisher sets them up to cowrite . . . (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

Banks articulates the central controversy surrounding artist cowrites: that songwriters are asked to voluntarily give up a portion of their writer's share to someone who lacks experience as a writer, who is there due to an arrangement made by others (e.g. managers, producers, publishers) in an attempt to access an income stream previously set aside for songwriters and their publishers exclusively. Add to this that writers will often have to compensate for the lack of experience of their collaborators by doing the lion's share of the work and it may be surprising at first glance that a songwriters would agree to such a seemingly exploitative arrangement. However, most of my informants point out positive aspects of writing with artists with little or no songwriting experience, or at least have reconciled it in their minds as making sense from the business point of view, like Tommy Lee James does here:

CW: Do you have to be a writer here in order to be an artist?

TLJ: Now especially . . . they send all the artists around . . . most of the artists can't write, but they want a piece of the publishing, and record companies have an interest now cuz they have 360 deals¹¹⁷ with a lot of the artists . . . I mean it makes sense to

¹¹⁷ A 360 deal is one in which a record company recoups their investment in an artist by taking a portion of all of the artist's music-related income streams (including concert ticket and merchandise sales, endorsement or ringtone deals, TV or movie appearances and, of most

have the artist in the room if they know the direction and they can add something it does make sense . . .

CW: But . . . I know how it works . . . you have closer access to a cut [by working with artists directly].

TLJ: Sure. It's political . . . it's all about politics these days (Tommy Lee James, personal communication, August 12, 2010).

James reference to “politics” is central to understanding why songwriters would agree to artist cowrites in the first place: artists are songwriter’s conduits through which they can get cuts, and having an artist advocating for recording a particular song has a far more powerful effect than a songwriter pitching her or his song to that same artist. In spite of giving away a significant portion of royalties, the advantages to the songwriter in this case are obvious: if an artist has a cowriting credit on a song, she or he is more likely to choose to cut that song over one that has no connection to the artist. In the current cowriting climate on Music Row there is a belief that to refuse to write with artists is tantamount to eliminating the chance of getting a cut.

Even top songwriters are not above being called upon to collaborate with new artists who are being aggressively promoted by their managers and producers. However, more established writers have a greater chance of being asked to collaborate with the most promising new artists. When I brought up the topic of artist cowrites with experienced and established writers like Tommy Lee James and Gordie Sampson they often assumed that I was referring to collaborations with well-known artists,¹¹⁸ thus alluding to a hierarchy of writers in Nashville in which top songwriters are more likely to be paired up with top artists.

significance to Nashville songwriters and arguable the most controversial of all these interventions, royalty payments). For a fuller explanation, including some of the controversy that surrounds such deals, see http://musicians.about.com/od/ah/g/360_deals.htm, accessed January 6, 2012.

¹¹⁸ Sampson has cowritten with Bon Jovi, Carrie Underwood and Canadian artists such as Jimmy Rankin and Ashley McIsaac. James has written songs with Martina McBride and Brad Paisley.

Gordie Sampson had a successful cut from a cowrite with a young artist in 2011. He here describes how this collaboration came about:

CW: Do you get asked to do anything with unproven artists ever?

GS: Ya.

CW: Under what circumstances? Your publisher says, “Hey would you do this”?

GS: Ya, the publisher will call and say “Hey, “Blah blah blah” over at Warner Records called. They’re developing this new girl called “Blah blah blah” and they’re really into it, they think it’s gonna be really great. Do you wanna write”?

CW: Have you had any cuts? Have you had any success in those kind of situations?

GS: Yeah. Got one on the radio right now, Hunter Hayes is his name. He’s a new guy. The song is called “Storm Warning” . . . it’s around 30, it’s not hittin’ it yet . . . He’s awesome. You kinda take your chances . . . I don’t know. Brand new artist cowrite . . . great!” . . . and with someone like Hunter, I *love* this kid, he’s just unbelievable . . . He’s a Cajun...

CW: But you know the danger: you get in there and you write 90% percent of the thing . . . Maybe that’s not a problem if you get a cut.

GS: Well . . . I don’t know what the fraction is, let’s say it’s one twentieth of all the . . . artists that any label signs come to fruition, so you’re up against the wall right off the bat . . . I could be writin’ with Troy [Verges], but instead I’m gonna write a song that’s got a one in twenty chance of . . . this artist even happening. And then it happens. Does my song even make the record? . . . but you gotta take them (Gordie Sampson, personal communication, August 26, 2011).

“Storm Warning” was the debut single of Hunter Hayes’ first album, peaking at #14 on the country charts. Hayes is now one of the most successful singers in Nashville, buoyed by the success of his and Sampson’s song.

The practice of writing with new artists with little writing experience has met with no shortage of reactions amongst the songwriters who are asked to collaborate with them, and I noticed an understandable ambivalence amongst my informants toward artist cowrites. Nashville songwriters are quick to praise young artists-turned-writers and the enthusiasm they bring, and will rise to the challenge of trying to help them sculpt a song that suits their needs. However, these same writers also know that, in exchange for the greater likelihood of a cut, writing with

newly signed performers who are placed there by managers and producers comes with its costs. I include extended quotes from Brian Davis, Steve Leslie and Victoria Banks to illustrate how songwriters, while ambivalent about them, tend to rationalize artist cowrites:

Don't get me wrong, there's a handful of artists that we write with that are great writers . . . Patty Newfield, she's a great writer, she knows what she wants to say, she knows where she's goin' . . .

I got a single comin' out . . . I think it's this week it might be hittin' . . . by a girl named Ashley Gearing . . . she might be one of the only exceptions to some of the talk we just had about artists . . . it's a song called "What You Think About Us" . . . it's actually a three-way. Ben Glover's another guy in the family, and he, Ashley and myself sat down and wrote this . . . she's another one that, surprisingly, knows what she wants to say, knows her people, and knows how to get to them . . . in fact we're leavin' on a retreat next week with her to do some writin', but she's . . . one of those ones . . . it's rare that you get those ones . . .

I deal with a lot more artists that don't necessarily have their things in place yet, and it's a little frustratin' at times cuz you know you're givin' away half a song or a third of a song to an artist that, you know . . .

A prime example: Vicky McGehee and I wrote a song with this one particular artist and then . . . we had written a verse, chorus, and were halfway through the second verse when we realized . . . we went to the artist and said "Hey, do you like this?" and he said "Ya, I kinda dig it" . . . that's not really fair to him cuz Vic and I write so much together it just flows, and before you realize it, we hadn't even considered . . . this person's opinion . . . then he was forced to cut it, then he lost his deal, then it was cut by another artist . . . and so now this guy has a third of a cut . . .

CW: . . . and it's not even his tune!

BD: Well he was in the room with us when we wrote it.

CW: Ya but he didn't really sing it, and he didn't really write it.

BD: No he cut it cuz he had to . . . there's a lot of that kinda stuff, where ya just really go . . . "Really?" . . . Most artists . . . all they want is a little bit of recognition and to be able to say "Ya, I wrote this song," because in their mind, with radio and the fans, they feel like they have more legitimacy behind what they're doin'. If you want that, then go work and get it, ya know? Figure out how to say stuff . . . put the time in! I'm not bashin' any artist cuz I think almost anybody could be a writer . . . if they add some sort of musical . . . if they're intuitive to what's goin' on . . . (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

SL: So that's one of the practical reasons why an artist writes. Also, an artist writes with a guy like me so that when we write a great song and [the artist does] have a shot at a career, the publishing company owns half the copyright because the girl was in the room and got me coffee. [This] is not every case. You can't generalize in this business.

CW: And some artists can write, I guess.

SL: Yeah they can, actually. You know what? I don't care if an artist can write if they show up enthusiastic and are a little bit embarrassed by the process and humble and excited and they've got great voices that inspire me and . . . [they don't] put on a facade of superiority like they're too cool or something. That's bad, but if they come in humble and they know that we're doing this because it makes economic sense . . . and they say "I got this idea" and it's not good enough it's ok . . . if they come with that sort of attitude and sincerity, I'm happy and proud to put my name with somebody. But if they come in with any other sort of façade and don't respect what's really going on . . . then it's a joke (Steve Leslie, personal communication, August 13, 2010).

VB: I've done a lot of artist cowrites.

CW: Have you noticed this, as a trend, increasing since you got here?

VB: Yes.

CW: Could you put a year to that?

VB: I would say . . . the past two years more than ever.

CW: Oh, that recently?

VB: I think so, ya . . . haven't been in the cowriting game for that long . . . a lot of the time it's three-way cowrites where I work with someone like Rachel [Proctor] that I know I'm gonna get something good with and I bring the artist in as the third person, which . . . it's harder to make money on that situation, but you're also more likely . . . you've got that one shot usually. You've got that one day and you better get something or you don't get another one.

CW: Better to get less of something than half of nothing.

VB: Exactly.

CW: How does it tend to work? Do artists actually contribute something?

VB: There are two different kinds of artists, it seems . . . some of them are like the singer-songwriter who come from that background and really value the songwriting aspect and really contribute and come with ideas and it's like . . . when you write with someone like that it's like getting on their train and doing what they wanna do, which is great, I'm all for that . . .

CW: That probably is kinda nice cuz some of your work is done for you.

VB: Ya, and it's great to be inspired, [and] then I got something under my belt that I wouldn't have written otherwise, you know?

But there are a LOT . . . a lot of artists who don't write, who don't have a background of writing . . . it's really . . . I think it's a sad state of affairs to be honest, because you don't . . . when you're forced to write like that, on the spur of the moment, generally . . . you might get a day, if you're lucky, or usually you get a three-hour block, and you better be done, because they're so busy they're off somewhere else and you'll never see them again, so you better finish the song and demo it and hand it

to them on a silver platter so they'll cut it . . . and it's frustrating because the quality of the songs . . . the quality of what's on the record goes down, and I think that's partly what's missing . . . It's "What are the best songs that the artist has been a part of," or it's "Let's have a big songwriting camp on the weekend and send the artist into each room and get their name on everything" . . . (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

These songwriters have no shortage of skepticism about artist cowrites producing songs that are worthy of recording (and in at least one case bemoans the fact that these songs often get cut regardless). They are acknowledging that in spite of their personal feelings about the phenomenon, they are not in a position to be able to refuse to write with newly-signed artists who are inexperienced songwriters. Yet this comment by Brian Davis, praising particular performers who have pushed back against this convention, indicates how songwriters would not have artist cowrites be part of their practice if the situation were ideal:

BD: The other side of the fence is . . . Jason Aldean, prime example . . . we've been buddies for a long time, and he . . . the last time we wrote together, he said . . . I'm trying to think of how to work this . . . basically he said "Ya know, man, I'm not a writer. Just bring me the songs. I don't wanna take a third of this, I don't wanna take half of this . . . it's not right" . . . which is . . . I respect that, that's huge cuz first and foremost that gives every writer in town . . . one more slot on a record . . .

CW: It's not always the artist that makes these decisions.

BD: He's big enough now that . . . that's what he's sayin'. He was forced to do that early, and nowadays he just . . . McGraw's the same way. McGraw, George Strait, we applaud the way these guys are just singers . . . and when I say just singers, that's not a demeaning thing, that's just their job . . . (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

Davis' image of "one more slot on a record" reminds us of how songwriting and economic considerations are intertwined on Music Row. On a more subliminal level Davis also alludes to how songwriters ("we") position their songwriting community as the collective upholders of the integrity of the songs within the country music genre. When weak songs get cut or appear on the radio, it is generally assumed to be the fault of producers or some kind of nepotism between a

performer and a songwriter friend who wanted a cut. Put another way, the blame for these songs is always placed on some sort of breakdown in how the system works ideally, which is when songwriters are given space to write songs without outside interference, and in which these songs are chosen to be recorded owing to a recognition of their inherent quality.

The prevalence of artist cowrites is thus an indication of how it is increasingly rare that the system actually works this way in practice. Victoria Banks here picks up a similar theme:

We don't have a Patty Loveless out there using songs by amazing songwriters, the cream of the crop from everything these great writers had been writing over the years, she would pick the best of it (Victoria Banks, personal communication, May 1, 2011).

These shifts in production method contravene the way the copyright system has been applied to Music Row's production methods, paying songwriters through royalties while artists, managers and producers access income streams the songwriter is not a direct part of (such as recording and merchandise sales, concert tickets, endorsement deals). However, with the restructuring of the music industry that has occurred since the 1990s, almost every income stream available to artists and their representatives has dried up considerably. Thus some rationalize artist cowrites as a reasonable and measured reaction by industry gatekeepers to a shrinking market, as opposed to a morally egregious intrusion into songwriters' livelihoods.

Some publishers have taken to building up a practice around artist cowrites, soliciting new artists and scheduling writing sessions between them and established writers on their roster. Brian Davis discusses below how Curb Publishing pairs their writers together with (hopefully) like-minded performers who are trying to develop songs for an upcoming recording.

You know we just bring artists in, or other writers if we need but ultimately we just bring artists in and go at it . . . and the crazy thing is you'll write 15 songs with one artist and get a couple of cuts on the record . . . And the crazy thing nowadays is . . . if it's just a cut on the record . . . you know, I mean I had 3 songs on Jason Michael Carroll's last project on . . . Arista I think is where he was . . . and he sold, I don't

know, maybe 100 000 units, and 100 000 units, you do the math, it doesn't . . . I had three songs on that record and so . . . probably paid the demo bills and then made a touch on the end . . . it's like crazy nowadays cuz the numbers are just so far down . . . so nowadays it's singles, so you have to put that kind of time in . . . write 15 songs with an artist . . . now that ratio has dropped tremendously recently, just based on . . . we fine tune "What are you guys lookin' for?" and spend a lot more time at what they're lookin' for vs. lettin' them chase somethin' they don't need . . . I'll really quiz an artist, I'll sit down with them and say "Whaddya need? What have you cut? Play me what you got" . . . so that I'm not chasin' somethin' I don't need to be chasin' . . . it may sound a little harsh but it's business . . . (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

Davis further talks about how he uses his experience, both as a performer and writer, considers what an artist might be lacking in terms of perspective, or what he himself might be lacking in terms of skills, and he might then supplement a writing session with another writer. In Davis' description, writing a song in such an environment is very much like fitting the pieces of a puzzle together:

CW: So when you work with artists, is it just you and the artist?

BD: Depends. It just depends on the situation. There sometimes will be . . . And a lot of it has to do with my perspective, you know, goin' out on the road and bringin' that stuff back into the writin' room and sayin' "What these guys wanna be, I see it everyday and I know it, I live that." So all I do is sit back and lead them down the path of the song. But the sad things is a lot of times you have to . . . allow them to participate, but you also have to help orchestrate where it's goin' because they might not necessarily have that same perspective or have the knowledge that you have based on the fact that you've been on the road, and these guys are just comin' into town fresh, so there's always . . . a give and take in the room, but dependin' on . . . what artist it is, I would pick . . . if I needed another writer in the room. I would grab someone that would help supplement . . . what this artist might be missin', or I may be missin' in this totality of all that's tryin' to take place . . . (ibid).

Davis' comments provide insight into how songwriters employ their particular skill set to artist cowrites, and how they attempt to incorporate some definitive input from the young artists they write with regardless of these artists' songwriting abilities. This is done to inspire ideas for a song, but more particularly it is done to encourage the artist to feel personally invested in the

song, as this investment will more likely lead to the song being cut. Artist cowrites represent the biggest recent imposition by Music Row on the practice and process of Nashville songwriters. They are a clear example of how factors both economic and “political” (to use Tommy Lee James’ descriptor) affect songwriters’ livelihoods and their choice of collaborators (or lack of choice in many cases). However, their creative and practical responses to this imposition demonstrate the nature of Nashville songwriters’ work and their continual balancing of commerce, culture and creativity.

I contend that the ability to respond in a productive way to the intimate and pressure-filled situations that cowriting imposes on songwriters is one of the factors that distinguish a successful Nashville songwriter (someone with a string of cuts and a steady income) from those who will leave town disappointed. Such situations require confidence, having a large stock of ideas and experiences at one’s disposal, and the ability to focus one’s energies to access these ideas efficiently and effectively. That being said, many songwriters talk glowingly of the experience of collaborating, particularly when it is successful. The mutual development of an idea, the potential for multiple perspectives producing something beyond what one songwriter could have, and the act of experiencing a song unfold from nothing more than a title, a musical hook or an story idea are the kinds of experiences for which my songwriters reserve their greatest enthusiasm during our conversations.

Chapter 5: Gender and the Nashville Songwriter: Three Songs by Victoria Banks

Introduction: Gender and Writing Country Songs

So I've been in the difficult position of trying to write for a living in a male-dominated publishing world, where women "can't write songs for men," for record labels that are second- and third-guessing what to do to break their artists in this environment . . . and on top of all that, I have to try and write songs that will get past male radio gatekeepers *and* be what *they* think 30-something-year-old women want to hear. While being a 30-something-year-old woman myself. Ironic, isn't it (Victoria Banks, personal communication, May 1, 2011)?

This chapter explores gender issues as they are made manifest in the careers and daily activities of professional songwriters in Nashville, Tennessee. Above is my informant Victoria Banks's summation of how her gender and, more broadly, gendered norms associated with the genre culture which she is a part of impinge upon her work as a Nashville songwriter. In the pages that follow I will discuss the gendered nature of country songs and outline the history of women songwriters and songs in Nashville. I will also introduce Banks herself, and explore her experiences — as related to me via interviews and email correspondence — during the writing of three songs between 2005 and 2008: "Remember That," "Come on Over," and "Some Men Don't Cheat." Several incidents that occurred while writing these songs provide a commentary on gender issues salient within the sociocultural milieu of Nashville songwriters. In my discussion of these songs' provenances, I highlight some of the observations Banks makes about gendered aspects of her professional life in Nashville. I then connect her perspectives to larger concerns related to the ways that gender is implicated in the working processes and social interactions that are part of the daily lives of Nashville songwriters.

Women who are songwriters in Nashville have what is in many ways a paradoxical position in the “male-dominated publishing world” in which they work. Songwriters’ work is not done in front of audiences generally, and they are thus not as beholden to the gender norms that inform the live appearances and media depictions country music performers experience in the course of their daily work. Further, female Nashville songwriters seem to be respected and treated as equal peers by many male songwriters. Nevertheless, and though female songwriters have a long and storied history on Music Row, their male counterparts dwarf their numbers to the extent that working with and being scrutinized according to the expectations of men is unavoidable. As such, they must navigate gendered expectations and behavior — in their daily interactions and as a consequence of the larger genre culture within which they live and work — in order to achieve success.

Songwriters occupy a unique place in country music production. As I discussed in the introductory chapter of this writing, the constructed history of the country music genre — including its perceived gendered, racial and classed norms associated with Southern working class whites — positions current Nashville songs as the most recent incarnations of a single, unbroken musical tradition, ascribing vernacular qualities to these songs as the expression of an identifiable sociocultural group (Mann 73-100). Scholars have noted the many historical inaccuracies in this origin story (see Peterson 1997:2-3, Negus 1999: 103-30; Harkins 2004, K. H. Miller 2010), yet the tension between country music’s historical continuity and ongoing construction is not new; it exists as a defining feature of the genre itself (as I examined on pages 4-7). Songs are and have always been implicated in this negotiation between continuity and innovation by creating country music’s texts. Songwriters, then, are both perpetuators of a

tradition and innovators charged with continually refreshing the genre's relevance to successive generations of listeners.

One of the competing histories of country music is contained within the arena of gender. Though particular views about gender perpetuate country music, these views have not remained static. Indeed, as Pamela Fox points out, “unstable models of femininity and masculinity, working in conjunction with other markers of identity, shape the very definition of country identity” (P. Fox 5). Fox’s important study *Natural Acts: Gender, Race and Rusticity in Country Music* positions gender as a central aspect of country music discourse, “but only in its conjunction with race as well as class, to produce shifting models of authenticity at particular moments in country music history” (ibid).¹¹⁹ Thus, gender in country music is thus far from being a fixed and constant set of archetypes. Instead, it is better understood as a site that is continually contested in order to both reinforce and reinvigorate the meaning of the music (McCusker and Pecknold xx).

Nashville songwriters have multiple and overlapping professional identities, and can be viewed through many lenses: as *creative individuals* who also respond to and fuel the discourse of country music culture; as *labourers* working within the commercial network of Music Row (the area of downtown Nashville where most commercial country music is produced); and as *members of a local songwriting community* whose constituents interact with and influence each other both socially and professionally in a variety of ways.¹²⁰ As my time spent interacting with

¹¹⁹ See also Leppert and Lipsitz 34-5.

¹²⁰ Some songwriters are also *performers*, whether they divide their time between the two tasks and treat them as separate but related aspects of their work, or whether they are appearing in one of the many forums in Nashville (and increasingly elsewhere) that feature songwriters performing their own songs. Banks is in fact a performer herself, with an active career in Canada. She has been nominated as Female Artist of the Year at the Canadian Country Music Awards (CCMAs), which she was chosen as in 2010.

members of the songwriting community in Nashville revealed, a key factor accounting for a Nashville songwriter's success or lack thereof is the ability to adapt to being a *cowriter*, and to be productive within the peculiar sociality of cowriting sessions (which I discuss on pages 155-59).

Victoria Banks and her songwriter colleagues supply songs that perform multiple functions: among other things, they serve as commodities, resonate with listeners, and act as cultural texts that fuel a wider discourse.¹²¹ Thus any examination of writing songs in Nashville must wrestle with how these overlapping factors affect a songwriter's work. It is within the complexity of cultural meanings, social poetics and professional identities that country music songwriters must create and promote their songs.

There are problematic aspects in positioning Banks as somehow representative of the members of the Nashville songwriting community, in assuming that there are uniquely feminine characteristics that she or any female writers bring to their songs, and in discussing three individual songs' inception and reception as either typical or non-typical. Further, it must be noted that the songs discussed here were not big hits, nor is their significance on par with prominent feminine-themed Nashville songs of the past. Yet while noting these and other potential concerns I contend that ethnographic inquiry about a single songwriter reinforces how a focus on an individual — one who is in some ways typical and in others exceptional amongst her

¹²¹ Michael Hughes has discussed how much of the discourse surrounding country music is intended to do the work of maintaining it as a musical form that is distinct from other popular musics with which it is clearly affiliated (i.e. rock and roll, folk and popular musics). (Hughes 195, 200).

peer group — can shed an invaluable and unique light on a group, community or, in this case, a large and complex commercial culture, regardless of the status of that individual.¹²²

Below I explore how Banks's songs, views and activities complicate the commonly accepted gendered narratives of country music culture, and inversely how gendered expectations and resistance to them have affected her work. In the process I both examine the common narratives themselves and highlight how female practitioners such as Banks have contested them over time. For my purposes here I position gender as “a way of referring to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes” (Scott 1053), rather than simply commenting on Banks as a woman working in a male milieu who experiences gendered expectations and behavior (though as we will see, she is an astute observer of such things). I wish here to temper a sole focus on gender issues by demonstrating how a Nashville songwriter's success depends on her or his ability to reconcile the many factors — whether creative, commercial, social, or political, including factors related to gender — that impinge on her or his work and daily life. As I make clear in the pages that follow, all of these are interwoven and ever-present factors affecting the work of Nashville songwriters.

