

"Not Ready to Make Nice":
The effects of U.S. politics on the country music genre

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US Political History from 1960 to the Present
4/25/2022

In 2003, the Chicks, then called the Dixie Chicks, were in trouble. On March 10th at a show in London, their frontwoman Natalie Maines commented on George W. Bush and the United States government's mounting invasion of Iraq. "Just so you know..." Maines said, "we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas."¹ Maines and the Chicks were all Texans themselves, and at that point were popular mainstream country musicians with a hit record. After that comment, however, mainstream country fans excommunicated the band, burning records and banning them from mainstream country radio.² The Chicks were adopted into the alternative country genre, despite no change in their sound, and became a lesson in the new ways that politics were affecting the classification of art.³ Today, a country musician's public political ideology is a predictor of whether they are considered "alternative" (left-leaning) or "mainstream" (right-leaning),⁴ with a similar delineation among fans of the two broader subgenres. The intense backlash by mainstream country fans and the Chicks' rising popularity on alternative country channels following the controversy was a result of decades of intentional association of country music with politics, due to the genre's association with both outlaw mythology and the working-class white electorate. The incorporation of mainstream country music into right-wing campaigns like those of George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, the resultant backlash of left-wing country artists, and the increasing politicization of popular culture has led to the spheres of alternative and mainstream country being differentiated not only by sound, but by political ideology as well.

¹ Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 266.

² Ibid.

³ Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox, "Introduction: the Importance of Being Ironic--Toward a Theory and Critique of Alt.Country Music," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 13.

⁴ Ibid.

To understand what happened to the Chicks and the country music genre, the best place to start is Nashville, Tennessee, in the 1960s. It was there that country musicians like Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Kris Kristofferson were pioneering the outlaw country genre. Outlaws “discarded Nashville’s old recipes”⁵ in a “restless union of country and rock,”⁶ creating the ancestral sound for alternative country music. The outlaw movement relied on anti-corporate rhetoric, but it also relied somewhat on corporate marketing and record sales,⁷ and in reality, the “outlaw” label was a marketing technique, as Americans love to think of themselves as outlaws.⁸ The outlaw movement was not political in nature, though individual musicians of the genre often espoused left-leaning politics, including Kristofferson and Nelson.⁹ Nashville was not hospitable for outlaw country musicians for long, however, as the “‘Nashville Sound’ in the late 1950s and 1960s, for example, was seen by many ‘hard country’ artists and fans as an unacceptable sellout to the mainstream.”¹⁰ Major outlaw country artists had a “renegade spirit that clashed with corporate ethos and linked with rock-and-roll cool,”¹¹ and found themselves leaving the city for more musical freedom. Willie Nelson left for Austin, Texas, which would soon become a hotspot for alternative country. Meanwhile, in Nashville, “Music Row was practically a battlefield command post for George Wallace,” a staunch segregationist, during the 1968 presidential

⁵ Michael Streissguth, *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville* (New York: itbooks, 2013), 3.

⁶ Michael Streissguth, *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville* (New York: itbooks, 2013), 4.

⁷ Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox, "Introduction: the Importance of Being Ironic--Toward a Theory and Critique of Alt.Country Music," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 4.

⁸ Michael Streissguth, *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville* (New York: itbooks, 2013), 154-155.

⁹ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 168.

¹⁰ Stevie Simkin, “‘The Burden Is Passed On’: Son Volt, Tradition, and Authenticity,” in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 203.

¹¹ Michael Streissguth, *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville* (New York: itbooks, 2013), 147.

election.¹² The 1960s began to build the political divide between what would be alternative and mainstream country music, though it took nearly four decades for that polarization to become as obvious as it is today.

Outlaw country had gained popularity as politicians associated with the political right began to co-opt Nashville country music as a political tool, beginning with George Wallace. Wallace had “had a country act in every political rally since 1958,” making its usefulness in attracting white, working-class voters apparent enough for Nixon and later Reagan to adopt similar friendly relations with the country music industry.¹³ According to country music historian Bill C. Malone, “‘before the 1960s, there wasn’t any explicit posture of Republicanism or *political* conservatism in music,’”¹⁴ but the progressive social movements of the 1960s generated white backlash that politicians on the right harnessed in part through country music. By associating mainstream country music with the white, working class, and the white, working class with the “real America,”¹⁵ Wallace laid the groundwork for modern country music subgenre political alignments. The cultural consequences of such associations are evident today, as Black country musicians are often relegated to the alternative genre regardless of sound, and Black country artists have been far and few between since the days of Charley Pride.¹⁶ This does not, however, mean the alternative country music subgenre is known for its diversity. It is still a male-dominated industry with “distinctly patriarchal rustic heritage,”¹⁷ and, according to Jenni

¹² Paul Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1970), 153.

¹³ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 170.

¹⁴ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 148.

¹⁵ Michael Streissguth, *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville* (New York: itbooks, 2013), 173.

¹⁶ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 180.

¹⁷ Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox, "Introduction: the Importance of Being Ironic--Toward a Theory and Critique of Alt.Country Music," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 17.