Gender and Country Music

While country music is often characterized according to its particular heteronormative construction of masculinity, the feminine plays a significant role in its construction and perpetuation. McCusker and Pecknold have advocated for the need to “highlight the underappreciated role gender has played in defining country music's identity as a genre.”

(2004:xix), arguing that “gendered discourse has been used to fix country music's place in the

¹²² See Stock 2001 for further discussion on the merits and limitations of ethnographic study of individuals' cultural practices.

social hierarchy” (ibid xx). Most country music songs portray responses to actual or at least plausible relationships rather than ones imagined or hoped-for, and deal with the conflicts arising from these relationships as much as the joys and escape of romantic love (Wilson 2000:295-300). Songs sung by men tend to have a strong feminine presence in them (e.g. mother, lover, daughter) that is urging them to do the right thing as they struggle with their own, usually relatively weak, consciences. Greg Smith and Pamela Wilson note that “in many traditions of white Southern culture, the woman is the primary bearer of tradition, the person entrusted with propagating the old values to the new generation” (Smith and Wilson 190).

By saying this neither the authors quoted above or I wish to imply that acknowledgment of the presence and influence of women in their lives by the men making country music is equatable with women having actual presence and influence. As I discuss throughout this chapter, women have always been in the minority in all aspects of country music production (songwriting included), and very few have been in positions of decision-making and influence. No true discussion of gender in country music could ignore how male domination allows maleness to remain unmarked, which has the concurrent effect of relegating women to a kind of otherness. This shortsightedness also conflates *gender* issues with *women’s* issues in a way that is no longer useful. Having said this, it is significant that country music has long been a genre in which the traditional realm of the female – that of home, family and relationships – is foregrounded in a way not characteristic of other popular musics.

The sources of the songs that make up the early hillbilly repertoire yield a few clues as to the gendered dynamics of the music. While the nineteenth-century rural work and dance songs and their antecedents that formed part of the early hillbilly repertoire were understandably imbued with a masculine outlook, the parlour and religious songs that filled out the rest of what

is heard on hillbilly recordings could not be seen in the same light. Indeed, the 'parlour' that gave that song genre its moniker was the domain of the female, and these songs were scored for the piano, an instrument with unambiguously feminine associations until well into the twentieth-century (Malone and Neal 26, K.H. Miller 37-39). Thus the parlour, and the feminine presence it articulated, tempered the largely masculine discourse surrounding early hillbilly songs.

Jimmie N. Rodgers estimates that three quarters of all country songs pertain to some aspect of relational love (Rodgers 47-8, see also Wilson 292). This fact alone belies the strongly (and heterosexually oriented) gendered textual strain of the genre. Geoffrey Mann's list of country music's themes – "rural life, work and everyday working-class life . . . , heterosexual 'salvific' love, family life and 'values', the southern U.S., youthful rebellion, Christianity, alcohol, death, humour, and nostalgia" (Mann 81) – include many overtly feminized constructs related to relationships and family while others (the South, Christianity, nostalgia) are not explicitly either masculine or feminine and are rarely imagined in uni-gendered terms .

The emotional realm is typically associated with femininity (the rational being the more masculine) (Pruitt 86), and country music notoriously seeks to elicit emotional responses in listeners, even if they appear irrational. Kenneth Morris has argued that a failure to understand country music as intended to appeal to the emotional rather than the rational can skew one's understanding of the music's relevance (Morris 6, 10-11). Aaron Fox examines how country music texts make emotional loss itself an object of desire, "reifying a certain kind of desire as perpetually unfulfilled - 'private' desire, the same kind which is 'fulfilled' (only to be re-created) by consumption in the competing narrative of Desire" (A. Fox 1992:61). Fox contends this process allows for the literal consumption of the emotional qualities of the song. Country music's emotionalism supports a gendered reading of country songs in which neither female nor

male perspectives are ever fully excluded, in spite of the relative dearth of actual women's voices singing or writing them.

Throughout the history of Music Row there have been several songs sung by women that have sparked debate and seemed to be giving voice to a widely felt but rarely expressed sentiment among female listeners. The first hit song in the early country genre to be sung by a woman comes from Patsy Montana (a.k.a. Rubye Blevins), though the song in question, "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" from 1935, did little to challenge the gendered status quo of the time (Malone and Neal 145, 147). Both she and the Girls of the Golden West (sisters Dottie and Millie Good) were popular West Coast entertainers grounded in the performance style and stage appearance of the singing cowboys (Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and their ilk) popular throughout the 1930s and 1940s, complete with garishly decorated Western garb and undisguised adoration for the figure of the range-roaming cowboy (ibid 145).

Kitty Wells' "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" is an answer song to Hank Thompson's "Wild Side of Life," adding new words to a melody both songs share (used earlier for Roy Acuff's signature song "Great Speckled Bird"). In it she suggests that it is men who are responsible for "good girls going wrong," not God or the good girls themselves. This charge runs contrary to a social climate that generally excused the libidinous excesses of men but severely censored similar behavior in women who were seen to be violating their position as upholders of the status quo (McCusker 2003:67-8, Smith and Wilson 2004:190).

Loretta Lynn's recordings of songs "Don't Come Home a-Drinkin' (With Lovin' On Your Mind)" in 1967, written by Lynn and Peggy Sue Wells, and "The Pill" in 1975, written by Lorene Allen, T. D. Bayless, and Don McHan, challenged realms of male privilege, as did Tammy Wynette with her recording of "D-I-V-O-R-C-E," a song she co-wrote with producer

Billy Sherrill.¹²³ More recently, the Martina McBride recording of “Independence Day”¹²⁴ (1994), written by Gretchen Peters, broke new ground in the public discussion about spousal abuse in country music. Shania Twain’s lyrics, videos, concert appearances and media depictions promoted much discussion about and implicitly advocated for more sexually liberated portrayals of women in country music. The Dixie Chicks “Goodbye Earl” (2000), written by Dennis Linde, continued the discussion around forms of empowerment available to abused women, as did Miranda Lambert’s “Gunpowder and Lead” (2007), written by Lambert and Heather Little, and Carrie Underwood’s “Before He Cheats” (2006), written by Josh Kear and Chris Tompkins.¹²⁵ None of the singers of these songs wrote them (though some were cowritten by their singers), and thus the subject of each can be reasonably questioned, as can the role and motivations of the songwriters in each case. As we shall see in the discussion of the songs written by Victoria Banks, the mechanism of production that brings any country song to the attention of listeners

¹²³ While hesitant to embark on such well-trodden ground, Wynette’s classic “Stand By Your Man” deserves a second listening in terms of its positioning of the male and female participants in the relationship. Though it is often critiqued as a call for female passivity, this reading overlooks the portrayal of men in the song, who are not submitted to out of honour but begrudgingly adhered to for the sake of keeping families and communities together. In Kenneth Morris’ excellent critique of the song, he contends that the feminist critique leveled at the song treats the sentiments of the chorus as a “cognitive message” (Morris 6) rather than assessing the overall impact of the chorus combined with the contrasting verse lyrics. In doing so, it fails to address how the lyrics of the song resonate with the experience of many working-class women, and thus reinforces a narrow and class-based definition of femininity. Morris has argues that the song, when considering the juxtaposition of the sentiments of the verse and the chorus, can be “interpreted not as an ode to oppression, but as an ironic aesthetic statement about a woman’s oppression” (1992:8).

¹²⁴ “Independence Day” is a song, David Fillingim notes, whose “blend of imagery exposes how Christian myth and patriotic myth are conflated in patriarchal America to reinforce an arsenal of traditional ‘values’ that often have damaging effects on women and children” (Fillingim 129).

¹²⁵ As a point of information, women songwriters wrote “Independence Day” (Gretchen Peters) and “Gunpowder and Lead” (Miranda Lambert, Heather Little), while “Goodbye Earl” (Dennis Linde) and “Before He Cheats” (Josh Kear, Chris Tompkins) are entirely male-written. None are co-written between male and female writers.

also needs to be scrutinized, including the circumstances surrounding how, why, when and by whom it is written.

Women have always been part of country music performance, at first rarely but in increasing numbers through the decades. Their songs have often provoked controversy (and made men uncomfortable) through their gendered poignancy. Gender itself, on the other hand, can be seen to have been an axis of continual deliberation since the outset of the genre, arguably never absent from song texts and observably affecting behavior and views of both female and male practitioners and fans.

Victoria Banks: Nashville Songwriter

Victoria Banks is a Canadian songwriter and singer from Bracebridge, a town of roughly twelve thousand people in the Muskoka region of Ontario, three hours north of Toronto. Since she was a teenager, Banks was determined to write songs for a living. “I didn’t know too much about it,” Banks told me in August of 2010 at a café near Music Row, “but I did know you could make a living doing it because one of my high school friends that I played in a band with . . . was living down here” (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010). That friend and band mate, Deric Ruttan, had relocated a couple of years earlier.¹²⁶ Banks moved to Nashville in 1997 with the knowledge that she had a couch to sleep on upon arrival, as well as the advice of someone who had already been navigating the songwriting terrain there. “[Ruttan has] been a kind of halfway house for a lot of Canadians coming into Nashville, ‘til we get our feet on the

¹²⁶ Ruttan is another of my informants, and has written songs recorded by Dierks Bentley, Eric Church and several Canadian country singers, including Terri Clarke, Michelle Wright, Paul Brandt, Jason Blaine and Jason McCoy. He is also a performer with an active career in Canada, and was nominated for Canadian Country Music Awards (CCMAs) in 2013 for Single Of The Year, Songwriter Of The Year and Video Director Of The Year (see <http://www.dericruttan.net/index.php>, accessed August 8, 2013).

ground,” she explained (Victoria Banks, personal communication, May 1, 2011). The reciprocity that Ruttan exhibited toward Banks is common amongst songwriters and aspiring writers in Nashville, and not just amongst old friends who have relocated there. Almost all of my informants related a similar story to Banks’s: of fellow songwriters who extended an unconditional helping hand to help them get established in town and in their work. Songwriters’ large numbers within close proximity, as well as the collaborative nature of their work, fosters an observable community-mindedness, collegiality, and mutual support network.¹²⁷

While gender did not seem to be an impediment toward Banks being shown cooperation from her songwriting colleagues, this does not mean that the gender of Nashville songwriters isn’t relevant to their work processes, successes, and challenges. Artist and Repertoire representative (A and R rep) Renee Bell encapsulates the experience of being both openly accepted and tacitly discriminated against as a woman working on Music Row here:

I’ve been lucky because my superiors haven’t been chauvinistic males . . . I have never felt men were prejudiced against me because I am a woman . . . [However,] to get an edge, you have to work three times as hard. If you are willing to do that you will get the respect of the men (Renee Bell, quoted in Dickerson 48-9).

While women such as Renee Bell and Victoria Banks will mostly defend the majority of the men they encounter in terms of their attitude toward women as professional peers, they will also freely acknowledge that they experience a bias against themselves as women in the course of their work.¹²⁸ The experiences that Banks had while trying to find her way in a new physical and

¹²⁷ Richard Peterson and Howard White call such a network a “simplex” (a peer group that relies on overt camaraderie as a way of masking a process of informal peer selection) (Peterson and White 1979: 417-18). As this relates to Banks, one explanation of the peer support shown to is that it was the result of her work ethic, sociability, and talent; in short, her appropriateness for the work and life of a Nashville songwriter.

¹²⁸ Many of the female songwriters I spoke with about the topic simply said they felt that women were fully accepted as peers and colleagues once they had earned respect as songwriters, either

professional environment upon arriving in Nashville are not characterized by gendered discrimination or obvious sexism. But just because men on Music Row don't behave in overtly discriminatory ways it does not mean the system is not biased in their favour.

Women in Country Music Songwriting

As was the case in Tin Pan Alley, country music production is indisputably a male-dominated arena with few examples of women holding positions of power in the industry (though it is not unheard of today), a minority of female songwriters,¹²⁹ and fewer women than men who have achieved star status as singers (though there is a sizable number of women performers).

Nevertheless, texts that examine the stances and roles of women practitioners in country music (Bufwack and Oermann 2003, Hight 2011, McCusker 2008, Wolfe and Akenson 2003) reveal the presence of women who have shaped every stage of its evolution.

The first woman to record a hillbilly song, Roba Stanley, did so within a year of the Fiddlin' John Carson's groundbreaking recording; and she recorded it in the same Atlanta studio. About her recording "Single Girl," done in July of 1925 in Atlanta, Charles Wolfe says, "This was an amazing song . . . its imagery and rhythm and scansion suggest that Roba was a natural-born songwriter, as well as an early defender of women's rights" (Wolfe 27), but it seems his

through previous successes or by being signed to a publishing deal. However, it must be remembered that as workers who need to be concerned with navigating their particular professional milieu, female songwriters may not feel that they are in a position to offer a full-blown critique of their male coworkers' attitudes toward female coworkers to someone in my position.

¹²⁹ The number of women who have been involved in writing country songs professionally is tiny compared to men (Sicoli 35-36), and though this ratio is gradually becoming more equal, is still estimated by many of my informants to be around 10 to 1 (male and female). Of the 183 inductees into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, only 13 are women, and only 9 of these are songwriters. In the country music Hall of Fame, there are only three women songwriters (Cindy Walker, Felice Bryant and Dolly Parton).

assessment was not widely shared, either at the time or retrospectively. Stanley herself has commented on being a female instrumentalist at the time, saying, “I know I was the only girl playing — at least I don’t remember seeing any more girls” (quoted Wolfe 23). Indeed, in the Southeast of the 1920s she had few peers – women rarely made commercial recordings. Yet in spite of her historically significant achievement, she remains an obscure figure to this day, and cannot be claimed to have had a lasting impact on the future direction of country music.

Audiences censured women who were working apart from husbands or families in this era,¹³⁰ thus severely limiting the options of a woman desiring work playing music (Malone and Neal 119-20). Stanley herself married, moved to Florida and (largely at the request of her new husband) stopped playing music, all within a few months of making the recording discussed above (Wolfe 28). There were, however, a few prominent radio entertainers in the 1930s that were women. One of the few was Myrtle Eleanor Cooper, widely known as Lulu Belle, who had a duet act with her husband (“Lulu Belle and Scotty”) that was one of the most popular¹³¹ on WSM’s National Barndance, the Chicago show that was then the nation’s largest of its kind (ibid 117, 119). Lily May Ledford was another National Barndance star (joining the cast in 1936), and together with her group the Coon Creek Girls she popularized a style of harmony singing and group instrumental playing that mixed gospel and sentimental songs with other pieces from the rural mountain repertoire (ibid 119).

Songwriting in the Tin Pan Alley era and throughout Nashville history has been a male occupation largely because of its entanglement with larger production processes that were almost entirely the realm of men. However, I would argue that there are a couple of factors that make

¹³⁰ Banjoist Rachel Veach had to pretend to be dobro player Beecher Kirby’s sister in order to play in the Roy Acuff band starting in 1939 (see Malone and Neal 119).

¹³¹ Lulu Belle won a Radio Digest poll in 1936 as the most popular radio performer in the country (see Malone and Neal 119)

songwriting more fluid in its gendered associations than performance or management roles. Firstly, female singers need material that can believably be attached to them in performance. It is common on Music Row for men to write songs sung by women. Nevertheless, as Banks's experience attests to, there are instances when women may hold a gender advantage over their male counterparts, particularly in times when there are a lot of women singers who need song material. Secondly, songwriters toil in the shadows, veiled from the visual scrutiny of audiences. Thus songwriters are able to transgress their own experience and perspective within a song, creating scenarios that may be fictional to them but believable when attached to someone else.

Songwriters such as Cindy Walker, Felice Bryant, Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, Matraca Berg and Hillary Lindsey have had and are currently enjoying successful careers as Nashville songwriters. Lindsey at the time of this writing is widely considered a standard bearer of the Nashville songwriting community, this assessment being based on her demonstrated success at getting her songs cut and made into hits. While Nashville songwriters are predominantly male and songwriting has and is a largely male domain, women are not excluded or overtly discouraged from becoming part of the Nashville songwriting community. They can be accepted and treated as peer-equals in this professional environment, and (as I give specific examples of below) there are many instances in which women are sought out specifically for the female perspective they are able to bring to a cowriting session.

Dialectics of Inclusion

1997 was a particularly good time for a female songwriter like Victoria Banks to be coming to Nashville. At that time, publishers were trying to figure out the kind of material being sought by the female singers who were then dominating the country music charts (such as Martina

McBride, Faith Hill, Sara Evans, and especially Shania Twain,).¹³² Banks's songs, which she calls "female empowered, pop-influenced, pushing the edge of pop stuff for women to sing" (Victoria Banks, personal communication, May 1, 2011), helped address this dearth of female-oriented songs, and she was signed to a publishing deal within six months of moving to Nashville.¹³³ Banks tells the story this way:

I got my first publishing deal because I was a woman. Women were doing really well on the radio in the mid 90s, and publishers were scrambling to try and find female writers who wrote the pop-influenced style of country that was having success. I fit right into that mold, so I was signed with very little songwriting experience under my belt (ibid).

In this instance Banks parlayed her gender and her gendered songwriting style into an asset, one that allowed her to, by her own account, jump the queue ahead of other songwriters who may have been more experienced.

While being a woman was advantageous in this case, Banks felt the disadvantages of her gender more powerfully shortly thereafter, in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York (Banks uses the descriptor "nine-eleven"). The comparative broad-mindedness of the late 1990s in terms of women-oriented subject matter in country songs ended. In its wake, the sounds of the honky tonk — sounds that are coded as masculine — dominated, and, as Banks puts it, "the women all of a sudden weren't doing that well. [Instead

¹³² The year before Banks moved to Nashville, 1996, was the first in the modern era of recorded music (i.e. post-1954) that female singers made up a bigger percentage of solo artists that made the top-20 on the charts than their male counterparts did (Dickerson 17-18), and country music reflected this emergence as much as any genre. The late nineties was also the first era in which female record buyers accounted for more sales than men (Tillekens, "*Trends and Shifts in U.S. Music Sales*"). See Dickerson 17-63, for further discussion of the late nineteen-nineties as it pertains to women in popular music generally and country music specifically.

¹³³ While it is not unheard of for an arrivee with no industry connections to be signed by a publisher within a few months, most of my informants who came to Nashville under similar circumstances, particularly those who have arrived more recently, were not signed so quickly, some waiting over two years (or never getting signed by a publisher at all).

we got] ‘Boot-in-your-ass, . . . how-country-am-I [songs]’ . . .” (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010).¹³⁴

The industry’s change in song preference as a reaction to the September 11 attacks had material implications for Banks beyond abstract debates about the gendered nature of country music: the ranks of female singers that she had regularly supplied songs to dwindled.

There were a lot of women who were doing really well at that time. I had a Sara Evans single, “Some Saints and Angels,” that came out right before nine-eleven. Sara was rockin’. She was double platinum, her record was doing great. [After the September 11 attacks] my song went up and came back down, and she never charted top ten after that (ibid).

Referring to this time in her career, Banks said, “I was writing songs that were better than I’d ever written, but I was writing with other women . . . and there just wasn’t anyone on the pitch sheet to record the songs we wrote” (Victoria Banks, personal communication, May 1, 2011).¹³⁵

This shift from the pop-oriented, cosmopolitan musical and lyrical content that characterized the music of Shania Twain and Martina McBride to the honky tonk, typically Southern content of the music of Toby Keith and Alan Jackson, male singers who dominated country music charts in the wake of the September 11 attacks, is one manifestation of what Richard Peterson has coined the “hard-core versus soft-shell dialectic” (Peterson 1995). Progressive cycles in Nashville’s production process have shown a tendency to vacillate between these poles, at times employing the pop-oriented sounds of the day (“soft-shell”) to appeal to a wider audience, at others showing a resistance to this perceived watering-down of a traditional

¹³⁴ For a discussion on honky tonk’s coding as masculine, see Ching 30-34. See A. Fox 2005: 164-91 for further discussion on changes in country music in response to the September 11 attacks.

¹³⁵ A pitch sheet is a list of singers who are looking for material, compiled from information sent from record companies to publishers and distributed to the songwriters on the respective publishers’ rosters.

country (“hard-core”) sound.¹³⁶ Banks’s statement above indicates that this dialectic is not only about the size and makeup of the audience, but also its members’ views about gender. A nuanced analysis would factor in how women can embrace a more aggressive hard-core stance as it suits them, and that some men might find their way over to the soft-shell side of things at certain moments. Nevertheless, the soft and hard binary itself is in large part a gendered distinction, and the ‘wider audience’ sought by soft-shell country is often made up of women who might feel alienated or indifferent about hard-core, honky tonk country.¹³⁷

Cowriting and Gender Politics

While cowriting has taken place amongst Nashville songwriters, in the past it was always undertaken at the discretion of the writers themselves. More recently, however, cowriting has become a standard practice largely because of the interests and interventions of Music Row publishers and producers (as I discuss in the previous chapter). Since cowriting has become standard practice for writing country songs, members of the songwriting community share more than a way of life: they collaborate regularly in the course of their work. Cowriting sessions are spaces in which a song is formulated and then written, ideally out of input from everyone present and often prompted by the recounting of personal experiences or thoughts of the cowriters.

Prior to coming to Nashville, Banks mostly wrote alone, and Fame Music, her first publisher, encouraged her to continue doing so.¹³⁸ Four years after arriving in Nashville, she

¹³⁶ I discussed the hard-core and soft-shell dialectic as it relates to songwriters on pages 34-37.

¹³⁷ See Hughes 196 for more on the gendered implications of the hard-core vs. soft-shell dialectic.

¹³⁸ Banks arrangement with her publisher to produce solo-written songs was exceptional for the time, and as of this writing is virtually unknown on Music Row. Songwriters are not hired and given a salary by publishers; rather they are signed to a contract (usually one to three years) and receive a draw that is recovered from the future royalties they are expected to produce. As

married her songplugger¹³⁹ at Fame, who became her “conduit to the world” while she “just stayed home and wrote” (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010). This relationship did not last, yet its beginning and its end had profound implications for the trajectory of Banks’s career and music.

One of the effects of the eventual demise of Banks’s marriage was that she sought to break her relative isolation and began to collaborate more often to write songs. For a period of time (2005-2009 roughly) she did so almost exclusively with women. As Banks explains it: “. . . a lot of [my cowriting] relationships came from after my divorce when I felt a little threatened by being in the room with men” (ibid). It is significantly more difficult to find songwriting collaborators who are women on Music Row owing to their relatively smaller population in comparison to men. Thus Banks needed to make a deliberate effort to cowrite with women exclusively.

While the effort exerted to find suitable female writing partners might have been beneficial on an emotional or psychic level for Banks, the tactic was not without risk. Banks explained to me that “there’s a belief in the business that although female artists will cut male demos, males can’t ‘hear through’ a female demo.” While Banks’s claim that “males can’t ‘hear through’ a female demo” is a widely held perception, there are exceptions. For instance, Tim McGraw’s assertion in 2012 that “for some reason, girls can sing a guy’s demo better than a guy can sing a girl’s demo” (Tim McGraw, quoted in Shelburne 65) is in direct contravention to

cowriting is deemed to increase the chances that the song that results will be cut, most Nashville songwriters are not even offered a choice from their publishers about writing solo-written songs: they are expected to collaborate with others in the course of their work. In some cases a publisher will set up these cowriting sessions themselves, usually but not always with input from the writer on their roster.

¹³⁹ A songplugger is a salesperson of songs. It is her or his job to have the right song be heard by a person – whether a singer, manager or producer – that is in a position to get a song cut.

Banks's claim. Nevertheless, a widely held perception exists that women routinely decide to cut songs upon hearing songwriter demos in which the singer is male, but the reverse seldom happens. This is, according to Banks and others, a gendered stigma, if not an overtly sexist outlook, one that prevents men from cutting a song they hear as "female."

This perceived bias extends beyond singers on demo recordings and into the writing room where songwriters meet to create songs. Banks asserts that,

There also seems to be a double standard that males can write female material but females can't write male material without at least cowriting with a male because they will naturally come up with female-sounding melodies, use too wide of a vocal range, or say things in a uniquely female way. Maybe that's true sometimes [i.e. that women bring a female perspective and tendencies], but I fully believe that a woman who pays attention and knows her craft can write a song for a man just as well as a man can write one for a woman. Why not? (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

While Banks doesn't deny that something "uniquely feminine" might result from a cowriting session between women, or where the perspective of the woman who is present dominates a song's content, she questions what the problem with such a perspective might be. Indeed, Country Music Hall of Fame songwriter Cindy Walker wrote songs for male singers throughout her career (most notably Eddy Arnold's "You Don't Know Me") largely without any gendered scrutiny of her lyrics. Further, there have been many country songs written by men and sung by women, and these are not rejected simply because they might have too much of a male perspective. Regardless, this bias, or at least the perception of it, exists to the extent that it is safe to extrapolate that fewer songs are written only by women on Music Row because of it. This indicates how Banks's decisions about cowriters after her divorce might have marginalized the songs she wrote at this time, in spite of the fact that Banks was, in her own estimation, writing "songs that were better than [she'd] ever written."

“Remember That”

Remember
How he told you you were stupid
How he couldn't even look at you anymore
Remember
How he told you you were crazy
How he got out of the car and slammed the door
He said you can't do anything right
Why you gotta make me so mad
Just get outta my sight
Remember that

When it's 3 am and he's at your door
And he wants you back and he's begging for forgiveness
Remember that
When your phone keeps ringing all night long
And that same old weakness gets so strong that you're helpless
Remember that

Remember
How he pushed you in the hallway
Just enough to hurt a little bit
Remember
The whiskey in his whispers
And the lies that fell so easy from his lips
He said he'll never do it again
But you can't take it back
The proof is on your skin
Remember that

When it's three a.m. and he's at your door
And he wants you back and he's begging for forgiveness
Remember that
When your phone keeps ringing all night long
And that same old weakness gets so strong that you're helpless
Remember that

It doesn't matter how he hurts you,
With his hands or with his words
You don't deserve it, it ain't worth it
Take your heart and run

When it's 3am and he's at your door
And he wants you back and he's begging for forgiveness
Remember that

When your phone keeps ringing all night long
 And that same old weakness gets so strong that you're helpless
 Remember that, remember that
 Oh remember that

Remember
 You're gonna be all right
 Take it from me I've stood there in your shoes¹⁴⁰

In the set of lyrics above (written by Banks and Rachel Proctor), the very personal nature of the scenario it outlines is contrasted by the removed stance the speaker maintains. Nashville songwriters tend to adhere to the belief that listeners are not interested in hearing about a songwriter's personal problems, and that country songs are most effective when they invite listeners to imagine themselves in the situation the song describes. In spite of the intimate ways in which the words describe such a private topic (one not often broached directly in country songs),¹⁴¹ there is little or no indication of how personal the topic might be to the actual writers of these words.

The song is sung from the perspective of a former victim of male domestic abuse to another woman who is currently in a similar situation. Banks's account of the song's inception is worth quoting here at length.

Rachel Proctor and I wrote it together about a year after my divorce. Rachel had saved the idea to write with me – we'd never written together or even talked much before that, but somehow she just felt compelled to bring that idea to me . . . It turned out that we both had that experience in common – we'd both . . . had "Remember That" moments that helped us end our relationships. So when we finally finished talking about it and got down to writing it – which wasn't until about four p.m., but we

¹⁴⁰ © 2008 Circle C. Songs (Administered by Full Circle Music Publishing LLC (ASCAP). Circle C Songs (ASCAP/SOCAN).

¹⁴¹ In spite of its rarity as subject matter, there have been a number of prominent songs that have broached the subject of domestic and spousal abuse, both physical and psychological. Loretta Lynn's "Don't Come Home a' Drinkin' With Lovin' On Your Mind" from 1967 (written by Lynn and her sister, Peggy Sue Webb) and "Independence Day" from 1994 (written by Gretchen Peters) are examples of this type of song.

finished it within an hour – we wrote it from the heart to try and help other abused women to have the same realization we had (Victoria Banks, personal communication, May 1, 2011).

The writing of the song was motivated largely by two songwriters' mutual desire to come to terms with abusive and traumatic experiences they had suffered at the hands of male romantic partners. Proctor had "saved the idea," presumably choosing not to suggest it to male cowriters or even to female ones who she felt wouldn't relate to the phenomenon the song describes. Banks's statement that it "wasn't until about four p.m." implies that the pair had been talking since their cowriting session began. During a conversation that lasted several hours, the two songwriters described their experiences of abuse both emotional and physical to each other, and found common ground in recalling each of their epiphanic "Remember That" moments." With the clarity of that image, they wrote a song relatively quickly (i.e., "within an hour").

Is "Remember That" an intrinsically female song? Banks certainly thinks so.

I don't think it could have been written with/by a man – at least not the same way. I wouldn't have felt as open and connected with a male cowriter at the time, although I'm getting better at that now, and I'm not sure a man would have had the same personal investment that motivated the lyric to be written. It came straight from our hearts and our respective experiences (ibid).

If her latter explanation that a man would not have a "personal investment" in speaking about the subject matter were a compelling argument for why this song is specifically gendered, then "Remember That" would be a rare exception amongst Nashville songs. By this I mean that it was written not with the expectation of it being a money-making hit, but because it *is* very personal to the experiences of its songwriters, and Banks and Proctor felt that it was an important message for and about women who have been abused by their male romantic partners.

While I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of her claims (nor any interest in doing so), Banks's initial statement — that the song could not have been written by a man — while not entirely refutable, needs to be scrutinized further. It is likely true that Banks would not have felt “as open and connected” with a male cowriter when discussing domestic abuse, yet it should not be assumed from this that male songwriters do not or cannot write songs on subjects that could be of particular interest to women. Nashville songwriters routinely write songs by adopting subject positions, including gendered ones, different from their own.¹⁴²

I refer to this process of adoption as *empathetic conveyance*. Here I intend the term to relate to both the process that allows songwriters to write songs describing subject positions outside of their direct experience, and also the process through which a listener will relate to and attach meaning onto a song.¹⁴³ Amy Shuman contends that “empathy provides one means for understanding across disparate experiences” (Shuman 18), and thus the empathetic responses of both songwriters and listeners are called into play when consuming a country song. While scrutiny of the potential relationship between a songwriter and the subject of a song, looking for connections between the lyrics and the writer herself, is routine among listeners and scholars alike, how empathy extends to the listener of a song as well is less often examined. Yet I want to suggest that this is an important analytical step given that Nashville songwriters are assigned the task of writing songs for others to sing and so that listeners can believably connect these songs to the singers that perform them, and that empathy is that capacity the listener possesses which allows her or him to relate to a song's subject matter.

¹⁴² Two examples of songs that primarily appealed to women but were written by men are Pam Tillis' “All the Good Ones Are Gone,” written by Dean Dillon and Bob McDill, and, more recently, Carrie Underwood's “Before He Cheats,” written by Josh Kear and Chris Tompkins.

¹⁴³ Oxford Dictionary Online, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/empathy?q=empathy> (August 20, 2013).

Aaron Fox highlights how a process of “split subjectivity” allows country listeners to both relate to and be ashamed by characters and behaviors described in country songs, simultaneously embracing and disavowing the lyrics’ applicability to their own lives (A. Fox 1993: 132-40). Accounts like that of the writing of “Some Men Don’t Cheat” demonstrate how empathetic conveyance could be viewed as another manifestation of split subjectivity, one that allows a songwriter to imagine the position of an intended listener, anticipate how a singer might convincingly perform the song, and apply their own skills and inspirations toward facilitating these connections. Based on my discussions with numerous commercial songwriters, it is the aspect of empathetic conveyance in which a songwriter anticipates how a listener will react to a song upon hearing it that most concerns them in their work. This is also the primary concern of a songwriter’s publisher, that publisher’s songplugger, and the producer, performer, manager, or agent that the songplugger is pitching the song to.¹⁴⁴ In pointing out this aspect of writing commercial country songs I wish to simply note that while “Remember That” is without a doubt a very personal, perhaps even autobiographical, song to its writers, this does not entirely account for what makes it compelling to listeners. Banks and Proctor’s songwriterly ability to extend their mutual experience into a song that can be relatable to and widely consumed must be considered as well.

Banks’s choice of collaborators, largely born out of a desire to achieve a sort of psychic unity between her songwriting and other aspects of her life (and in spite of the risk involved in

¹⁴⁴ In commenting on the role of audience and the motivations of producers in country music production, sociologist Michael Hughes notes that “. . . collective behavior of industry actors and artists . . . is based in generalized beliefs about the existence and nature of the audience and what they will buy” (Hughes 196). These beliefs are far from fixed, and not only change over time but are often confounded by unanticipated song choices on the part of audiences. While publishers and producers try to anticipate what audiences will respond to, this process is highly speculative and the whims of consumers change constantly.

not writing with men), helped earn her a reputation as a quasi-specialist at writing empowered songs for women, a reputation that has contributed to some specific songwriting successes. The song “Remember That” set one such success in motion the day an executive at RCA Records pulled a demo CD out of a pile on her desk and listened to it.¹⁴⁵ The song was then pitched to Jessica Simpson, a well-known actress and singer who was at the time (2007) making her entry into the country music market and was looking for songs. Simpson liked “Remember That” so much that she decided to cut it. “Apparently she’s been through that experience, too,” Banks explained, “so she related to it, fell in love with the song and decided hands-down she was going to record [it]” (Victoria Banks, personal communication, May 1, 2011).

While Banks and Proctor may have been somewhat surprised that this song got cut given its subject matter, they were optimistic that the message of the song might be widely heard. In addition to whatever cathartic affect the writing of this song may have produced, Banks was clearly motivated by the idea that the song might help other women who had been or are currently in similar situations. That a well-known singer cut the song made them even more optimistic about the song’s potential effect.

“Remember That” was [Jessica Simpson’s] second single, and we had such high hopes for it! Rachel and I personally hand-wrote a card to each country radio station in North America . . . asking them to please consider “Remember That” and the impact that it could have on their listeners that needed to hear it. But radio didn’t play it. I don’t know if it was the mostly male music programmers, or whether country radio was just over Jessica Simpson already. But we were pretty crushed about it. It was the most downloaded song on iTunes [for a brief period after its release], so it must have touched the listeners out there that did find it (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

¹⁴⁵ Songwriters regularly ‘demo’ their songs (i.e. record them or have them recorded by professional musicians and singers). Songpluggers then make CDs (or use more recent digital file technologies) of particular songs from their roster of songwriters that they think would be of interest to producers and managers, whether as a matter of routine or because of specific knowledge they might have about what types of song a producer might be seeking.

It is unusual for songwriters to actively advocate for their own song as Banks and Proctor did in this instance. Writing to programmers at radio stations is even more unusual and would be seen as transparently self-serving unless the altruistic motivation behind it was apparent. It would seem that the songwriters' advocacy had little effect on the song's radio presence, however, and it never achieved a high position on the charts. Banks's observation about the downloads indicates how a song might have wide appeal, or appeal to a large group of listeners, yet still be rejected by "mostly male radio programmers" who either don't recognize the song's merits or are biased against it because of how its gendered position contrasts with their own.

"Come On Over"

Leave your dishes in the sink
 Leave the ice cubes in your drink
 Just come on over
 Leave your coat behind the door
 Leave your laundry on the floor
 Just come on over

I need you now
 I need you bad
 I need you, baby
 Looking just like that
 Don't pack your bag
 Don't make me wait
 I wanna kiss that smile
 That's on your face
 I need you wrapped up in these arms
 I want you just the way you are
 Come on over . . .

Baseball cap and torn-up jeans
 A pair of flip-flops on your feet
 Just come on over
 Don't slow down, don't stop for gas
 Keep those four wheels spinning fast
 Just come on over

I need you now

I need you bad
 I need you baby
 Looking just like that
 Don't pack your bag
 Don't make me wait
 I want to kiss that smile
 That's on your face
 I need you wrapped up in these arms
 I want you just the way you are
 Come on over!

I need you now
 I need you bad
 I need you baby
 Looking just like that
 Don't pack your bag
 Don't make me wait
 I want to kiss that smile
 That's on your face
 Oh, all I need is all your love
 Baby I can't get enough
 I need you wrapped up in these arms
 I want you just the way you are
 So come on over
 So come on over!¹⁴⁶

Hearing the song “Remember That” prompted Simpson to make another choice about her upcoming recording. As Banks relates, “She decided she wanted to write for her record and she sought us out to write with us because of that song” (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010). The song that emerged from that decision, “Come On Over,” was not similar in tone to “Remember That,” as can be observed in the sample of the lyrics above. These lyrics of course do little to provide insight about Simpson or any of the song’s individual writers. “Come On Over” is a broadly relatable statement of longing and desire and an impassioned plea for the placation of these feelings that was a good vehicle for Simpson’s sexually-charged stage

¹⁴⁶ © 2008 Sweet Kisses, Inc. (ASCAP)/EMI April Music Inc. (ASCAP). Circle C Songs (administered by Full Circle Music Publishing LLC) (ASCAP). Circle C Songs (ASCAP/SOCAN).

persona. However, the story behind its creation demonstrates how songwriters' actual lives and interactions (and in this case, their sharing of poignant and observably gendered experiences) facilitate a song's creation and help songwriters navigate the formulaic constraints of country music songwriting.

To write what would eventually become "Come On Over," Simpson flew to Nashville on two separate afternoons. The first of the writing sessions consisted of Simpson recounting several incidents of her life while Banks and Proctor sat in silence (Banks was taking painkillers because of a recent knee surgery and Proctor was stricken with a serious flu). "Luckily she liked us enough to give it another chance, cuz we didn't come up with anything that day," recalls Banks, "but she came back a couple of weeks later . . . and in the meantime I had taken some of what she, you know, was talking about, and started the song "Come On Over" that we ended up writing" (ibid).

It is important to reflect on the types of interactions that occur between writers — the brief moments of caring that made it safe for Simpson to put herself in an emotionally vulnerable position in front of virtual strangers on more than one occasion and allowed Banks and Proctor to take Simpson's stories and infuse them into a song — and how they inform the song that results in any analysis of songwriters and their working process. Country songs owe their existence to unpredictable and intangible personal interactions and to spontaneous decisions made by songwriters in cowriting sessions (though Banks alludes to the fact that sometimes work gets done at home after these sessions as well). Regardless of the number of times a song is played, reworked, or listened to, I argue that it inevitably bears some imprint of the writers present at its initial formation. This imprinting can be thought of as *auratic sedimentation*, a process that

places the presence of the songwriter in the song itself, regardless of who is involved in later performances, recorded or live.

I refer to this process as “sedimentation” because, rather than competition over ownership, songwriters work together to add content and meaning to songs. The idea of accumulated layers of meaning allows for how later manipulation of the sound of a song (such as by producers, engineers or singers) can also be responsible for imprinting definitive aspects onto a song, and these later contributions could also be thought of as auratic. This process is reminiscent of Barthes’ claim that authorship in the modern sense involves a transference of authority from writer to reader. Barthes contends that “the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes 148), and thus “it is language that speaks, not the author”. The following passage has particular resonance when applied to Nashville songwriters:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture . . . the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely . . .

Put simply, writing a country song relies on blending (and clashing) several strands of cultural meaning in a way that is recognizable to listeners, and any authorial privilege over this song can only be validated to the extent it conforms to others expectations. The author in this context is dead, Barthes argues.

The specter of songwriters, singers and instrumentalists, engineers, producers and others all imprinting on the impression created when listening to a recorded song has resonance with

Howard Becker's ideas of "art worlds." Becker argues that works are created as "the result of the coordinated activities of all the people whose cooperation is necessary in order that the work should occur as it does," rather than originating from a sole creator and her or his individual creativity (Becker 705). Recognizing auratic sedimentation thus complicates binaristic thinking about songs as either mass produced commodities *or* authentic art objects (Negus 2004:4), and considers how songwriters contribute to songs whether or not the final lyrical content directly reflects their personal experience. It also allows for the presence of the original songwriters' intent in a studio produced and mass mediated recording.¹⁴⁷

In the case of the cowriting session with Simpson, it was initiated out of her belief in the emotional trustworthiness of the songwriters, a belief premised on hearing a particularly poignant song. This would at least help to explain why Simpson would fly all the way to Nashville and pour her heart out to two strangers as a way to write a song. She chose these collaborators not only as a marketing strategy (though this is obviously part of the reason that a singer in her situation seeks out professional songwriters as cowriters), but also in large part because of her own personal comfort level. Notably, this mirrors how Banks made decisions about cowriters after her divorce.

As Banks points out, the subject matter of "Remember That," and by extension the gender of her cowriters, was a clear factor in Simpson's choice to write with them. Thus while in the previous section I cautioned against a reading of Nashville songs as sincerely personal expressions of the songwriter, it would seem that Simpson did not hesitate to make that

¹⁴⁷ I discuss Benjamin's idea of aura, both its applicability and limitations as an analytic to describe Nashville songwriters' work, on pages 32-34.

connection. “Come On Over” represents another instance in which Banks’s gender and her choice to write only with female cowriters seems to be responsible for a tangible success.¹⁴⁸

“Some Men Don’t Cheat”

One foot in the hallway
 And one foot out the door
 One foot in a new life
 And one still in the life I lived before
 That ain’t my life no more
 Back over my shoulder this house is full of pain
 But even though the comforts cold it’s still almost enough to make me stay
 But I can’t live that way

Because I still believe that some men don’t cheat
 And some men don’t lie
 Some men don’t need what they don’t have to feel satisfied
 So I’ll walk out this door
 And drive off down that street
 ‘Cause baby I deserve more
 Some men don’t cheat . . .

Baby I’ll forgive you but I just can’t forget
 It’ll haunt me like the scent of Jasmine perfume when I lay down my head
 Like a ghost in our bed
 That’s why I got to leave

Cause some men don’t cheat
 And some men don’t lie
 Some men don’t need what they don’t have to feel satisfied
 So I’ll walk out this door
 And drive off down that street
 ‘Cause baby I deserve more
 Some men don’t cheat

Yeah I’ll walk out this door
 And land on my feet

¹⁴⁸ Banks’s, Proctor’s, and Simpson’s eventual collaboration produced Banks’s most commercially successful song to date, which still holds the record for the most successful debut single by a solo artist in the history of the Billboard Country Music Charts. The music charts printed and distributed by the Billboard Company have, since their inception in 1936, been considered the most authoritative record of song popularity. It publishes charts in multiple genres, including country music.

'Cause baby I deserve more
Some men don't cheat¹⁴⁹

The story of “Some Men Don’t Cheat” sheds light on the auratic sedimentation that occurs in cowriting sessions and how this might pertain to a song written by a man and a woman together. It provides an exception to my previous depiction of Banks as someone who typically cowrites with other women, and is an example of men collaborating with women in the crafting of a song written for a woman to sing, something that happens with regularity in Nashville.¹⁵⁰ The singer in “Some Men Don’t Cheat” is describing the thoughts of a woman who is exiting a relationship because of a partner’s infidelity, and asserting the inevitability of her decision in spite of the pain that will ensue. Banks describes the song’s genesis this way:

[After my divorce] I did work with a couple of men that I really loved working with. Michael Dulaney was one . . . he pulled one out of me after my divorce, a song called “Some Men Don’t Cheat” . . . I was [talking a lot] about my marriage cuz it was close to coming to an end and he looked at me and said, “Some men don’t cheat. You deserve better,” and I was like, “Let’s write that!” (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

The interaction between Banks and Dulaney described here further highlights how songwriters in cowriting sessions can generate ideas by mining their own and their collaborators’ experiences and views for subject material. While conversations in cowriting sessions routinely drift toward topics usually considered too private or intimate to be shared amongst mere acquaintances, and certainly between strangers, these conversations could at any time be interrupted by a “let’s write that!” moment. Banks describes how this happened in the session with Dulaney:

¹⁴⁹ © 2005 Mojave Rain Music/Circle C. Songs (Administered by Full Circle Music Publishing LLC (ASCAP). Circle C Songs (ASCAP/SOCAN).

¹⁵⁰ Famous examples of this type of collaborative song include “Stand By Your Man” (written by Billy Sherrill and Tammy Wynette) and “Redneck Woman” (written by John Rich and Gretchen Wilson).

Michael contributed a lot to “Some Men Don’t Cheat,” but again that song is a painfully honest commentary on the experience I had with my first husband. After the divorce, I spent about six months coming apart emotionally in the writing room, often with cowriters I had just met! I was hurting, and I was venting. Some of my collaborators brushed it aside, but the really good ones like Michael used it as material and gently helped me dig into it and explore my feelings about what had happened. They mined my pain like the songwriting gold that it was, so to speak . . . country music loves a cheating/ drinking/ heartache song (Victoria Banks, personal communication, May 1, 2011).

Here is another manifestation of empathetic conveyance, where these songwriters make themselves vulnerable enough to expose personal stories and thoughts, but at the same time, abstract themselves from these experiences in order to write a broadly-relatable song text. “Some Men Don’t Cheat,” while arising out of Banks’s experience, is not written from an unequivocally female perspective, but rather represents a merging of two slightly different takes on the assertion of the title. Dulaney is essentially saying that not all men are cheaters (and it was he who came up with the lyrical hook to that effect), Banks is contextualizing her specific relationships by saying that not all men act that way, and drawing hope from such an assertion. Dulaney, rather than being embarrassed by or dismissive of Banks’s emotional pain, “gently helped” her to translate her real life experiences and emotions into a song with the potential to resonate with listeners. Cowriting sessions, even when they contain intimate sharing of personal details from the songwriters’ lives, act as a buffer between the emotional content contained within a song and a song’s eventual manifestation as a recorded and mass-mediated commodity.

A group called “Cowboy Crush” cut “Some Men Don’t Cheat” in 2005. The experience of this group and its efforts to exploit the commercial potential of this song gives insight into how gender affects how one hears a particular song, and also how certain viewpoints get privileged on the radio, the primary medium through which country songs come to the attention of listeners. After cutting the song, the band and its management team chose it as the first single

to be released on its debut album.¹⁵¹ More correctly, that was the intention until it came to the first radio tour¹⁵² promoting the album. Banks provides a second-hand description of what happened at that point:

We were told that the radio programmers were reacting very unfavorably to it. As much as it mobilized and excited women listeners, who were calling in to the radio requesting it, it must have been incredibly uncomfortable to listen to that song if you were a man that DOES cheat. And according to what we were told, radio programmers tend to be men who have a penchant for hitting on the female artists out there on radio tours. There are many inside stories about female artists' careers being made or broken by the fact that they slept with – or rejected the advances of – a high power radio programmer . . . so as sad as Cowboy Crush was to have to pull the song, they said they could see programmers visibly squirming when they played it and it just wasn't going to fly (ibid).

Owing to the perception of a gendered bias amongst gatekeepers at country radio, Cowboy Crush's management team concluded at the time that it was not commercially expedient to release "Some Men Don't Cheat" as a first single (i.e. the band's mass mediated first impression on consumers). In describing this experience and the response of middle-aged male radio managers and programmers, Banks became more animated about male biases in the country music industry than at any other point during our conversations. In Banks's estimation, "There are so many women that would have loved to have heard that song. And men too" (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010). She believes that they were denied this

¹⁵¹ The common industry strategy for promoting a group is to release one or more songs in advance of a full-length, multiple song recording (on CD or as a downloadable digital package). While this is primarily done to promote the upcoming full-length recording, the process can veer off course owing to the vagaries of Music Row and the wider music industry. Curb Records released six singles by Cowboy Crush between 2005 and 2008, one of which was "Some Men Don't Cheat". None charted higher than fifty-six. The full-length recording *Cowboy Crush* was finally released in 2009, and achieved only modest success.

¹⁵² A "radio tour" is undertaken by singers as a way of promoting new singles after their release. A visit to a radio station typically involves a live performance on-air, and as Banks alludes to, can also consist of various forms of interaction between the singers and musicians and the radio managers and programmers, some public and some private.

opportunity at the whim of a group of men who were squeamish at the song's lyrical content because of how it reflected on them personally, and without any regard for (or out of a misrepresentation of) the listeners they are charged with getting a favorable response from.

Banks identifies a poignant concern arising out of this scenario: that there is little room for her own subjectivity, as a “30-something-year-old woman” who has experienced the kind of physical and emotional pain the song describes, in her professional environment. In other words, Banks cannot simply write songs by imagining what she or women like herself would want to hear, ironic given that a significant percentage of country listeners are believed to be women of a similar age to Banks. In order to get a song on the radio in the current industrial climate, Banks has to employ empathetic transference in order to write what a man, very likely in his fifties, *thinks* a woman in her mid-thirties, someone much like herself, would want to hear, or perhaps what they *want* such a woman to hear. To Banks, the idea that middle-aged male radio programmers were making decisions about radio content meant that women were not hearing the songs they ought to be hearing, songs that might empower and uplift them.

Analyses of Victoria Banks's Stories

What are we to make of Banks's statement that she “mined [her] pain like the songwriting gold that it was,” quoted above? Using her painfully personal story as a theme for a commercial country song intended for mass mediation may seem a debasement of these experiences to some, yet this is not by any stretch unusual for Nashville songwriters. Nashville songwriters rely on inspiration plucked from plausibly “real-life” scenarios, thoughts and beliefs — including but not limited to their own — in order to resonate with listeners.

Banks's approach to her work and the process through which these songs came about challenges the overly reductive view that positions songs as either sincere and authentic or fabricated and commercial. All of the songs I discuss here, though inspired from real life experiences of its writers, are written from a stance that invites listeners to participate in their meaning for themselves. Further, "Remember That" and "Some Men Don't Cheat" were not initiated through Banks's own insistence. The former came from an idea that another songwriter "saved" to work on with Banks, while the latter was the idea of a collaborator who was inspired by Banks's story. That the experiences and emotions she depicts in these songs closely resemble her own simply sharpens the songs' imagery.

Banks and all working Nashville songwriters demonstrate an ability to adapt to a variety of constraints — some longstanding and constant, others arising more spontaneously and unpredictably — in order to write sellable songs. While musical ability is a necessary prerequisite, it alone does not account for who can successfully forge a career writing songs in Nashville. In addition to dogged determination, success requires continual adjustment to the work conditions imposed by publishers and producers, and to their constantly shifting expectations. Nashville songwriters must also have the ability to work and interact with others (whether friends, acquaintances, or strangers), and to produce songs from these interactions. This is possible through a process of split subjectivity in which one is intimately connected with and simultaneously abstracted from a song's subject, yet also relies on an ability to be comfortable and productive within the unique sociality that exists between Nashville songwriters when they collaborate.

Banks's personal story was subject to the same collaborative process and genre-appropriate reformatting that cowriters subject any idea to. Rather than focus on how these songs

might represent some sort of cheapening or selling out of her own experiences with domestic abuse and divorce, it is important to contemplate how Banks may have strengthened these songs by finding a balance between the autobiographical and the broadly-relatable within the confines of a cowriting session and using the medium of the country song. Banks's post-divorce songwriting process was to write with women, or the few men that she was comfortable collaborating with, as part of a healing from her trauma. Thus it could be argued that gender and gendered decisions were responsible for her and her collaborators discovering this middle ground between Banks's intensely and painfully personal account and a widely shared, communal one.

Cowriting in Nashville requires a particular adaptation on the part of female songwriters, who must negotiate an often-intimate environment when cowriting with men (or, like Banks, make a choice to write only with women and accept the ensuing consequences). The social environment of the cowriting session is characterized by the revelation of private thoughts or personal experiences not often shared between acquaintances or work colleagues. The empathy required to write meaningful and resonant songs is not necessarily more easily summoned by women than men. Such generalizations, while perhaps tempting to make, are problematic and difficult to verify. Nevertheless, Banks's experiences offer food for thought as to how cowriting might be more subtly coded as male or masculine, and how it might be different were it not inclined toward the proclivities of male writers.

Though I am hopeful of this changing, and while not discounting the work and successes of the many women who have and continue to work as songwriters in Nashville, cowritten country songs continue to be subjected to social and commercial processes that often disadvantage those songs that are written by women (e.g. who they are likely to be pitched to or cut by). The significance of this phenomenon and its implications on how gender is negotiated in

the production and consumption of country songs merits further scholarly critique, and my treatment of it here is far from definitive. However, and though it is challenging to quantify them, experiences such as Banks's and those of other female Nashville songwriters can certainly shed light on the more tacit biases and underlying gendered assumptions informing country music culture and song production.

Banks chose cowriters as part of a process through which she sought to make her songwriting an organic extension of the rest of her life and her personality, as the following quote illustrates:

The thing that empowers me most as a writer is to think of the creative process in a spiritual way, where I'm not responsible for the content that I come up, I'm just the tap, the conduit, so it's all about keeping the tap working. I don't have to be responsible. It's too much responsibility to place on my shoulders, and it puts me through all this agony, to think that I'm responsible for coming up with the idea. But to think that I just have to listen for it and it's there . . . allows me to honor those little whispers in my subconscious . . . If you looked at your creative personality like a little child – it's that delicate really . . . you would treat that child with respect and gentleness (Victoria Banks, personal communication, August 19, 2010).

Banks sought to achieve a state of spiritually attuned listening and self-nurturing through songwriting, and felt she could achieve this more readily when she cowrote with women. I am struck by this act of self-marginalization, done not out of professional strategizing but rather through a need for an emotional self-nurturing that Banks felt certain cowriters would jeopardize. In choosing the temporary tactic of limiting her pool of cowriters, she managed to create songs that were arguably different than those written on similar topics by songwriters with less personal investment in the subject matter. Importantly, even though her path was different, in the end she and her collaborators were able to turn aspects of Banks's personal life story into meaningful, broadly relatable (and thus sellable) songs. The reasons why Banks chose to do this,

and the fact that she was even in a position to make a choice about the gender of her cowriters, set her apart from her peers.

Barbara Ching points out that the “differences” that have cropped up over time to challenge the norms of country music ought to be viewed as crucial in the formation of oppositions to official narratives, and that it is these differences, these slippages in the official narrative, through which “meaning” is created (Ching 5). Less typical individuals and the creative acts they perform provide important windows into how things come to be normalized or accepted as natural, things “already said” (Foucault 25) and thus taken for granted. Points of slippage encourage inquiries into other possible modes of production and creativity, and are implicated in how and why country music maintains its relevance through so many generations. Country music is a commercial cultural practice that, while prominently positioned as a historically constituted, nostalgia-tinged fixity, is actually a highly flexible discursive arena through which many gendered (and classed and racialized) issues are articulated and debated.

Oppositional stances and challenges to convention such as Banks’s are often unnoticed or lost over time. This reinforces the difficulty — but not impossibility — of effecting large-scale change in the context of longstanding and monolithic commercial cultures such as country music. Fortunately for the continued health and relevancy of the genre, however, the monolithic nature of the country music industry and the conservatism often attributed to country music culture doesn’t seem to stop people such as Victoria Banks from challenging conventional wisdom in various ways. In a broad sense challenges like these are part of a cumulative series of events that cause the shifts in the genre that are necessary to reinvigorate its relevance.

Chapter 6: Going Straight to the Source: The Bluebird Cafe, the “In the Round” Format, and the Performance of the Nashville Songwriter

Introduction: Nashville Songwriters and the Bluebird Cafe

For performers, New York City has Carnegie Hall. Los Angeles has the Hollywood Bowl. London has the Royal Albert Hall. Nashville has the Ryman Auditorium. For the past twenty years, thank God, songwriters have had the Bluebird café (Vince Gill, quoted in Kurland, Benner and Fagan, 2002: v).

In episode sixteen of the first season of the prime time TV soap opera *Nashville*, Avery Barkley has lost his way. Once considered an up and coming star of the alt-rock/Americana genre, he signed a questionable deal with a powerful producer who manipulated Barkley’s music into something the singer barely recognized. In his quest for stardom, Barkley has alienated himself from his best friend, his former lover, and others. Frustrated at the producer’s refusal to compromise, Barkley destroys his own master tapes¹⁵³ as a symbolic statement of the end of their partnership. With newfound freedom but a lack of options, primarily because of his inability to avoid the massive debt that his destructive act incurred, Barkley seeks to rediscover what drove him to want to make music in the first place, to reignite the lost spark of his creativity, and to rebuild his professional and personal reputation. This is the subtext for the scene in which

¹⁵³ In this day and age of digital copies it is highly unlikely that a only a single copy of one’s master tapes would exist. Reality has a way of ruining a good story line, however, so it’s best not to dwell on such details.

Barkley sings a song called “Let There Be Lonely,” presumably of his own creation,¹⁵⁴ that recalls his trials and reminisces about simpler times. The site for the coming-out of this new, confessional and humbled Barkley is a venue in Nashville well known for positively receiving acts of musical contrition: Nashville’s Bluebird Cafe.¹⁵⁵

This chapter focuses on the performances of Nashville songwriters at the Bluebird Cafe. Most of the performers at the venue work primarily as songwriters (as opposed to singers, or “artists” in Nashville parlance), and the Bluebird stage is the most public arena for Nashville songwriters. The identity of the Nashville songwriter as a public figure is a complex one that can be viewed from several viewpoints (such as industrial labourer, culture bearer, creative artist), all of which are relevant to their self-representation on the Bluebird stage. I thus position events on the Bluebird stage as performances of both individual identity (of the songwriters who appear on stage) and collective identity (of the songwriting community in Nashville), both reflective and constitutive of the figure of the Nashville songwriter. As such, my concern here is primarily with issues of identity construction as they pertain to such performances.

More specifically, I examine the format that has been established for such performances, called “In the Round.”¹⁵⁶ This manner of performance staging, implemented at the Bluebird in the mid-1980s, affords writer/performers opportunities for self-representation through telling stories, singing songs, and bantering with audience members and fellow performers. The audience hears about a songwriter’s back story, what ideas inspired the song they are about to

¹⁵⁴ In reality this song was, at the time of the airing of the episode, a recent single by the Alabama duo *The Secret Sisters*, whose producer, T-Bone Burnett, is also the music director for the TV show *Nashville*.

¹⁵⁵ The Bluebird Café is the setting for many of the performance scenes featured in the show *Nashville*. This setting was important enough to the show’s producers that they reconstructed the Bluebird’s interior at a separate location to film these scenes.

¹⁵⁶ The term “In the Round” is used as a noun in media and public discourse in Nashville (e.g. “Tonight’s In the Round features . . .”), and I will use it in this sense throughout this chapter.

sing, and the circumstances surrounding its writing, including with whom it was written and how it was pitched to singers and producers. Songwriters routinely identify the other writers of the songs and weave stories of these collaborators into their introductions. Indeed, it is common to have another of the song's writers on the stage or in the crowd, and for the story to get told collaboratively, just as the song was written. The act of telling the back-story of a song's creation as a collaborative process renders problematic an autobiographical reading of a song's text and focuses attention toward the collective sociality that produces commercial country songs (a phenomenon I discussed on pages 155-59). As I have discussed throughout this writing, this sociality is definitive of a song's eventual content and form, yet is a little known aspect of Nashville songwriting, one that the Bluebird makes public.

Robert McCarl argues that “work processes and techniques [are] a basis for all other forms of expressive interaction.” (McCarl 159). “In the Round” performances at the Bluebird encapsulate country music production and discourse in which creative and culturally situated concerns are inextricably connected with the commercial motivations of producers. Thus Nashville songwriters' self-representation on the Bluebird stage, along with making public various aspects of individual writers' personalities and experiences and placing these individuals within a wider songwriting community, has the additional effect of positioning them as part of the industrial apparatus of Music Row.¹⁵⁷

The scenario at the outset of this chapter is a dramatization of the actual reputation the Bluebird enjoys amongst Nashville music venues: shows at the Bluebird are seen to be as

¹⁵⁷ Significantly, the TV show *Nashville* tends to ignore this aspect of the Bluebird performances, instead depicting performances there as more standard presentations of a singer or duet, accompanying themselves or by a small band. COO Erika Wollam has actually addressed this dearth of In the Round on the show as a misrepresentation of the venue and encouraged them to depict more rounds.

‘authentic’, ‘sincere’ or ‘real’ a musical experience as is likely to occur in Nashville, and that this is largely because the performers are also the original creators of the songs. Almost everything about the experience of attending the Bluebird, from the full houses every night to the service and demeanor of the staff to the notorious policy of “shushing” patrons who talk during performances,¹⁵⁸ attests to the reverence the venue accords to songwriters. Bluebird shows are seen to strip away the artifice of studio production and the glamourized interpretations of recording artists, ostensibly showing the rough beauty of the song before it was ground into shape and polished. Attending the Bluebird brings the sense of being granted a new perspective on country music, one that allows audiences to see beyond the stars of the genre to where the “real” musicality and inspiration lies. Bluebird performances implicitly position songwriters as the “backbone” of country music culture, the “real thing” in an arena often characterized by its embrace of artifice.¹⁵⁹

I attended dozens of Bluebird shows between 2010 and 2012 while on fieldtrips to Nashville. I did this initially because it was an opportunity to see my informants perform and meet new potential informants, and this exercise was consistently a useful one in terms of my research. I liked to sit at table 27, along the back wall next to the soundboard where I could take notes fairly unobtrusively. As the use of recording devices of any kind is not permitted, I relied

¹⁵⁸ Here is the venue’s explanation of its shushing policy, from the “Frequently Asked Questions” page of the Bluebird website: “The Bluebird has gained a reputation as a listening room; one where songs are valued and songwriters recognized for their compositions. Too much conversation distracts listeners and is disrespectful to the songwriters who form the backbone of our music community. Our room is designed to be quiet – even the telephone lights up rather than ringing! We encourage talking before the show, between sets and after the show but ask that during the performances, to keep talking as low as possible” (<http://www.bluebirdcafe.com/about/faq/>, accessed January 8, 2014).

¹⁵⁹ I discuss country music authenticity on pages 102-06, and though I will not repeat my take on these concepts as they pertain to country music here, I wish to reiterate the flexibility and constructedness of these concepts.

on my jotted notes and the memories they triggered when I transcribed them later the same evening or the next day. At some point along the way, however, I became aware of the numerous views my informants had about the Bluebird, and also of the ways that they tailored their demeanors when playing there. Though they did not act in ways radically different from what I had seen in other contexts, it was the consistency in the ways they presented themselves during “In the Round” shows that caught my attention. This made me question the expectations the venue itself might have created for the songwriters who play there.

Michael Hughes’ *Country Music as Impression Management* outlines how country music’s authenticity is maintained through a complex dialogue between producers and audiences. Hughes argues:

[There is a] tension in authenticity between the twin demands that authentic products be (1) original and sincere expressions and (2) believable or credible representations of some cultural form. This contradiction between authenticity as originality and authenticity as following a form is a continuous threat to authenticity, and thus to legitimacy. If conventions are not strictly followed, is the product still legitimate? Is it still authentic? (Hughes 190).

This “tension in authenticity” is wrestled with by songwriters in the course of their work, and is observable in songwriter performances at the Bluebird. I argue the venue and the songwriters on its stage collectively contribute to the performance of a complex authenticity that presents songwriters as both autonomous individuals and as figures that are inseparable from the genre culture they work within. I examine performances at the Bluebird in terms of how the venue positions songwriters, how songwriters present (and perform) themselves, how audiences might interpret such representations, and more broadly how this venue and the performances that take place there participate in forming a particular figure of the Nashville songwriter, a figure I frame at the conclusion of this dissertation.

History

What follows is an overview of the Bluebird Cafe that examines how the presentation and ideological positioning of songwriters associated with it came about. The venue's depiction on the TV show *Nashville* manifests what is commonly acknowledged in the actual Nashville: that the Bluebird is the venue where the particular appeal of songwriter performances was discovered and nurtured. As Vince Gill's quote at the outset of this chapter suggests, the Bluebird is regularly referred to as one of the most famous performance venues in the world. A quick Internet search reveals how often people acknowledge it as a 'bucket list' destination (of places to visit before they die). Further, local tourist media — even before and especially after its inclusion in a recent hit TV show — position it as one of the most approachable activities that visitors to Nashville can engage in, including those who claim to not be fans of country music.

The Cafe opened its door in 1982. The venue is in an unassuming strip mall in the affluent community of Green Hills, southwest of the downtown area. Amy Kurland, a Nashvillian who had returned home after attending a cooking school in Washington D.C., started the venue with inheritance money from a relative. She had intended it to be a restaurant serving casual gourmet food to shoppers during the day (Kurland, Benner and Fagan 2002:13,14). It is not in an area of town known for its nightlife, and seems an unlikely location for a music venue.

The musical activities that began to take place in the evenings at the venue took shape largely as the result of personal relationships Kurland had with local musicians and songwriters. Kurland herself has stated, "The Bluebird Cafe happened because of three of my vices . . . food, drink, and guitar players" (ibid 14). The idea of songwriters performing their own songs may

have come from a conversation outside the club between Kurland and Don Schlitz,¹⁶⁰ one of the many local songwriters and musicians acquainted with the Cafe and its owner. Schlitz himself picks up this part of the story in a published letter to Kurland herself:

It happened a long time ago. You had a new club. You were booking bands and doing okay. One day we were talking in the parking lot and I was trying to convince you that people would pay to see songwriters play their own songs. You were skeptical, as a businesswoman, but you were intrigued as an artist in your own right. So you gave it a shot.

You lost a lot of money, but you never stopped trying. And it took a long, long time. But it worked. Amy, you made it work. Now the whole world considers the Bluebird Cafe to be the best songwriters' club ever. Period. But do you want to know a secret? I didn't know if it would work or not.

I was just trying to get a gig (Amy Kurland, quoted in Kurland, Benner and Fagan 2002:28).

Whether the idea occurred to Schlitz, Kurland or someone else first, Kurland was soon committed to the idea that people would pay to see local songwriters sing their own material. Songwriters have had a presence in Nashville since the days of Fred Rose in the 1940s, but they would seldom perform in any formal setting. Nashville singer songwriter venues, featuring performers who wrote most of their own material, date as far back as the 1960s, and my informant David Olney recalls arriving in town in the early 1970s and being able to hear singer songwriters such as Guy Clark, Kris Kristofferson and Townes Van Zandt on a regular basis. In Nashville, however, singer songwriters perform a different role than professional commercial songwriters. Though some songwriters also have performing careers for which they write and perform their own songs, these tasks are clearly delineated, particularly in that each aspect of her or his career (songwriting and performing) is administered by a different overseer (e.g. publisher,

¹⁶⁰ Though he has had many songwriting successes, Schlitz is best known as the writer of Kenny Rogers' "The Gambler" and Randy Travis' "Forever and Ever Amen," both Grammy Award winning songs and Country Music Association (CMA) songs of the year (in 1978 and 1987 respectively).

agent, artist manager). Nashville songwriters, who toiled in a room to create songs for others to sing, had essentially no public presence before the Bluebird in spite of their ubiquity. With this in mind, Kurland and Schlitz's parking lot chat (if Schlitz is indeed remembering it correctly) and Kurland's subsequent commitment to creating an unprecedented type of venue dedicated to local songwriters was indeed visionary.

“In the Round”

Rumour has, Fred Knobloch and Don Schlitz had been drinking on the Sunday night they came into the Cafe and offered up the following idea: “Let's put four chairs in the middle of the room, facing each other, turn around the lights and see what happens” (Quoted in Kurland, Benner and Fagan 2002:46).

In 1984, Kurland added the first official “writer's night,” and one year later the songwriter in-the-round format was started with Thom Schuyler (“16th Avenue” and “Old Yellow Car”), Fred Knobloch (“Used to Blue” and “Meanwhile”), Don Schlitz (he would collect his second Grammy a few years later for “Forever and Ever, Amen”), and Paul Overstreet (future co-writer of “Forever and Ever, Amen” as well as a slew of other hit songs) (From the Bluebird website (<http://www.bluebirdcafe.com/about/history/>, accessed Mar. 8, 2013).

Not only did Amy Kurland's venue champion the unheard of idea of songwriters-as-performers, it initiated a format for such performances. It features each songwriter sitting on a chair in a circle in the middle of the room (rather than on a stage) with the chairs facing each other and each writer performing one after another (rather than appearing individually then ceding the stage to the next writer). This format, with the appearance of a picking session but based on a different type of interactivity, became known as “In the Round.”

Schuyler, Knobloch, Schlitz and Overstreet were acquaintances and collaborators who, if legend contains at least some of the truth, happened upon the idea for “In the Round.” Regardless of this claim's accuracy, what is indisputable is the interconnectedness of this performance

format, the venue that spawned it and the community from which the Bluebird draws its weekly roster. Presently, “In the Round” is the standard presentation format at the Bluebird. Though it is not adhered to on the Sunday writers’ nights or the Monday open mic nights, the other five nights of the week are dedicated to presenting an early and late round of four songwriters each. This format in which songwriters sit together (either in the middle of the floor with the audience surrounding them or up on stage with the audience on three sides), has become “almost synonymous” with the venue (Kurland, Benner and Fagan 46), and by extension (as I argue toward the end of this chapter) serves as a symbolic representation of the Nashville songwriting community.

From an inauspicious beginning as a performance involving four friends and colleagues in 1985, “In the Round” has, through trial and error, endured until the present day. “In the Round” is now not only the standard format at the Bluebird, it has been adopted in other songwriter venues in Nashville¹⁶¹ and by Nashville songwriters when they book their own collective shows outside of Nashville.¹⁶² It has also been widely embraced by the Nashville Songwriters Association International (NSAI) and its many branch chapters throughout North America, as well as being used in other contexts that claim no direct connection to the Bluebird.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Some other Nashville venues that feature songwriters on a regular basis are Douglas Corners, and the Commodore Lounge. Another venue that featured songwriter performances exclusively, Hotel Indigo, has recently abandoned that format.

¹⁶² These include mostly corporate workshops and casino shows, but also the annual showcase the Bluebird organizes at the Sundance Film Festival.

¹⁶³ The Bluebird has a pervasive legacy that is more widespread than is commonly acknowledged. I played an In the Round in Sarnia, Ontario in June of 2010, and spent some of my time on the microphone telling the audience about how the performance they were watching reflected back to the Bluebird Café, which those present professed little or no knowledge of.

Apprenticeship Process

The Bluebird functions as a gateway through which aspiring songwriters pass in order to begin to live and work as a Nashville songwriter and participate in the songwriting community there.

There is a five-stage process through which almost all aspiring writers pass in order to appear in the most coveted spot at the venue: the late round. These five stages are inscribed onto the weekly roster at the Bluebird: play a Monday open mic night; audition for a slot and sufficiently impress in order to be included on a Sunday writers' night; play four Sunday writers' nights over a two year span in order to be included in an early round (Tuesday-Saturday); play in four early rounds over a two-year span; then finally graduate to playing late round slots. Once in this position, one can expect to be asked to play at the venue no more than twice a year, although exceptions are made for certain writers (as I mention below).

This process is rigorous enough, incorporates such a large percentage of the songwriters in Nashville, and is so often related to a songwriter's success in getting their songs cut on Music Row that it functions as a type of apprenticeship for Nashville songwriters. Bluebird COO Erika Wollam says:

Our policy for the majority of folks who have never played here is that writers have to pass one of the live auditions and then play four times on one of our Sunday Writers Nights before they can be considered for an early show . . . Since so many writers go through our audition process, out of respect to them and their efforts, we do not make exceptions to this by adding people to the early shows who have never performed here before (Erika Wollam, personal communication, June 28, 2012).

Although there are songwriters who for various reasons do not follow this precise trajectory, the venue is committed to upholding the integrity of this process and not making too many decisions that unduly favour writers they might happen to prefer. This elaborate procedure and the effort made to impartially adhere to it indicate the Bluebird's commitment to present and represent the

songwriting community in Nashville broadly, from new and unsigned writers to the most established and successful ones.

Open Mic Nights

The first step to performing on the Bluebird stage is to play an open mic night on Mondays. Even though it is called an ‘open mic’ there remains a selection process, though this is a concession to the overabundance of writers requesting a spot rather than a merit-based assessment. No one gets turned away entirely, as Wollam here describes:

We also have our Monday Open Mic Nights each Monday evening with signup at 5:30PM. For writers who haven't played at the Bluebird and writers from out of town, open mic is the first place to start. Open Mic Sign up is Monday night at 5:30pm. Writers must be signed up by 5:45pm. Names are drawn and the line-up is announced at 6:00pm. The show runs 6-9:00pm. Writers get the chance to play one original song, solo, or accompanied by no more than two others on stage. Drums and backing tracks are not allowed. Often we have more writers come to Open Mic than we have time and space for. In this case, we offer writers a “play next time” ticket, so that if the writer doesn't get to play the first time he or she tries, the writer will get their name on the top of the list to play the next time he/she comes (ibid).

Monday nights are the first chance a writer has to appear on the Bluebird stage. Approximately 30 writers get to sing one song on these occasions. Though there has never been difficulty in having ample numbers of aspiring songwriters lining up on these occasions, the popularity of the T.V. show *Nashville* (which occurred subsequent to Wollam’s quote above) has meant that many more show up and try to get a slot than ever before (sometimes over a hundred), and the venue has had to hire security people to manage the process on those days.

Auditions

Once someone has appeared on an open mic night, they are qualified to sign up for an audition, the next step in a Bluebird apprenticeship. These are held on four Sundays throughout the year, and are populated on a first-come-first-served basis via Internet sign up. These sign-ups, which open up two or three weeks before the audition in question, are filled up within minutes.

The audition begins at 10 a.m., and all latecomers are turned away. Auditioners are allowed to accompany themselves or bring an accompanist (almost always on guitar or piano), perform one minute of a song (usually a verse and a chorus only), and quickly relinquish the stage to the next auditioner. The order of auditioners is not known in advance, so the applicants become each other's audience for the duration of the audition process, sitting and watching each other perform unless it is their turn.

At each audition, seventy writers get to play for a panel of eight or nine judges, who are either songwriters known by venue management, publishers with a solid background in song and songwriter selection, or venue management. Though punctuality, a polished appearance and a professional demeanor are all deemed assets, the judges privilege content over performance skills, as Wollam outlines here:

[The judges] rate the folks one to five on their songs, one to five on their performance, with really the song being the driving force. A great song performed by somebody who's not a great performer will still trump a great performance of a crappy song (she laughs). I say that to you just sort of being funny, but the truth is that I have all the respect in the world for these people coming in, going through all of this effort to play a minute of a song hoping to get on one of our Sunday writers' nights (Erika Wollam, personal communication, February 26, 2013).

Wollam may be glossing over how effective a good performance might be in swaying judges opinions or their evaluation of a song's quality. Nevertheless, she indicates that while the

judges are motivated to find the best songs and songwriter performers they can, they are not unsympathetic to the amount of time and expense required of auditioners,¹⁶⁴ committed with no guarantee of reward. Wollam told me how it is common for auditioners who show promise to be asked to come back, without going through the online sign up process, if they had a mishap with their accompanist or for whatever reason were legitimately not able to audition. A typical audition round sees eight to ten successful auditioners, with approximately six being asked to return for another try. When I quipped how selective this process seems, Wollam replied simply: “We’re the Bluebird Cafe!”

I asked Wollam if a successful appearance on a Monday open mic night allows one to avoid auditioning for a Sunday night slot. Her response indicated the venue’s dedication to its own process:

Rarely can it, but it’s possible. If it would make sense then yes, but the other part of the audition process is really the commitment. What I will tell people [who say they] want to play the Bluebird is, “Well, this is what we do. If you haven’t played here before, then this is what we do.” Out of fairness and respect to all the people who have done this I don’t like to circumvent the process . . . People are signing up for these things online, and we sell out of everything online in five minutes, so here are these people who are sitting at their computers trying to get a slot on the audition, [and] it’s really hard to say “You don’t have to do that.” Even if you are amazing, come and be amazing at the audition. Now, that’s not to say that I won’t say to somebody, “I’ll put your name on the audition list,” because I will do that to see if they’ll make an effort to see if they will go through that process (Erika Wollam, personal communication, June 28, 2012).

Wollam here indicates two aspects of the mission inherent in the apprenticeship process the venue sustains. On one hand Bluebird management is committed to upholding the processes they have enacted as a reasonably impartial measure of deciding who appears on the Bluebird stage. On the other hand, in spite of wishing to honour the efforts made by any and all auditioners,

¹⁶⁴ Some have travelled considerable distances to attend auditions, and others audition multiple times, undaunted by previous rejections, before being granted a Sunday night slot.

judges might privilege more promising writers by making it easier for them to be able to audition. In either case Bluebird auditions indicate the venue's commitment to finding the best songs and songwriters they can amongst the crop of current aspirants.

Sunday Writers Nights

Tony Arata, whose song "The Dance" was cut and made famous by Garth Brooks, describes steeling himself to go through the early part of the Bluebird apprenticeship process:

When I first moved here . . . I couldn't get into the Bluebird. I finally got up the nerve to try out, did the Sunday night, and of course they always have a special guest who's actually had some success, and you realize how far it is to get from here to there. It is . . . it's overwhelming (Tony Arata, personal communication, March 19, 2012).

Arata positions his initial Sunday night appearances as a combination of competition, mentoring and intimidation. Sunday Writers Nights represent the next stage in the apprenticeship, and songwriters are expected to appear in four of these over two years. Eight to ten aspiring songwriters take part in each Sunday writers' nights.¹⁶⁵ On these nights a host writer and a guest sings her or his own songs as well as presenting the other songwriters, who each sing three songs, eventually ceding the stage to a guest who is a reputable and established Nashville songwriter.

Sunday writers' nights not only give songwriters an early impression of their peers — both their rivals and potential collaborators — but also pit them against senior writers in a way that is equal parts humbling and inspiring, contextualizing and motivating them for the experiences they may soon encounter.

¹⁶⁵ On top of the eight to ten who are invited to play a Writer's Night, Wollam estimates that on average six other auditioners are invited to audition again without having to go through the onerous sign up process. All others are able to audition again if they can manage to sign up.

Early Rounds

This round was hosted by Steve Bogard (who wrote “Damn Your Eyes,” a hit for Etta James and others), and he smartly included 3 young songwriters: Hannah Thomas (who must be all of 20, was very good but was the only one without cuts in this Round), Ryan Tyndell (an Ole writer who is going to be very successful I believe), and Charley Worsham (another Ole writer, an amazing picker and a charming performer).

Bogard has ‘more hits than Babe Ruth’ according to Tyndell, and he reminded me of my father-in-law, a really nice guy and very gracious and humble. He sang ‘Every Mile a Memory’, a Dierks Bentley cut that went #1 in 2006 (Bentley features prominently on this night), was written based on an idea he got while driving to where he and his wife are from in Florida. The way he told it he said something like, “Honey, I got this great idea, but I’m driving. Can you grab that notepad and take down what I say?” Not sure if it really happened that way but a compellingly charming image nonetheless.

Ryan Tyndell sang his recent cut ‘Breathe You In’ (written with Bentley and the excellent songwriter Marty Dodson). This song is on Dierks recent album “Home.” Sometimes I think that Nashville songwriters may be overreaching when they try to come up with an exceptional or standout image to set their song apart from others it may be competing with. Hearing the lines in this song “I wanna breathe you in/ I wanna be so close/ You can wear my skin/ Like a new set of clothes” made this night one of those times.

Dierks Bentley is an interesting performer in that he cowrites a lot of his material (as he did with “Every Mile” and Breathe You In”), but still has a few slots on every album for cuts written by songwriters alone. He is in the Conway Twitty mold: known primarily as an artist, with some songwriting chops, but also acquiescing to the talent of pro songwriters as a way to flesh out his albums with strong material. A Bentley song in the latter category is Charley Worsham’s “Heart of a Lonely Girl,” which is the early milestone of Worsham’s young career.

Worsham is a very affable guy who won the crowd over quickly. When he performed his song “You Gotta Be Young to See,” he announced that this night was its public debut, then ‘hired’ two audience members (i.e. he loaned each of them a camera and gave them each one of his CDs) to take a video he could post on YouTube, and encouraged others to take their own video and do the same. He did this in such a way that before anyone thought about it we were all routing for him and involved in the promotion of this song we had never heard, even when he forgot the lyrics of the second verse, then had to stop briefly when something got stuck in his eye. We laughed as he quipped afterwards that we all had just witnessed what was probably the worst video ever made! Later, when a couple of people started clapping upon hearing the opening chords of his excellent song “Trouble Is,” he stopped playing and said, “Two people know my hit!” He then asked the rest of us to pretend that we did as well, and as we all readily did he basked in the mock applause! This guy is very charming and funny.

The highlight of the night, however, was reserved for Hannah Thomas' song "Watch Out For the Deer." She started out by enthusiastically asking, "Do y'all wanna hear a redneck song?" which got lots of cheers and laughs. She then half-sang and half-rapped a story about hanging out in a Walmart parking lot in her Georgia hometown, then driving around backroads "sippin' on Bud." And though this might seem an unlikely response, we all willingly joined in the call and response part, which had us all shouting out the song title at the appropriate moment (Fieldnotes, March 1, 2012).

I included the above fieldnote excerpt in an attempt to illustrate the type of occurrences that may happen at early round shows owing to the level of experience of the songwriters who appear in them. Other than Steve Bogard, the more experienced host of this round, the writers did not inspire awe at the recounting of their past successes so much as enlist support from the audience for their future ones (though both Tyndell and Worsham had cuts already).

Once a songwriter has made four Sunday writers' night appearances, the venue allows them to appear in an "In the Round" show with three other writers on Tuesdays through Saturdays between 6 and 8:30. These early rounds can be assembled by a host writer who then invites the other roundmates (though final decisions are vetted by venue management), as was the case with the Round I describe above. When no such hosting arrangement can be arranged, the club itself puts Rounds together. In either case, members of early rounds tend to be at a similar stage in their career development: either they are seeking to get established in town, have recently gained a publishing deal, or have been in town for longer but have not yet worked their way through the Bluebird apprenticeship. They are songwriters-in-process, and represent the future block of hit songwriters (though some may already have had cuts on the radio).

The Sunday writers' night stage of the apprenticeship comes with a term length of four appearances over two years, while the early round stage requires a similar commitment. A large percentage of the songwriters who appear at open mic nights and auditions make the trip to Nashville — from points all over North America and beyond — to appear at open mics and

auditions and even writers' nights. By contrast, by the time a writer has qualified for an early round appearance they are most likely living in Nashville and working as a songwriter, and it is a rarity that a late round songwriter is not living in Nashville (unless they are employed elsewhere as a songwriter). A Bluebird apprenticeship can thus be seen to mirror the path of an individual songwriter as they relocate to Nashville. That the whole process of qualifying to play a late round requires a minimum of four years indicates not only the stringent standards of the Bluebird, but also the sort of perseverance that is required of most Nashville songwriters in order to become known on Music Row, get a publishing deal and get cuts.

Late Rounds

The show was wonderful, and easily the funniest I have seen while here. All of these songwriters [Marc Beeson, Georgia Middleman, Gary Burr and Tom Douglas] were comfortable with themselves and were praising the others. They were also comfortable enough to slag each other, and that was the most fun.

Gary Burr was impressively restrained this night, not trying to hog the spotlight but saying some very funny things. He joked about how the universe had just shifted because he asked for his guitar to be turned down, and told Tom Douglas that he hated his song 'Little Rock' right before Tom sang it! (What does Tom care? The song was massive, and launched his songwriting career.)

Tom sat on a high stool at his piano, which prompted jokes on all sides about how he likes to look down on everyone. He was the funniest of all of them, and his dry delivery never failed to inspire laughs. He stuck to his best-known material (he plays them the same way every time). After the show I asked him if any of those songs have been cut [every song he played was a #1 and massively popular], which he immediately rolled with and said "No!" and that he "Needed a decent publisher," with Troy Tomlinson [his publisher at Sony ATV] sitting right there (fieldnotes, March 17, 2012, square parenthesis added later).

Four early rounds qualify you for the next stage of the graduation process: late round appearances. "For the most part our late shows feature established writers who either have hits to their credit or are nationally known touring singer/songwriters with a national following." This is how Erika Wollam describes late round performers. These writers have now worked their way

through the apprenticeship process at the Bluebird (unless they appear there because they have established themselves as songwriters in some other way). There is a hierarchical relationship reinforced in which late round writers are clearly the ones that others aspire to be. These are the writers who have crested the summit and are now full-fledged Nashville songwriters.

Late round writers (those who can sing recognizable songs because they were radio hits) participate in Bluebird shows for exposure, for the financial gain of the cover charge that goes directly to the writers in these rounds,¹⁶⁶ or simply because they were asked by the round's host. Audiences willingly pay the cover in order to increase their chances of hearing songs they have heard on the radio, and because they feel that the songs in the late rounds are more likely to be of the highest quality even if they are unfamiliar. Thus late rounds are prescribed as the most crystalline, authentic representation of working Nashville songwriters available at the venue (or anywhere else), and many attend these performances with this notion in mind.

Erika Wollam describes the venue's process for choosing who plays late "In the Round" shows by saying, "Typically I reach out to one writer to ask them to anchor the show and put something together or someone calls me with an idea of a group" (Erika Wollam, personal communication, June 28, 2012). Wollam welcomes this sort of intervention into her selection process — an individual writer putting a round together by choosing whom she or he would like to, or feels it's expedient to, perform with — not only because it lessens her work and time commitment to that particular round, but because a host songwriter will choose roundmates with whom they have an existing friendship or for whom they have a professional respect.

¹⁶⁶ On Tuesdays through Saturdays, the Bluebird has two seatings a night. For the earlier 6:00 pm show there is no cover charge (though a minimum \$7 food and drink purchase is insisted on), whereas the later shows often command a \$15 cover charge (as well as the food and drink minimum).

The relationships that exist between writers in an “In the Round” performance typically results in a demonstration of supportive camaraderie amongst all of the songwriters, who will banter and joke back and forth and with the audience, often thank the host for the opportunity to play at the Bluebird, and gratefully acknowledge and praise the Bluebird for the role it plays in promoting the Nashville songwriting community. That these songwriters have persevered through their Bluebird apprenticeship, and concurrently have established themselves as professional songwriters in the eyes of Music Row producers, adds further validation to their deserving place performing late rounds at the Bluebird, and to the content and shape of these performances themselves. A late rounds appears to be an intimate and spontaneous occurrence among friends and colleagues, yet the quality and impact of these performances often renders them indistinguishable from a rehearsed stage show. These performances of spontaneity, collegiality and professionalism play a large role in the impression that audiences form about the Nashville songwriting community and its members.

Size of the Songwriting Community

The elaborate apprenticeship process through which almost all songwriters pass is in part owing to a need to maintain a performance standard in spite of the sheer number of songwriters who play on the Bluebird stage annually. Though precise numbers are not available, Erika Wollam was able to give me some strong clues. If there are fifty weeks of regular programming a year, the thirty writers that appear on open mic Mondays comprise an annual total of fifteen hundred. As some audition more than once, a conservative estimate would be half of this number (though likely on the low side). An average of nine writers on Sunday writer’s nights would make four hundred and fifty writers, which could be halved assuming that each writer plays there twice

annually. Four writers per early and late round five nights a week is two thousand writers, which could again be cut in half owing to redundancy. This puts a safe estimate of the number of songwriters that appear on the Bluebird stage annually at almost two thousand, a daunting figure that indicates why there is a need to establish formal processes to regulate who plays at the venue and when.

The total numbers of songwriters that play the Bluebird do not represent the entirety of the Nashville songwriting community, of course. There are those who do not play the Bluebird when they first come to town as part of their initiation into the Nashville songwriting community and there are established writers who for various reasons no longer play there. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the Bluebird showcases the majority of this community over the course of the year. Furthering its commitment to a broad representation of local songwriters, management tends to limit the number of appearances of any writer to no more than two or three per year with a few exceptions for particularly prominent writers with strong ties to the venue.¹⁶⁷ The Bluebird stage is the most tangible public presentation of this professional peer group and, as this chapter's final sections examine, shapes the impression of this community to outsiders like no other phenomenon.

Creation and maintenance of meaning at the Bluebird

This self does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses (Goffman 252).

¹⁶⁷ Don Schlitz, an original In the Round alumnus and writer of Kenny Rogers' "The Gambler", plays almost monthly at the Bluebird and will take audience requests from his extensive catalogue in exchange for their donation to a charitable cause ("Don For a Dollar"). Tony Arata, best known for his solo-written song "The Dance" (which became one of Garth Brooks' signature hits), is a favourite of the Bluebird's management and appears there at least six times annually.

Owing to the obscurity that songwriters experience relative to Nashville-based performers, The Bluebird itself is more widely known than all but the most famous of the Nashville songwriters that perform there. It follows then that the venue itself is the reason why most visitors attend. The Bluebird itself attains a particular value which, while it “arises from exchange,” is not a straightforward exchange of goods for money, but a subtler one that relies on “an effect of individual desire . . . the degree to which the buyer wants it” (Graber 31). Value in this sense implies “the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality – even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor’s imagination” (ibid xii). This applies to the Bluebird in that performances there are local events linked to a “larger, social totality”. This linkage is not only made because of deliberate efforts by the venue, but also through the desire of an audience members to make these connections, and the effect of these performances’ in fueling the imaginations of those in attendance.

Many who attend Bluebird shows (either for the early or late round) do not do so because they have prior knowledge of the writers performing. Rather, many come because they have heard of the consistent quality of shows at the venue generally. And this applies to not just late rounds. Though more established and better known writers populate the later rounds, it should not be underestimated how early shows featuring unsigned or lesser-known writers contribute to both the venue’s coffers and its mystique.¹⁶⁸ While many come to hear songs and writers they are familiar with, there is not a noticeable decrease in crowd size for lesser-known songwriters.

¹⁶⁸ I do not wish to confuse this point about audience familiarity or lack thereof with my earlier point about how published songwriters play their best-known material. While many in the audience will recognize the songs of established songwriters, there are always those in attendance who are not familiar with even the better-known songwriters’ material. Thus no

The Bluebird, whether by trial and error or calculated intervention on the part of management, has adopted a series of practices that are adhered to with deliberate consistency. Every aspect of an evening at the Bluebird Cafe can be seen as part of the performance of the Nashville songwriter, including securing of an online reservations; lining up in front of the venue; being efficiently and courteously seated and waited on; the overall tenor of reverence for the songwriters who appear on the stage; and the stance that songwriters consistently adopt when appearing there.

The venue thus sets up a template or series of expectations for performances that take place there. These expectations constitute a disciplining effect that the venue tacitly exerts on songwriters (and audience members alike). I use “disciplining” here in the sense Michel Foucault (1977) does: as a tacitly coercive force imposed upon subjects but which is submitted to, either unknowingly or willingly, because the social consequences of not doing so are deemed more undesirable than the results of resistance. In saying this I do not in any way espouse the idea that the Bluebird or its management are attempting to manipulate or coerce songwriters into behavior they are not otherwise willing to exhibit in a way that political states do according to Foucault. Songwriters appear there of their own free will, and typically embrace the opportunity to do so. I merely wish to point out that the presentation of songwriters at the Bluebird has been formalized to the extent that those attending or performing in shows there are compelled to replicate it.

This situation exists largely because of the perceived interconnectedness between “In the Round” shows and the Nashville songwriting community and the impression that the former is a representation of the latter. That songwriters willingly agree to be part of these performances indicates that they endorse how they and their peers are presented at and by the venue at least

matter how well known a particular song is, there is likely to be some in attendance who have never heard it.

provisionally, and that they implicitly benefit from appearances at the Bluebird because it places them within their peer community. The following sections discuss two particular aspects of Bluebird shows, the expectation of collegiality and the presentation of the songwriter as singing artist, both of which demonstrate how the venue intervenes in how the songwriters who perform there present themselves and how the figure of the Nashville songwriters that emerges from “In the Round” shows is informed by these interventions.

The Expectation of Collegiality

I was witness to an early round show that tangibly displayed one particular songwriter’s commitment to collegiality toward his songwriting colleagues. On this night Tony Arata allowed some younger songwriters to experience what his early Bluebird encounters with established songwriters were for him: supportive, inspiring, but also putting into sharp relief what standards they need to have for the songs they write. Here is an excerpt from my field notes:

I met Phoenix Mendoza (what a tag!) and Jimmy Stanley (host of the round). These two and Dan Adams are all 30-ish buddies trying to make a go here. Nice guys, songs were pretty good (especially PM, a real talent), but they had a hard time holding a candle to Tony Arata (fieldnotes, Feb. 16, 2012).

I asked Arata about this “In the Round” show later, and he told me a story both touching and telling about the Nashville songwriting community and how it is manifested at the Bluebird.

People gave me a hand up, like Pat Alger. Pat gave me a stage to play on when no one else in this town knew me from Adam’s housecat. Jimmy Stanley, who works at the Bluebird, he asked me “Would you ever do an early show with me?” And I said, “Sure I would!” I love Jimmy. He’s a sweet, sweet guy. And then when I did Jimmy’s thing, Michelle [another young songwriter he knew from the Bluebird] asked me, and she is the sweetest gal. Oh man that night broke my heart. Her dad was there, and her grandmother – that was the couple sittin right in front of me – and I just looked at her daddy. And I mean, he just . . . he was . . . that’s why I do it. Just to see a reaction like that (Tony Arata, personal communication, March 19, 2012).

As the Bluebird clearly facilitated many formative experiences for Arata, he feels compelled (and seemingly perfectly willing) to reciprocate, and to be the sort of support that his senior peers were for him in the past. Significantly, the same type of interaction is characteristic of early rounds as well as late rounds. Though early round writers are less likely to know each other than those who populate later rounds, they do their best to be supportive during introductions, play or sing along if their abilities suit and the song being sung allows for it, and often compliment their roundmates' songs after they have played. The round I describe above was one small example of the sort of mutual support amongst supportive colleagues that can be observed in any "In the Round" show.

It is not only Nashville songwriters and their friends or immediate colleagues who appear at Bluebird "In the Rounds." For instance, Erika Wollam will "occasionally . . . create a round if there is someone coming through from out of town that I like and want to couple with some folks here who I know will draw" (Erika Wollam, personal Communication, June 28, 2012). While Wollam states that her criteria for choosing roundmates in this context are largely economic ones, it behooves the writers in such "In the Rounds" to recreate the type of interaction that characterizes performances at the venue. The practice of spontaneously accompanying songs sung by other roundmates originated because of the mutual comfort and familiarity with each other's material that occurs naturally between the colleagues and friends who played "In the Round" shows in the early years. It has now become one of the understood elements of a Bluebird show. Each songwriter in this setting is a friendly neighbour, whose supportive community is represented by the other writers on stage.

The sociality and behavioral expectations of "In the Rounds", however tacit or explicit they are expressed, infuse and inform all shows at the venue. The process through which the

venue assembles rounds helps reinforce collegiality, but more significantly, it is maintained even when roundmates do not know each other, and the expectation of friendly collegiality extends to those “In the Rounds” where the members might be less familiar with each other. This collegiality that seems to exist between songwriters performing on the Bluebird stage does not seem hollow or appear forced or feigned, and these songwriters are not just pretending to be nice to each other in order to reinforce how the venue wishes to depict them. However, it is so consistently part of these shows that songwriters who appear at the Bluebird must be considered as an inherent part of a performance of collegiality¹⁶⁹ between fellow songwriters who are mutually supportive and behave as neighbours, friends and workmates. Performers in all rounds are compelled to maintain a particular demeanour and reinforce and reflect a particular sociality, one that becomes interconnected with the Nashville songwriting community because of and through its placement on the Bluebird stage. Supportive and friendly interaction between songwriter colleagues, while arguably rooted in real-life scenarios, becomes a type of social ideal as it is iterated on the Bluebird stage.

Songwriter as Singing Artist

Inherent in the Bluebird’s presentation of Nashville songwriters — from the reverential tone of the website to the insistence on rapt attention and hushing of audiences — is a positioning of the songwriter as the essential creative force in a wider field of cultural production, creating artistic objects that others turn into profit (though of course the songwriters profit from such activity as well). In this way Bluebird performances are informed by singer-songwriter traditions that not only place the song into the realm of a work of art (i.e. songwriter-as-singing artist), but also

¹⁶⁹ I examined the sociality of cowriting sessions on pages 155-59.

support the idea that being in the artist's presence is revelatory. Songwriter performances at the Bluebird thus create an impression of what the song *really* sounds like.

When a song is performed by its writer in an "In the Round" show it is distinguished from the one that was produced in a studio and intended for radio play. This may happen through a telling of a song's back story that complicates the song's better-known context; by indicating how the songwriter intended their song to be performed in a way different from how it eventually came to be known (e.g. using a different tempo or 'feel', thinking of it as sung by a differently gendered singer, or altering any number of other variable parameters); or perhaps through alluding to the fragile confluence of events that produced the song, which very easily might not have happened. The songwriter is, through performance, implying "even though it's not exactly my music alone, without me you wouldn't have the music at all," carving out a space for her- or himself outside of the industry that they are so intertwined with.

There is arguably a fetishization of the practice of songwriting at work here, in which the songwriter is invested with quasi-magical powers and an auratic presence in their own songs that bear little relation to the realities of working as a Nashville songwriter. Regardless, many Bluebird audience members are attracted to the idea of writing a song, and others entertained by the experience of the performance of a good song, that makes the chance to observe the sort of person who practices it, and the potential to experience the unique insight she or he might offer, a substantial part of the appeal of songwriter performances at the Bluebird regardless of who is on stage.

Songwriter Self-Representations in Performance

I heard my informant John Scott Sherrill sing a song called “Five Generations of Rock County Wilsons” on February 28, 2012 at the Bluebird. It is a song that uses the ubiquitous country music theme of the disappearance of small town life and culture, yet I found it particular concise and powerful, and its crisp imagery immediately drew me into the emotional stakes of the story.

The lyrics are as follows:

It seems like overnight the town of Red River
 Was suddenly full of strange men
 Who wore suits in the summer and stood on the dirt roads
 Trying to hold their maps in the wind
 And some of them smiled and some of them didn't
 And none of them came back again
 After five generations of Rock Country Wilsons
 The last fifty acres apparently didn't
 Mean a damn thing to them

I stood on the hill overlooking Red River
 Where my momma and her momma lay
 And listened to the growling of the big diesel cat
 As they tore up the wood's where I played
 And I said, “Momma forgive me that I'm almost glad
 That you're not here today.”
 After five generations of Rock Country Wilsons
 See the last fifty acres in the hands of somebody
 That would actually blow it away

You know the bus station in the town of Red River
 Used to be the general store
 But now they got a new one and you know that's okay
 If a bus is what you're looking for
 So early one morning
 When the sun cut red I got up with the dawn
 After five generations of Rock County Wilsons
 The last one just climbed on a big old gray dog
 And was gone¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ © 1998 Combine Music (BMI).

The internal trauma of a fifth generation member of the rural town of Red River who is witnessing his ancestral land being callously divided up and sold by “strange men” to whom the place didn’t “mean a damn thing” is played out as a metaphor of the forces of modernity and urbanity and their seemingly inevitable claiming of rural America. The wording and imagery of the last verse are particularly poignant, using a sort of black humour (“That’s ok if a bus is what you’re looking for”) to emphasize the gravity of the situation. The song and Sherrill’s performance encouraged an empathetic connection with the protagonist.

Scott, while a gracious and comfortable performer, is not prone to long, detailed explanations about the origins of his songs, and none were offered that night. This song so impressed me, however, that I made a point of asking him about where this song’s inspiration came from (John Scott Sherrill, personal communication, March 17, 2012). It turns out that the town of Red River, the five generations of a family named Wilson and the speaker’s position in the song are all entirely imagined. He told me he had been riding a bus when he was a young college student in the mid-1960s, going across Indiana to where he was intending to enroll in an art school. He observed a scene out of the window, wrote it down in a journal, and that was it. He never ended up going to art school, put the journal in a trunk of his personal effects that he stashed in his parents’ attic, and joined a commune in rural Vermont. When he was moving to Nashville in 1975, he liberated the trunk from the attic, recovering and rereading his journal entry after he unpacked in his new home.

The way that this song came about highlights an essential aspect of country songs: they attain their effect through the applicability of the story, not the literalness of it. A song that transcends the physical scene or relationship depicted and reaches a metaphoric significance that is grasped by the listener is far more likely to be a resonant, and thus successful, one (assuming it

has a good hook, a catchy chorus and is sung by an agreeable singer as well). Whether that song depicts an actual event or people that do exist (or once did) are not of significance in this context, and writing a song based on an imagined scenario is by no means intentionally deceptive.

The intimate knowledge of the genre culture that a successful Nashville songwriter possesses can be seen when a different singer sings her or his song (either live or on a recording), and the listener is able to map the song onto that person, believing (at least in the moment of performance) that the singer is speaking in the first person. This quality of movable subjectivity is a necessary feature of country songs. Harlan Howard's truth — the one accompanied by three chords — is not so much a factual one but a less deniable, more pervasive, socially relevant one.

In many of the stories related and views expressed by my informants I have detected a conviction that they have a unique insight into how a song will affect listeners. This conviction causes them to feel protective of particular songs' content in the face of significant pressure to tweak or alter them, indicating the ways that songwriters instinctually count on listeners being able to understand their song and consume it in different contexts when industry gatekeepers and sometimes even their songwriting colleagues do not. By way of illustration, Songwriter Gary Burr told the following story in an interview for the Country Music Hall of Fame:

There was a song that I wrote, [and] after I wrote it . . . they would play it for people, and it wasn't getting taken, so they kept coming to me with advice on how to fix the song. And I said there's nothing wrong with the song. So it sat in the closet for seven years. And they'd pitch it and then they'd come back and say, 'We really think you should do *this*,' and, 'we really think you should change *this*.' A couple of times I'd sit down with my guitar with it in front of me and I'd try, and I kept going back to them and saying, 'No. I'm sorry. You're wrong. I'm right. There's nothing wrong with this song. It's *done*, leave it alone. If nobody cuts it I can live with that. It's *done*.' And after seven years, it got cut, and it was #1 for four weeks. They were wrong. I'm right. Nyah nyah nyah . . . (Gary Burr, interview for the Country Music Hall of Fame, May, 2000).

The song he is discussing is "Can't Be Really Gone," recorded by Tim McGraw in 1995. He is

making no effort to mask how he feels about outsider interference on his songwriting process, particularly if it comes from someone whose songwriting abilities he doesn't recognize.

Burr also relayed the following observation to me:

Georgia [Middleman, a Nashville songwriter who is also his wife] will write a song with somebody, and that person will play it for their plugger, and the plugger will go, 'I don't think it's ready yet, I think it needs something. I think you should try *this*.' And she'll be all upset, and I'll just go, "Who *is* that guy? Has he written? Is he a writer? Who the fuck is he?" (Gary Burr, personal communication, May 23, 2012).

While Burr's stance may seem like bravado or defensiveness, having conviction about the effectiveness of one's songs is needed to gird oneself for the steady rejections a Nashville songwriter experiences. Nashville songwriters seem to trust that they have unique insight about songwriting, a perspective that is responsible for the sense of protectiveness they demonstrate in performance toward the integrity of songs (of their own and those they admire).

While "Five Generations of Rock County Wilsons" is effective in telling a story and conveying the emotions surrounding its protagonist, hearing Scott's story about writing it raises other questions: are there limits on appropriate personal revelation within songwriter self-representations in Bluebird performances? What types of things are *not* included in this self-representation? In what ways do songwriters alter their performance or their self-representation as a response to audiences or particular audience members, or to maintain whatever mystique they wish to tactically display? Regardless of the proximity to the actual truth a country song may contain, it is good to be reminded that even a songwriter singing her or his own song is still very much a *performance*. With this in mind it is possible to see how a country song's effect could be weakened through particular engagements with the writer of the song, and that Scott chose not to reveal this song's back story to his audience (even though he freely and willingly

did so with me later) out of an impulse beyond his natural economy with words: that there are some things best left unsaid if you want your song to resonate with its intended listeners.

This section presents some scenarios that occur with regularity at the Bluebird, intending to nuance (but ideally not confuse) my depiction of “In the Round” shows thus far. My fear is that I have presented an overly homogenous view of Bluebird shows; that in trying to depict the typical or intended characteristics of a performance at the Bluebird I have implied that all shows are somehow formulaic. These performances, though adhering to an established format and the expectations of the venue, are far from being stultifying or predictable. On the contrary, they are characterized by their heartfelt spontaneity. Nevertheless, there is much that is not made apparent to audiences, but affect the meaning of these performances significantly.

As with De Certeau in his seminal study *The Practice of Everyday Life*, I am concerned with “. . . the difference or similarity between the production of the image [i.e. the figure of the Nashville songwriter that the venue displays] and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization [i.e. how songwriters respond to this production through their performances]” (De Certeau xiii, parentheses mine). For De Certeau, disciplinary forces are powerfully persuasive, yet individuals respond to these forces either by reinforcing or challenging them in ways that challenge and subvert power. Individuals respond to the situations imposed on them in ways that make it “possible to live in them by reintroducing into them the plural mobility of goals and desires — an art of manipulating and enjoying” (DeCerteau xxii).

These responses are what De Certeau calls *tactics*, as he elaborates here:

Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many “ways of operating”: victories of the “weak” over the “strong” (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, “hunter’s cunning,” maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike (De Certeau xix).

Put another way that relates to songwriter performances at the Bluebird, the practice of everyday life involves the tactical self-representation of a reasoning, creative and spontaneous individual who, rather than submitting to and accepting whatever constraints predetermine their position, instead makes decisions about whether to support these constraints or subvert them, in either case to their own advantage. These constraints arise from preexisting factors that inform their appearance, the adaptations they make to achieve cuts on Music Row, and the figure of the Nashville songwriter that the venue espouses and promotes. I argue that the scenarios discussed here constitute tactical responses by the Nashville songwriters who perform at the Bluebird to the expectations of “In the Round” performances.

Below I outline aspects of songwriters’ self-representations during “In the Round” performances (as community member and as working person), and examine ways that their performances are affected in response to audiences and to industry figures that may attend Bluebird shows. I then give examples of how songwriters respond to the expectations incumbent on “In the Round” shows to enhance their self-representation, arguing that songwriters take advantage of the opportunity for self-representation that “In the Round” shows at the Bluebird afford them. I do so to explore the nature of the figure of the Nashville songwriter that the songwriters who perform there collectively represent through “In the Round” performances; discuss tactics songwriters employ to either reinforce or resist the representation of the Nashville songwriter the venue reinforces; and suggest reasons for these tactical responses.

Songwriter as community member

During one performance I witnessed at the Bluebird, Mallery Hope, Natalie Hemby and Randy Montana,¹⁷¹ excellent writers all, intentionally or otherwise wove stories of their young children into all of their introductions; Hemby in particular said that that night was the first time she had been out in public since the birth of her child. While such a display of domesticity never seems unwelcome in Nashville, it happened to such an extent that eventually they were laughing at themselves and apologizing that they had nothing else to talk or even think about!

Phil Barton,¹⁷² the fourth member of this particular round, was the only one who didn't have kids, a fact that was noted by all of the performers. Ironically, however, Barton has over 600 published children's songs to his credit in his native Australia. Thus it was a moment of rare poignancy even for the Bluebird when he sang his song "Little Poopie Monsters" (about a brother describing his younger brother's first potty chair sittings) to his engrossed and appreciative roundmates (Fieldnotes, March 6, 2012).

The portrayals of songwriters' personal lives on display during the introductions and song performances at "In the Round" shows, shared with each other and audiences simultaneously, create a powerful and enticing impression of a collective made up of individuals that share a locale, a line of work and more. Commonality between songwriters (as made manifest in anecdotes told during song introductions) can extend to shared experiences beyond the songwriting realm. Nashville songwriters often divide their work time between songwriting and other activities such as performing, publishing and plugging songs or engaging in some other,

¹⁷¹ Mallery Hope and Randy Montana are both singer songwriters who write songs primarily for themselves to sing. Natalie Hemby is a decorated songwriter (and one of the few I met who grew up in Nashville), best known for writing Little Big Town's #1 song "Pontoon" and her numerous collaborations with Miranda Lambert, including her second single "White Liar" from 2009. Lambert's handwritten lyrics from when they wrote this song is in a glass display at the Country Music Hall of Fame.

¹⁷² Barton was nominated for an ACM award for song of the year of 2012 for the Lee Brice #1 hit "A Woman Like You."

non-musical work. Further, they are often family people involved with the concerns of home life and raising children.

All “In the Round” shows at the Bluebird adhere to the template that the very first “In the Round” shows created: established songwriters who behave as supportive colleagues, appear together on stage and assist and support each other when each individual performs her or his songs. Songwriters are introduced according to their individual accomplishments and backgrounds, are given their separate moments to feature their own songs, and engage the audience through humour, stories or banter that contextualizes the song about to be sung and the process through which it was created. Thus these introductions reveal how each of these songwriters is part of an observably collective effort, not just while on stage but through shared experience. In this context “In the Round” implicitly demonstrates how songwriters operate independently, each signed to their own publisher and responsible for his or her own successes primarily, yet behave collectively (mostly in groups of 3, and less often in pairs or in larger groups of 4 or 5) in order to create songs. “In the Round” positions songwriting in Nashville as a collective endeavour, with these performances being an encapsulation of the types of interactions and a display of the sociality that characterize the cowriting session.

The manifestations of the collective of Nashville songwriters that are visible on stage during “In the Round” shows have become performance conventions, though they should not be dismissed as mere artifice (Corin 12). I regularly heard about how ‘Harlan, Hank, Willie and the boys’ would meet and drink at Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge most afternoons after writing, in a sense creating a collective (or at least a sense of one or an imaginary one) where none was being legislated. It is difficult to imagine that songwriters then had fewer interpersonal conflicts than they do presently, and I have heard tell of and been witness to many of these. However, that is

not how this community seems to represent itself to outsiders. If there is a choice to be made within an occupational culture between workers operating as cutthroat competitors with each other or behaving in a friendly, mutually supportive way, that choice seems to have been made a long time ago amongst Nashville songwriters.¹⁷³

As with all communities, the songwriting community in Nashville is a mutually agreed upon one, one powerful enough that those who find it difficult to behave collaboratively and collectively find themselves at a disadvantage, as the following fieldnote excerpts evinces.

I was at a Bluebird show last night where [one of the invited songwriters] was behaving somewhat confrontationally toward her roundmates, and in particular [one who was younger and far less experienced]. The tension on the stage was noticeable, though through humour and some artful dodging on behalf of all of the performers it was defused and glossed over. I spoke with the round's host, Steve Leslie, a Bluebird regular who is well known and liked by the venue's management. Leslie had chosen three younger writers, whom he felt had promise and wanted to give some exposure to, as roundmates. [The confrontational writer] was the most experienced of the three, but was unknown to all but Leslie. Leslie told me he knew she had a fiery temperament, but always appreciated how she channeled that into her writing. He said that in the time that had passed since he had last seen her (a number of months during which she had been away from Nashville), her fire had begun to turn into cynicism.

Leslie was embarrassed by [this songwriter's] behavior, and felt responsible for creating a situation fraught with unwanted tension that was inappropriate for the Bluebird stage. He seemed in this instance to be disappointed that [the confrontational writer] was not acknowledging the mentoring nature of his intent in inviting promising yet lesser-known writers onto his round, and that she didn't take to opportunity to display similar reciprocity toward those on the lower rungs of the same ladder she is climbing (Fieldnotes, May 18, 2011, square parentheses added later).

Of course Nashville songwriters as a collective demonstrate no less factionalism and tension than any other social collective that operates in a competitive professional environment, but these discontents are not typically made obvious to audiences at the Bluebird. Supportive and

¹⁷³ There are many reasons why people involved in non-regulated occupational groups such as songwriters operate collaboratively and without overt competition. I explore instances of this phenomenon – what Richard Peterson and Howard White refer to as “simplexes” – on pages 152-53 and 198n.

collaborative interaction between writers is a de facto expectation, and antagonism between writers is likely met with some form of rebuke.

The Bluebird makes manifest the commonalities between writers as the result of belonging to a geographically situated community. Not only are there four writers on stage, but also they both separately and communally refer to others with whom they have written and had experiences; they often refer to great writers of the past and present; and they reminisce about shows at the Bluebird they have played in, witnessed or heard about. They attest to the presence of several overlapping networks of other writers with whom they are intertwined professionally and socially in Nashville and on Music Row. For those in Bluebird, it is as if the writers who appear on stage signify a much deeper well of songwriters that they are part of and, for the duration of the round, *representative* of.

Such displays do not mean that Nashville songwriters *are* a community of course, simply that they are willing to be represented that way. Collectivity among Nashville songwriters is largely spurred by economic imperatives, and thus brings together people who would not otherwise have any association (such as sharing a similar social cause, ethnicity or residential proximity). In a sense all songwriters in Nashville are rivals, all trying to outdo each other in getting their songs noticed. However, songwriters listening attentively to each other while they sing, participating in other writers' performances by playing along or singing accompanying vocals, and bantering with each other during song introductions manifests interactions between Nashville writers as one of mutual respect, support and interactivity (rather than of competitors who might undermine each other in order to advance their individual careers).

The collegiality displayed between writers on the Bluebird stage, part of "In the Round" performances since the days of Schlitz, Knobloch, Shuyler and Overstreet, is a performance,

however organically this particular aspect of “In the Round” shows began. I am not suggesting that Nashville songwriters harbour venomous feelings toward each other that are masked through feigned smiles during performances. Nevertheless, tensions do exist in the Nashville songwriting community, as a number of stories told to me confidentially (and in some cases with the help of alcoholic stimulation) confirm. Appearing as a supportive colleague, however, is both a stance consistently adopted by songwriters in “In The Round” performances and is an aspect of the figure of the Nashville songwriter that the venue espouses. In those instances when there is a disjuncture between songwriter self-presentations and the scenario the venue promotes, songwriters’ behavior and demeanor almost never complicates the venue’s expectation of collegiality between performers on their stage.

Again, I don’t point this out because this is surprising. It would be unusual for the venue to want their performers to do anything that would alienate customers. Beyond this, warm and welcoming behaviour is part of the larger imaginaries about Southern hospitality and grace that the venue embraces. When songwriters align themselves with this expectation of collegiality, it is consistent with the preference of the wider genre culture they belong to. Nevertheless, because this collegiality is so often performed even when there is evidence that it is contrived to some degree, it implies that songwriters have no wish to challenge the view of themselves and their professional community that it suggests (that is, a mutually supportive and non-competitive colleague or neighbour).

Songwriters performing “In The Round” shows are engaged in a performance of reinforcement of their own myths. The sense of community they enact is formed through history and geographic location, through the Bluebird as a performance venue and “In The Round” as a performance format, and through the actual act of songwriting (which occurs

elsewhere but is depicted during performance). Regardless of the interpersonal tensions and the nuances of the cowriting session that this performed sociality may obscure, it is the one on display for Bluebird audiences at “In The Round” shows.

Songwriter as worker

You know what’s great about this town is . . . there’s a lot of cancelations that go on in Nashville, and if you can be a guy that can maneuver stuff, that’s the key. If I get called now and they say that my eleven o’clock is sick today . . . A lot of people would go home, take the day off. But there’s a bunch of guys I know that I can call, that we can make something happen. After an amount of time, those writes get better that you can pull together in a day. Which means the songs are gonna be better, you know? I mean, that’s what it’s all about. I’ll mostly just book on write for 10:30 or 11, sometimes have an afternoon 3:30-ish tentative, you know? And then something will fall together in the evening . . . (Phil Barton, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

I came here to write good songs, and hopefully write some great ones. What happens after that you don’t really have control over . . . You do have this amount of control: you have the control that if you do nothing, nothing will happen (chuckles). The control you have over it is that the harder you work, the better your chances that you will write something that will rise above you (Pat Alger, personal communication, April 25, 2012).

I’ve always been pretty disciplined. From the time I got here I tried to write whenever I had the chance, just kept working my way up. I mean, when I got here I saw, you know, really great writers at the Bluebird, and I realized how far I had to get. It’s quite a disheartening revelation to realize what it took (Tommy Lee James, personal communication, August 12, 2010).

The community that I’m involved in . . . we’re workaholics, man . . . we go at it one hundred percent of the time all the time (Brian Davis, personal communication, August 23, 2010).

In both our conversations and in performances at the Bluebird, songwriters consistently speak of their occupation as hard work. They often espouse the fact that they have the same concerns as most people: they have mortgages and their children’s educations to pay for, they get divorces, go to baseball games, and are grateful that they have been able to make an income at

all. This attentiveness to the concerns and worldviews of the working class is consistent with that of the genre culture that Nashville songwriters work and live within. Just like country singers, songwriters present themselves as ordinary people who work in a demanding occupation (however extraordinary the occupation itself may be).

As well as the parameters of the genre culture they are most closely associated with, the profession of songwriting in Nashville is modeled on a method of industrial production in which several divisions or types of labour are oriented and coordinated toward a single goal of commodity production. This method is inherited from Tin Pan Alley in the first half of the twentieth-century (Corin 56). Songs in this process prompted a chain of events, with several other players involved in arranging, distributing, promoting and selling them. While record companies have occupied the gatekeeper position in country music that publishers did on Tin Pan Alley,¹⁷⁴ songwriters' position in this production process as creators of the raw material that others record, perform and promote has not essentially changed.¹⁷⁵ This larger conceptual framework that guides common understandings of the songwriter in popular culture — that of the songwriter as part of a larger industrial process — in part predetermines the figure of the Nashville songwriter. By emphasizing songwriting as labour and themselves as workers, Nashville songwriters performing “In the Round” implicitly reinforce a view that they attain their voice through, define their songs by, and are inseparable from the genre culture and industrial apparatus that sustains them.

¹⁷⁴ Songs were created on Tin Pan Alley in order to sell sheet music primarily, with publishers acting as songwriters' employers as well as the primary gatekeepers of popular song. As the recorded product is now the primary commodity of the music industry, those who produce recordings are the primary force in determining the shape and direction of the industry. Publishers are still songwriters' employers, however, and the publishing industry has adjusted to the demise of sheet music sales.

¹⁷⁵ The Nashville Songwriters' Association International (NSAI) slogan (“It All Begins With a Song”) illustrates this attitude nicely.

There are significant differences between songwriter self-presentations at the Bluebird and that of the postmodern ‘ironic nihilism’ that Grossberg argues characterizes rock music (Grossberg 224). Rock performers authenticate themselves through observably inauthentic but culturally situated performances stances, in effect embodying the separateness that the performer and audience share (and that differentiates them from those who can’t interpret the performance appropriately), a process Grossberg has coined *authentic inauthenticity* (ibid). By contrast, Nashville songwriters are seen to possess a believable yet, for most, unattainable set of skills and insights that set them apart, but only slightly, from those who occupy different positions within their shared genre culture, such as performers, producers, and audience members. Extending Grossberg’s terminology would compel us to coin this process *inauthentic authenticity*, in that the figure of the Nashville songwriter made manifest in Bluebird performances is one that does not rely on suspension of disbelief, but rather the impression of believability: that they are largely like their audience members in daily life.

That the venue presents Nashville songwriters in ways that are inseparable from the imaginary surrounding singer songwriters (that is, Nashville songwriter as singing artist) is to be expected given that it is trying to both separate itself from other local venues and appeal to a broad range of local and out-of-town clientele. The Bluebird presents a songwriter figure whose songs have intangible qualities beyond being merely a product of labour (Negus 2004:15). That an artist can work hard at her or his craft, or that a labourer can approach work in an artistic way are not, of course, irreconcilable ideas. The Bluebird and its management are in no way trying to counter or mask songwriters work, and indeed provide the opportunity for it to be highlighted. Nevertheless, the tendency for songwriters in “In the Round” shows to depict themselves as

working people who do difficult labour for a living complicates the artist figure of the Nashville songwriter that the Bluebird espouses.

That songwriters take pains to portray themselves as involved in hard work, approaching it in ways similar to how others do their labour, is also not surprising given the value placed on the working woman and man and an “honest day’s work” in country music culture. What is notable is the juxtaposition between this figure of the Nashville songwriter as a bard-like artist the venue positions her or him as and the working class self-presentation that songwriters consistently adopt in performance. Songwriters, at least verbally, largely eschew the more rarified depiction the venue promotes, informed as it is by larger tropes involving writers of popular songs and the success of their well-known cuts, yet the fact of their presence on the Bluebird stage suggests that they are not entirely uncomfortable with how the venue positions them.

Responses to Industry

In addition to out-of-town visitors, there are a considerable number of locals and non-tourists that attend Bluebird shows. These include unknown songwriters at open mic nights; friends, family and colleagues of the performers; other writers who might be looking for ideas or inspiration; and publishers and songpluggers on the lookout for writers to sign. Indeed, a significant aspect of Bluebird performances is the likelihood of industry representatives being in attendance, individuals who make decisions about which songs get recorded and promoted. As Wollam notes below, songwriters often tailor their appearances at the Bluebird to recognize the potential presence of such representatives:

The early shows are typically (but not always) developing writers – sometimes established writers want to play the early show as it is a way for them to showcase

some material for industry types who won't come out for a late show (Erika Wollam, personal communication, June 28, 2012).

Wollam's comment about established writers who request to play early shows reveals one way that the venue coordinates with Music Row and the wider music community in Nashville. Many events in Nashville, including early shows at the Bluebird, begin at 6:00 pm, a practice that exists out of acquiescence to the schedules of Music Row and industry executives that these events are largely organized to attract. Further, Wollam indicates that the Bluebird stage acts as a launching point for a future publishing deal or at least makes publishers aware of some of the new talent in town without having to do too much of their own sleuthing.¹⁷⁶ Generally it is the writers in the earlier rounds that are scouted for publishing deals at the Bluebird, given that better known writers already have publishing.

However, as Wollam points out, this is not always the case. Owing to the popularity and reputation of the venue, even established songwriters have the potential to have a song heard by a person who can get it recorded or connect it with someone who can. While the Bluebird is not a songwriter's only or even preferred method of raising awareness of her or his new material, seeing a Bluebird show is considered a good opportunity to hear new material because a writer will tend to present her or his best songs.¹⁷⁷ Further, audience reaction is deemed significant in the country music industry, and this can be gauged directly.

¹⁷⁶ In the TV show *Nashville*, the Bluebird provides a way for two of the show's characters, Gunner and Scarlett, to get noticed and sign a publishing deal and eventually a recording contract. The character that scouted these two, an industry insider named Watty White (played by real-life songwriter J.D. Souther), 'just happened to be in the crowd' one night to hear them.

¹⁷⁷ By performing unpublished songs, unsigned songwriters run some risk of having their song ideas co-opted (not stealing entire songs so much as hooks, riffs or lyric snippets). I have never heard even anecdotally about this happening as the result of a Bluebird appearance, but there is a wonderful story about East Nashville singer songwriter Todd Snider and Nashville songwriter Kent Blazy, the writer of Garth Brooks' first number one song "If Tomorrow Never Comes,"

Responses to Audiences

Songwriters with a publishing deal, when performing at the Bluebird, will seldom present uncut material. This is not usually out of fear of theft of ideas despite the fact that general knowledge that their publishers possess and have already heard demos of the song is usually a safeguard against acts of plagiarism. Rather, established songwriters avoid performing uncut material simply because it will be unknown to listeners. Whenever I have had occasion to hear more than one round done by the same writer they sang the same set of songs (in some cases with small modifications). Thus while Bluebird performances hold the allure for audience members of being able to observe the writing process, many of the songs performed there tend to be established ones that have been performed frequently, rather than rough gems still in need of polishing.

Established songwriters may sing their ‘hits’ simply because they want to present their best material or sing songs they feel most comfortable performing. There is, however, another important factor at stake. When I asked both Gordie Sampson and Tom Douglas — two writers I have heard in multiple “In the Rounds” — about this practice, both said that they feel it would be presumptuous to do otherwise. If an audience member is aware of the songwriter prior to attending a show, this awareness is based on knowing which prominent songs the writer has

that relates to this phenomenon. Blazy was also cowriter of a song called “Beer Run” that, while distinct from Snider’s song of the same name, borrows not only the title but a distinctive lyric hook (the spelling of the title as “B - double E - double R - U - N”). There is little dispute that the earliest version of the song is Snider’s, but as he is a lesser known singer songwriter and Blazy’s cowrite was recorded by no less than Garth Brooks in duet with George Jones, this issue was not likely to be resolved in Snider’s favour. In fact, even though Snider declined to take legal action, legal action was taken *against him!* There was no conclusive evidence presented to indicate any fraud occurred, and both writers agreed to declare that they had each written two different songs independently. Snider did have a tangible public response to the situation, however: he wrote a song called “If Tomorrow Never Comes,” which includes the lines “you cant prove anything but one thing is true/ if you can steal from me I can steal from you” and “if we were all good people we could work in perfect rhythm/ if worms had daggers birds wouldn’t fuck with them.”

written. It therefore stands to reason that such informed listeners will want, and quite possibly expect, to hear those songs in performance. My informants expressed very little interest in violating this expectation for the sake of trying out new material or personal preferences.

One clear example of how songwriters respond to audiences and deliberately present themselves in the most favourable light is through efforts made to appear polished, rehearsed and professional in performance. Many songwriters also have performing careers, and many others were performers prior to their move to Nashville, but even in cases where songwriters are not typically performers there are obvious preparations made for “In the Round” shows. On one level this is done to avoid the disappointment of listeners or being shown up by roundmates, but it is worth noting how the vocal and instrumental standards of Bluebird shows are quite high, to the point that they are comparable to local shows that feature full time performers.

The Cultural Capital of the Nashville songwriter

This night’s In The Round session (even though this one had the performers along the wall on the south side of the building) was organized by Mary Hartman, and featured Clinton Gregory and Mark Stephen Jones (“Red, White and Pinkslip Blues”) and John Scott Sherrill (“Nothin But the Wheel,” “Wild and Blue”). This night was more notable for the contrast between performers than the similarities.

Mary Hartman, the host of the round, was clearly the weakest singer of the group; her songs seemed to be a step behind the others, particularly Sherrill’s and Chapman’s, as well. Her stories were clear and relatable, however, and she was more articulate about her songs’ moments of creation than the others. Her status on this night was buoyed by her role as host. She continually referenced her move to Nashville (she’s from Detroit) and her activities since she arrived, including that she has been writing with and encountering (the others seemed to do this a little less). There were of course gender dynamics at work – did she feel less secure in her position and is this a gendered response? – but it seemed like the men spent less time announcing their Nashville credentials, even though they had all been in Nashville for quite some time (and longer than Hartman herself I think).

Gregory’s inclusion in this round was more than welcome by the others because of his local status as a ‘genius’ (Chapman’s words) and the ‘best fiddle player in the world’ (Sherrill’s words). As a result he got a pass in terms of his songwriting abilities, and was perhaps the only performer I ever heard at the Bluebird who sang songs he didn’t

write. He did play a wonderful song he cowrote with the legendary Hank Cochran¹⁷⁸ called “I Miss You To Tears Today.” This may have been the best song I heard on this night, though Gregory claims he had little to do with writing it and his good friend Cochran put his name on it anyway.

Introducing this song did prompt two funny comments about songwriting (coming as they do from a career touring and session musician). The first was that “lyrics to me used to be a waste of time between solos.” The next followed right after with equal wit, and related back to the song’s other writer: “Hank Cochran taught me to listen to the words, and I’ve been miserable ever since.”

As a decorated musician, Gregory claimed the status of a respected outsider to the songwriting community – not a true songwriter but nevertheless one who has written songs and is intimately knowledgeable about them – a status that was reinforced when he performed a self-described “Bobby Braddock¹⁷⁹ parody” about a blowup doll called “He Stopped Plugging Her Today,” to a delightfully awkward reception from all present.¹⁸⁰

Sherrill and Jones’ songs were consistently good and sometimes more than that, and they were clearly the ‘pros’ of this round, both having written best-selling and widely recognized songs. I particularly loved Sherrill’s “I’m Mr. Honky Tonk,” “I Don’t Drink When You’re Around,” and the very funny “Hard To Be a Hippie in the Morning,” and Jones’ “Red, White and Pinkslip Blues,” and “Bigger, Badder, Meaner (Drunker Than You Oughta Be),” with its call and response chorus that invited (and received!) easy audience participation.

Their visual presentation was a marked contrast. Gregory wore a skullcap and a t-shirt reminiscent of a 1950s-era Marlon Brando. Hartman was simply dressed in a casual floral blouse and jeans. The two hit writers were the most interesting study in contrast however. Jones had a distinctly urban bohemian look; clean-shaven with a silk scarf around his neck and tucked into his shirt collar like a cravat. Sherrill looked like a classic outlaw country singer, unshaven with a cowboy hat and boots and a western shirt all worn from wear. Ironically (and though both have lived in Nashville for several years), Jones is a Southerner and Sherrill a Northerner (Fieldnotes, February 12, 2012).

¹⁷⁸ As well as penning such classics as “I Fall to Pieces” and “Make the World Go Away,” Cochran is also known as the early champion of Willie Nelson, and his efforts helped the then-unknown songwriter get his first publishing deal.

¹⁷⁹ Bobby Braddock is widely acknowledged as one of a small pantheon of greatest Nashville songwriters of all time (others in this category would include Harlan Howard, Tom T. Hall and Kris Kristofferson). Though he has had dozens of hits over his career that began in the 1960s, being the writer of Tammy Wynette’s “D-I-V-O-R-C-E” and George Jones’ “He Stopped Loving Her Today” alone would likely qualify him for this exceptional status, particularly as the latter of these is often referred to as the greatest country song of all time.

¹⁸⁰ Songs titles such as “All My Ex-es Live In Texas”, “She Got The Gold Mine And I Got The Shaft”, “Friends in Low Places” and even “Jesus Take the Wheel” indicate the ironically self-referential streak that runs through country music songwriting. The genre even has its own well-known parodist, Cledus T. Judd.

In the above excerpt from my fieldnotes one can observe various ways that the songwriter performers presented themselves as part of an occupational collective and geographically situated community through their banter and their references to other Nashville songs and songwriters, while simultaneously asserting themselves as individuals with traits, skills, and (most importantly) songs that distinguish them from and justify their place amongst their peers. I included the excerpt in an attempt to demonstrate this duality, though the particular night I describe was not exceptional in this regard. The same phenomenon can be readily observed at almost any “In the Round” show at the venue.

There is also a complex mix of symbols and referents at play during “In the Round” performances such as the one above, indicative of ways that songwriters consciously and subconsciously value their work and construct their self presentations favourably. These performances can thus be scrutinized in terms of what they reveal about the cultural capital of the Nashville songwriter. Pierre Bourdieu coined this term to mean both what is valued in a given sociocultural milieu beyond but expressed in the terms of the economic, and how individuals behave in ways that utilize the capital they have. I am suggesting a modification of this idea, arguing for a particular cultural capital of the Nashville songwriter as it is manifested on the Bluebird stage. The tendency of “In the Round” performers to demystify the songwriting process, preferring to see it as painstaking work rather than artistry, is intertwined with the cultural mythos that surrounds country music more broadly: the privileging of work and humility over grandiose notions of the *artiste*. Nevertheless, the Bluebird and songwriters’ presentation at the venue would suggest that they enjoy whatever benefits come from being seen as singing artist. While this duality complicates Bourdieu’s formulation of bourgeois cultural capital (in

which taste and class are directly related), it is worth examining what kind of capital *is* being enacted in songwriter performances at the Bluebird.

Country Music and/as Labour

As Geoffrey Mann puts it, “some of the more prominent [country music] lyrical fixtures include rural life, work and everyday working-class life (especially contrasted with that of the affluent).” As country music is marketed through its affiliation with the Southern white working class, work and labour, and the kind of recreational pursuits of those who spend most of their time working, are consistent subjects for lyrics.

This often masks the complexity of class views that exist within the genre itself. The majority of country music listeners have for a long time been concentrated in urban areas in the U.S., and many of these listeners can claim little familiarity with life in rural America. While many country music listeners do indeed live in rural areas and no doubt feel a particular propriety over the genre, they do not account for why the genre is as widespread or widely popular as it is. And indeed, the history of the genre shows successive attempts over the generations of fans to appeal to urban listeners by introducing musical and formal elements into country songs that were recognizably borrowed from styles of popular and rock music current at the time (Hughes 192-3). Further, these urban listeners would often appreciate such attempts at making country music less of an embarrassment in social situations.¹⁸¹

Nevertheless, extolling the virtues and hardships of a working-class existence are consistent enough as lyrical elements that it reaches the level of a lyrical theme. The honesty of a

¹⁸¹ Diane Pecknold’s study *The Selling Sound* is particularly insightful in dissecting how country music audiences have shown a particular sensitivity to class issues, often opposing or subverting expectations in this regard, particularly in urban settings, in a way that obscures or complicates their habitus (see especially Pecknold 95-97).

days work is upheld in a way that transcends place, and sets up a contrast with those who do not labour (that is, both the affluent and the deadbeats). Little wonder that Nashville songwriters, though they are not from Nashville and often not from the South or even a rural area, write about working-class subject matter and forefront the working aspects of their existence to audiences at the Bluebird. To do otherwise would contrast too much with the genre parameters and expectations within which they write and work.

In discussing how songs were recorded and became successful cuts, songwriters emphasize how their songs are commodities, reminding auditors that a song is something on which labour is spent and by extension subjectifying the songwriter who performs that labour. An inverse process also factors in to this scenario, however, in that commodities — whether bolts, chiropractic adjustments or country songs — align the labourer with larger impulses of the social collective that consume them (i.e. they are meaningless unless consumed). In this sense a labourer's subjectivity is objectified and alienated from the product of her or his labour when consumed. This dualistic view of commodification helps with an understanding of the process through which the figure of the Nashville songwriter is at once a labourer, the maker of a commodity, an individual artist set apart from the common people and a culture bearer whose work is inseparable from the social collective to whom they give voice and sell records.

Mystique of the Song

Songs are made in private rooms either by an individual songwriter¹⁸² or among a small number of people, and entirely outside of the public realm. By the time a song comes to a listener's attention, the moment of and inspiration for its creation has passed. Further, all writers bring

¹⁸² As my last chapter explored, solo-written songs are rarely cut in Nashville, though this fact is not widely known.

their own creativity born of intangible factors: their personalities, experiences and other subjectivities that make them unique as individuals. My informants refer to the incongruous alchemy involved in writing a successful or popular song as “catching lightning in a bottle.”

There is a mystique surrounding how songs get created (Brackett xix) that the Bluebird exploits. This mystique is perpetuated through songwriter performances, spectacles that demonstrate how writing songs is a task that most will never be able to accomplish (and even fewer of us at a commercially successful level) (McCarl 148). The Bluebird acts as a kind of portal through which anyone can peer into part of the work of the Nashville songwriter and imagine the moment (or several hours) of inspiration that resulted in a song.

It must be remembered that what is being viewed here is not song *writing* per se, which takes place in private offices and writing rooms, and that “In the Round” shows do not allow access to that working process so much as they are a controlled medium for its representation. In this sense Bluebird performances could be viewed as a sort of reifying feedback loop — a cyclical and closed system appearing as creativity and spontaneous choice but constrained by its inherent limitations — that Adorno (1945) and others argue is typical of practices within the “culture industry.” It is highly debatable how much access to an otherwise hidden creative process is obtained by audiences here, or that this is anything other than a sort of well-rehearsed spontaneity, a hyperreal Baudrillardian simulacra of the act of songwriting (see Baudrillard [1983] 2006).

This important question must be asked: why does seeing songwriters and imagining them writing songs matter to audiences who attend shows at the venue at all? Hearing songs seems to access an internal emotional life that many of us don’t consciously acknowledge or have difficulty accessing (Brackett xx), and because of this listeners may imagine a certain kinship or

identification with its performer (often not consciously distinguishing between performer and songwriter) as someone who provided this window of insight into a listener's psyche. Listeners construct strong experiential and personal associations with country songs that are entirely separate from those of the songwriter, and these subjective associations, the listener's experience of the song, come into contact with the subjectivity that imagined the song in the first place in a Bluebird performance. If a listener has a particular attachment to or relationship with a country song they may have only experienced through mass-mediation, what is perhaps counterintuitive is how an encounter with a songwriter at an "In the Round," and hearing about her or his intentions when writing a song, seems not to *dispel* mystique by unwittingly revealing the mystery of a song's effect or revealing its fictitiousness. Why is it not disillusioning to hear it in its "original," raw form at the Bluebird?¹⁸³ And if a listener is intended to associate a country song with the singer who sings it, and find meaning in the connection between the two, then why is there not disappointment upon finding out that this connection might be simply one of her or his own making, or one that only exists through performance and not in any more inherent way?

In many forms of expressive culture there is a tacit assumption that subject and writer and singer are different, and consumers embrace and take pleasure in artifice, willingly suspending disbelief for the sake of an experiential connection to what is being performed (e.g., plays). Different genre cultures demand different kinds of authenticity, of course, and as I have argued country music songs are embraced as authentic if they can be believably attached to a performer (even when the song is known to have been written by someone else). The effective country performer convinces through the force of her or his rendition (that is, they become the "I" in the

¹⁸³ Of course there may be people who don't attend Bluebird shows specifically because they resist such revelations about their favourite country songs, but I have not spoken to anyone who claims this.

song), and people simply don't know or care that the singer did not write the song. The longstanding practice in country music, as well as other forms of popular music, of having the same song be performed by more than one singer ("cover" versions) may help explain listener's authentication of more than one version of a song.¹⁸⁴ However, even this phenomenon reinforces how country music authenticity arises out of the performance, and it is incumbent on the listener to make an experiential connection between performer and song material.

It is perhaps useful to return to the idea that country songs are vehicles for a shared experience between performers and audiences, and that the opportunity to have this experience is what is being promoted to listeners. Nashville songwriters in this scenario cannot claim the narrative for themselves: their songs are never truly their own. Cultural texts attain meaning through consumption, and songs become the vehicles through which others perform, experience and maintain meaning. The act of consumption is an exercise in the creation of meaning. De Certeau argues that consumers create spaces for themselves to establish "a kind of reliability within the situations imposed on an individual, that is, of making it possible to live in them by reintroducing into them the plural mobility of goals and desires — an art of manipulating and enjoying" (DeCerteau xxii). In a country music genre which relies on notions of authenticity that validate certain singers over others, the existence of multiple versions of the same song, perhaps counter-intuitively, doesn't seem to represent a contradiction or indiscretion. Songwriters singing

¹⁸⁴ Though comparably rare, there are cases where songwriters and singers have formed tactical partnerships, and in these cases the songwriter is well known and forefronted as a way to promote sales. These pairings include Burt Bacharach and Dionne Warwick and, in the country realm, Cindy Walker and Bob Wills. One poignant example here is that of singer Glen Campbell and songwriter Jimmy Webb. Webb famously penned three of Campbell's signature hits: "By the Time I Get To Phoenix" (1968), "Wichita Lineman" (1968), and "Galveston" (1969). All of these songs are intimate personal accounts of a young man's inner emotional travails, and Campbell's performances are famous for their conveyance of this struggle and vulnerability. The fact that Webb, not Campbell, penned these songs seemed not to diminish their emotional poignancy.

their own material are simply performing an alternative interpretation of a song that may be more widely known in another version, demonstrating how the original intention of the author is one of many possible interpretations.

Bluebird audience members (and country music listeners generally) consume a song (as a text or narrative) by reading themselves onto it in an active, not merely passively reverential, way. When someone who is familiar with a mass mediated recorded version of a song hears it sung by one of its writers at the Bluebird, they must reconcile these two experiences by becoming part of the process. It is an essential paradox of the Bluebird that creating an auratic experience simultaneously welcomes the listener to silently create empowers them to legitimize their own ideas about a song's meaning. Bluebird audiences encounter authorial intent without submitting to it. The listener is essentially inviting the inclusion of an authority, yet must then be able to tacitly assert that her or his hearing of a song can coexist with the songwriter's or any other version. The listener becomes part of the "writing" of a song through the experience of one of its actual writers.

Songwriter performances at the Bluebird could also be seen to be part of the broader process of songwriting in Nashville. Songwriters in "In the Round" shows may be altering ("rewriting") their own songs in response to several factors not related directly to the work that took place in the room the song was developed in (such as subsequent recordings of the song, presence of the audience or other songwriters). As Jeff Packman (2011) has argued, much of what musicians do to earn a living does not pay, does not happen on stage, and does not look like work or music. Songwriters who perform on the Bluebird stage are in fact *working* (e.g. showcasing their material, making connections, promoting themselves), they just are not *writing* (in the sense of creation from nothing or even making major changes to the songs). It is possible

that these performances inform the song's inscription, in that they offer alternatives to the version of the song that most of the public hears post commercial circulation. Additionally, these performances may offer a way for a song to be further reimagined in the future.

There is a conflict here between the idea of the song as a discreet entity, written in rooms by groups of songwriters and later interpreted by others, and the song as a malleable construct that undergoes alterations as a result of performers' interpretations and studio production processes. The distinction being the two is informed by the figure of the composer in Western Art Music tradition, and the concomitant notion of the *work* — a discreet entity that exists independently of any performance — that buoys this figure. Lydia Goehr claims the following:

Most of us tend . . . to see works as objectified expressions of composers that prior to compositional activity did not exist. We do not treat works as objects just made or put together, like tables and chairs, but as original, unique products of a special, creative activity. We assume, further, that the tonal, rhythmic, and instrumental properties of works are constitutive of structurally integrated wholes that are symbolically represented by composers in scores. Once created, we treat works as existing after their creators have died, and whether or not they are performed or listened to at any given time (Goehr 2).

In the art music tradition that is the focus of Goehr's writing, "there is no obvious category of object within which works are comfortably placed" (Goehr 3). So too it is difficult to apprehend an "original" or "authentic" song as a work, an object that is identifiably the product of its creator. Is the song that which was written and demoed by its songwriters? Is it the best-known recording of that song? Does it exist at all? I contend that Nashville songwriters would see themselves as constructing a song that allows singers to be able to perform it as their own, and invite listeners to make this connection. While performances at the Bluebird may appear as a sort of return to the auratic source of a song (and in some sense this is indeed what is happening), it must be remembered that these songs were intended to circulate, to change, to get passed around.

Further, songwriters performing at the Bluebird may perform their songs with attention paid to how they know audiences are used to the song sounding on the radio (such as adding a guitar riff or a melodic hook, or adapting the tempo or feel). The writers of these songs recognize that their songs take on a life of their own once they are in demo form and in the hands of several publishers. This is a process that is beyond the ability of the songwriter to manipulate, other than in the form of her or his song.¹⁸⁵

The mystique surrounding song creation and songwriters that the Bluebird perpetuates arises in part because of the frequent retelling of stories like Tony Arata's below. Early "In the Round" shows in particular reinforce Nashville's reputation as an incubator of talent in my experience. Those that attend these rounds, myself included, cannot help but imagine how many more talented songwriters that they have never heard of wander Nashville's streets. Here Arata talks about his first early "In the Round" show, which happened to have a young Garth Brooks in attendance:

I had written 'The Dance' not long at all after we moved here, and so when I did . . . the early show at the Bluebird with Garth, I did that song. That's how he heard it. He's a songwriter. He was on the same bill that night. And he said, "Man, if I get a record deal, I'm gonna do that song (Tony Arata, personal communication, March 19, 2012).

The early round referred to here by Arata happened in 1987, and two years later Brooks released his first record. By the end of the 1990s, Brooks' overall sales rivaled that of the Beatles and he had become the best-selling solo act of all time in any genre.

¹⁸⁵ The whole process presents interesting challenges to notions of the work (i.e. is the "original" or "authentic" song the one that was written and demoed by songwriters or is it the best known recording of that song?) and of aura itself (i.e. what are the auratic qualities of songs written for mass mediation? Do songwriters auratically infuse their songs in the sense that they define the parameters of the discourse that arises from their consumption?). I intend to pursue these inquiries in future publications.

“The Dance” is an ode to a lost love that can be easily attached to many different scenarios (a former lover, a deceased friend or relative), a classic tearjerker that is a signature song for Brooks and is indelibly associated with him in the minds of his legions of fans. Yet I have never failed to see audience members in tears when Arata performs it at the Bluebird. The mystique that “In the Round” shows perpetuate, however difficult to properly dissect, seems to rely on a view of the songwriter as mediator, channeling meaning that is not foreign to the consumer, yet which the song makes easier to access or process. “In the Round” shows thus manifest what is perhaps the most tangible aspect of a Nashville songwriter’s skill: creating texts that can be meaningfully performed by other singers, and inviting active participation in its meaning through consumption by listeners.

Songwriter Authenticity

Josh Kear sang his song “Before He Cheats” at tonight’s Round. The Carrie Underwood recording of the song was in the top position on the Billboard country charts for five consecutive weeks in late 2006. It won Grammy, Academy of Country Music (ACM) and Country Music Television (CMT) awards as country song of the year, and is likely the fourth biggest-selling country song of all time. It tells the story of the damage that was done to the car of an ex-boyfriend, told from the perspective of the scorned lover. I always wondered what was so compelling about this song to make it as massively popular as it is.

While Underwood’s recorded performance displays a certain form of vengeful female empowerment (however ineffective or trivial the car wrecking may be) that suitably contrasted the relatively passive stance espoused in her earlier hit and other signature song “Jesus Take the Wheel,” Kear’s live performance was understandably quite different. He noted the irony of singing this song that was clearly intended as a woman’s song, and his rendering had little of the venom that characterizes Underwood’s recorded version.¹⁸⁶

Kear’s performance forced me to consider how the ineffectiveness or triviality I assign to the act of auto vandalism might be a misreading of the concerns of the listeners who consumed this song in large numbers. Kear’s rendered this vandalism as an act of violence that, while largely symbolic in its significance, has implications of

¹⁸⁶ Kear did not write “Before He Cheats” alone. Perhaps surprisingly to some, given the song’s content and resonance with female listeners, his cowriter, Chris Tompkin, is also male.

social disruption that I had been oblivious to. And he conveyed this through a character that only someone other than himself could believably perform (Fieldnote excerpt, March 28, 2012).

Kear anticipated that country music listeners (mostly likely female ones) would resonate with the scenario described in “Before He Cheats.” While a song’s success relies on a whole chain of events from the writing stage through its production, distribution, marketing and consumption, the most successful ones align with aspects of the collective psyche of in ways that others do not.

The following section discusses notions of authenticity as they relate to songwriters in Nashville, and how they are reinforced or challenged by songwriter performances at the Bluebird. For many, seeing songwriters perform their own songs in person give the impression, as the title of this chapter suggests, of going straight to the source of inspiration. If the song was familiar to listeners prior to hearing the songwriter perform it, they will retroactively imagine it as the creation of the individual they observed at the venue, perhaps wondering how that particular person, and what kind of internal motivations and experiences, produced that particular song. As in the performance of “Before He Cheats” above, sometimes these performances do much to unsettle preconceived narratives about how particular songs came about. And yet if a songwriter can convey intent even through a heavily manipulated studio recording, and via a singer who is very different than she or he is, it suggests there may remain something of the songwriter’s essence, or aura, even at the point or moment of consumption, or perhaps in the song itself.

There is an authorial privilege inherent in songwriter performances at the Bluebird, as this excerpt from ethnomusicologist Amy Corin’s study *I’ve Been Shushed at the Bluebird: The Role of a Nashville, Tennessee Cafe in Shaping Music and Musical Behavior* describes:

I felt as though I had not really heard (perhaps experienced is a better word here) the song until I had heard it in this context. It's difficult to describe this experience. The song, as a discrete entity or an object, is theoretically considered to be the same entity regardless who performs it. If it were analyzed, it would have the same title, the same text (with very few exceptions), the same melody, and usually the same or very similar chord changes regardless of who performs it. The fact that it is sung by its creator, and in this particular context, renders it a very different communicative vehicle (Corin 66).

Corin notes how songwriter performances, rather than undermining the authenticity of the more famous recorded version of the song, seem to alter the experience of the song itself. It reveals a song's auratic authenticity as the work of a living, breathing individual.

Bluebird performances present several challenges and suggest worthwhile revisions to Benjamin's notion of aura. Is the songwriters' (collective?) aura ever-present in a song? Is it absented by mechanical reproduction but retrievable through Bluebird performances? However altered a better known version of a song might be from the one heard in the minds of its writers, does a song retain essential properties that exist outside of any performance? And does a popular song have auratic qualities, and are songwriters the only ones capable of delivering an auratic performance?

I would argue that songwriters auratically infuse their songs in the sense that they define the parameters of the discourse that arises from their consumption. Though songwriters' original hearing of a song's tempo, feel, and use of referents to other genres may often be discernable in a recorded and mass mediated version, this final version is also likely to have altered many aspects of a song in ways never anticipated by the songwriter. They nevertheless provide the framework in which any alteration occurs. And certainly in its lyrical and textual parameters, songwriters' original intentions are almost entirely adhered to. "In the Round" presents a different paradigm in which to understand the work of songwriting, and of writing songs that are both culturally

situated and commercially viable. This practice is situated in previous practice and discourse but also evolving through a constant metadialogue with producers and consumers (Hughes 188-200).

The Bluebird manifests publicly what many songwriters in Nashville feel: that even though they work within the apparatus of Music Row, they are part of a unique entity with its own identity and values. The figure that emerges from Bluebird performances is that of an individual who is simultaneously autonomous from, commenting on, and inextricably linked to a particular commercial culture. Songwriters in their performance stance at the Bluebird convey that they are uniquely gifted in that they write songs as a form of employment and thus different than others who don't, such as most of those who are sitting and watching them at the Bluebird. At the same time, songwriting is presented as a form of work resembling a trade, relatable to other types of manufacturing. Adding layers to this depiction is the fact that songwriters, while producing goods just like other labourers, create objects that are meaningfully circulated and consumed as part of a process of participation in a genre culture. Songwriters thus present themselves as workers primarily, but also creative individuals, more artisans than artists, and culture bearers, a composite figure without ready comparison.

None of my informants are wizards or alchemists of course, and the often-arduous journey that each took to get to their current place in Nashville is full of experiences of failure and misunderstanding as they sought to learn what Dan Daley has coined Nashville's "unwritten rules" (Daley 1998). However, and with charming references to past foibles and stumbles during their song introductions aside, the performers at the Bluebird are not figures of failure but of overcoming odds and succeeding. To audience members unfamiliar with more intimate details about Nashville and Music Row, songwriters possess hidden and fascinating knowledge. The

fact that this was gained through trial and error and going through hard times only strengthens the esteem in which they are held.

Songwriters who perform on the Bluebird stage come to represent the wider collectivity of Nashville songwriters due to the flexible yet consistent format that “In the Round” is, and how little is known about songwriters outside of these shows. These songwriter performances manifest a cultural intimacy that sets songwriters apart from audience members and other country music figures, positioning them, at least in the moment of performance, as possessors of a distinct cultural insight. Yet as I hope this chapter illustrates, songwriter self-depictions in performance are complex, multi-dimensional and contestable. There is much verbalized, more still conveyed through the performers’ individual and collective stance, and more still to be gleaned from knowledge of what was not said in a public forum.

Concluding Remarks: The Figure of the Nashville Songwriter and Lines of Further Inquiry

The aesthetic disposition demanded by the products of a highly autonomous field of production is inseparable from a specific cultural competence (Bourdieu 1984:4).

Through this dissertation's examination of how songwriters react to and operate within a specific commercial framework and set of cultural constraints, a *figure* of the Nashville songwriter emerges. This figure is formed through the demands of producers, molded by country music genre culture, affected by the shared traits and behaviors of all Nashville songwriters, and perpetuated by their tactical responses to all of these parameters. I contend that these responses and the adaptability they demonstrate define the particular creativity of Nashville songwriters.

As I explored in chapter 3, pre-existing paradigms for songwriters' work also inform perceptions of Nashville songwriters. Three traditions that I have discussed, those of Tin Pan Alley, country music, and singer songwriters, are all foundational in forming the figure of the Nashville songwriter. As chapter 6 examines, these traditions are also implicated in songwriter performances at the Bluebird Cafe, a performance that sees songwriters "balancing pressures from commercial industry with desires for musical/emotional integrity" (Corin 6). The three traditions I mention above have resonance with and form much of the back-story that supports the analytical paradigms of commerce, culture and creativity I apply throughout this dissertation, and I return to it one final time here.

This trio of descriptors is manifested in aspects of Nashville songwriters' daily work as much as it is upon the songs they write. Owing to their proximity to and negotiation of the complexities of a song production infrastructure that Nashville songwriters encounter,

commercial considerations are never absent as motivating factors for writing their songs, and certainly inform the content of these songs. Country music culture, defined by Curtis Ellison as “the accumulation and reinforcement through time of shared attitudes, values, traditions gestures, rituals and ceremonial events” (Ellison xvi), is a complex, largely fabricated yet widely shared collective, and country music listeners’ reactions to songs can never be far from the mind of songwriters as well. Finally, songwriters disregard these wider considerations within cowriting sessions, a phenomenon explored in the fourth chapter of this dissertation. Nashville songwriters are able to speak to their intended listeners from a removed perspective, yet in a culturally intimate manner that is more commonly ascribed to singer songwriters. Because of these various factors, the figure of the Nashville songwriter possesses a unique cultural capital within the physical and social environment of Nashville — one that is a mix of unique commercial, cultural and creative concerns.

Many of my inquiries into Nashville songwriters and their working processes are speculative at present, and I intend to pursue them in future publications. These include further exploration of cowriting sessions, with more specific research devoted to observing the ways my informants interact and contribute to a temporary social space conducive to writing songs. There is much interest in Nashville songwriters currently owing to the popularity of *Nashville* the TV show. This phenomenon could be usefully examined for the implications of its dramatized presentation of my informants and their ilk, and how this presentation has been shaped by and in turn shaped the strategies of Music Row, the traditions of country music and the physical and social environment of Nashville. Inquiries into how songwriting in Nashville is a process that involves many individuals’ input over time — a phenomenon I term and theorize as auratic sedimentation in chapter 5 — could be usefully expanded to theorize how songwriters’ work,

tactics and subjectivity are implicated in how and why various forms of popular music achieve the effects they do.

I have done preliminary research toward a study of Canadian songwriters who are connected with Nashville, either by having a publisher or artist management there or travelling there to write songs and perform. Building upon Aaron Fox's *Real Country* (2004), I intend to examine how Canadian country music scenes both reflects and differs from those in the U.S., and ways that local scenes both reflect and gain identity separate from Nashville. This study's methodology could be expanded to incorporate local country music scenes throughout the world, and invites deeper questions into country music's meaning and significance, and how this is both translated to other places and reappropriated to suit local practices and needs.

Ultimately, a mapping out of a country music imaginary would be possible from such a broad focus. The country music imaginary incorporates the perspectives of individuals from different countries and ethnicities that all collectively ascribe to and in the process reinvigorate country music as a commercial industry, a musical genre, a discursive entity and a cultural practice. From this perspective country music serves as a template for how broadly mass-mediated commercial products, even though they are linked with a particular culture and center of power, can be made meaningful and fuel divergent cultural practices. These practices in turn inform the strategies of the very industries that manufacture the products in the first place.

On a more practical and personal level, I would hope that this study would be of help to those who are considering working in or relocating to Nashville. A professor colleague of mine told me she shared a draft of my chapter on gender and Nashville songwriters with a friend of her daughter who is a songwriter considering such a move. I am grateful for the work of advocacy that a critical view of Nashville such as this dissertation can do, both for my informants and for

anyone considering joining their ranks. Perhaps most relevantly, ethnographic studies like this one can contextualize the work of commercial songwriters working within and applying their creative processes to write relevant content for specific genre cultures. Positioning practitioners at the centre of such studies facilitates the difficult work of unraveling and articulating cultural meaning, as well as exposing analytical paradigms that are insufficient to this task.

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