Sperandeo, the president of indie record label Dangerbird Records, it is “largely music by and for white people.”¹⁸ A 2003 survey found that “an astonishing 86 percent of [the alternative country zine *No Depression*] (replying) audience was male.”¹⁹ The question of authenticity, and which subgenre is truly “authentic” country music, often comes into play when comparing the two, but there are “implicitly white generational rhetoric and structures of feeling that underlie the authentic/inauthentic, deep/shallow distinction.”²⁰ The political battle present in country music is not a matter of white identity politics against the rest of the nation, but rather two forms of white politics against each other. It is important to recognize that the political conversation being had through country music is one involving mostly white people, and political pandering to either subgenre is pandering to white people, not the rest of the United States.

The songs of outlaw country reflected the growing importance of identity politics in the United States,²¹ as people became prouder of who they were but ultimately less cohesive as a country.²² There were those who thought the 1960s were the downfall of American culture, and there were those who think it was the beginning of America’s transition to what it should be.²³ The majority of Americans were still religious, but the government was becoming more secular, and “Conservative Christians, formerly part of the establishment, had come to see themselves as cultural counterrevolutionaries.”²⁴ Mainstream country music was their rallying cry. The morality of the nation was at stake, apparently, though “disentangling the Christian Right’s

¹⁸ Timothy Gray, *It's Just the Normal Noises* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 127.

¹⁹ Timothy Gray, *It's Just the Normal Noises* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017), 126.

²⁰ John Smith, "Growing Up and Out of Alt.Country: On Gen X, Wearing Vintage, and Neko Case," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 53.

²¹ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 21.

²² Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 45.

²³ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 2.

²⁴ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 79.

moral panic from white racial panic is no easy task.”²⁵ While campaigning for the presidency in 1968, Richard Nixon used that panic to appeal to “whiteness” and “machismo” rather than economic concerns,²⁶ approaching politics as a matter of “who hates whom.”²⁷ Nixon used country music to appeal to the working class, or his “Silent Majority,”²⁸ and to play up the “heroic quality” of blue collar jobs in country music.²⁹ He associated country music with patriotism³⁰ and, once elected, was the “first president to regularly invite country performers into the White House.”³¹ Both Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard played at the Nixon White House, and when Nixon asked Cash to play “Welfare Cadillac” by Guy Drake at his first White House performance in 1972, Cash refused, as he thought it mocked the poor.³² Cash was another predecessor of alternative country, as both his tendency to mix country with rock n’ roll and his politics displayed. While George Wallace may have begun the trend of associating country music with the politics of the right, Nixon solidified the concept through his presidency.

Jimmy Carter also attempted to use country music in his campaign and presidency to connect with voters, but his efforts were in vain. Carter was an honest fan of the genre, bringing country musicians in regularly to entertain,³³ and his son Chip even shared a joint with Willie Nelson on the roof of the White House.³⁴ Despite his love of the genre, mainstream country music was telling the story of the white, working class, and the white, working class felt like it

²⁵ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 85.

²⁶ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 127.

²⁷ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 128.

²⁸ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 168.

²⁹ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 176.

³⁰ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 177.

³¹ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 87.

³² Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 168.

³³ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 88-89.

³⁴ Randall Roberts, “When Jimmy Carter’s White House was a tour stop for long-haired, ‘torpedo’-smoking rock outlaws,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 9, 2020.

was getting shafted. The stagflation of the 1970s and the moving and dying of industries³⁵ made it so that “even when everything went right for labor in the early 1970s, it still went wrong by mid decade.”³⁶ Popular country music was rebelling against everything from the recession, like in Johnny Paycheck’s 1977 novelty song “Take This Job and Shove It,”³⁷ to speed limits, like in C.W. McCall’s song “Convoy” of the same year.³⁸ Meanwhile, country rock, another predecessor of alternative country, “dominated the early seventies.”³⁹ As the two subgenres continued to solidify, politicians blamed high wages and full employment for the stagflation of the country rather than the energy crisis, making way for Ronald Reagan’s economic policies following Carter’s single term.⁴⁰ While Carter may have been a bigger fan of country music than Nixon or Reagan, both did a better job at harnessing the genre for political gain, helping to secure mainstream country music as a Republican party staple.

Ronald Reagan used white backlash rhetoric like no other politician since, aside from perhaps Donald Trump. In the 1980s, Republicans deified the 1950s and villainized the 1960s, creating an image of the 1950s as patriotic and idyllic and 1960s as chaotic and plagued by hippies.⁴¹ American culture had popularized the archetypes of the “rogue” and the “outlaw with morals,”⁴² and nothing said outlaw like country music. Reagan took advantage of the genre’s association with the white, working-class and outlaw mythology, but “hadn’t been overly appreciative of the genre” himself.⁴³ Regardless, according to GOP strategist Lee Atwater, Reagan’s campaign aimed to build a coalition of populists and “country clubbers” to prevent

³⁵ Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 30.

³⁶ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 57.

³⁷ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 17.

³⁸ Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 29.

³⁹ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 179.

⁴⁰ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 224.

⁴¹ David Sirota, *Back to Our Future* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), 29.

⁴² David Sirota, *Back to Our Future* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), 77.

⁴³ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 88.

Democrats from building a coalition of populists and African Americans.⁴⁴ The populists, in this era and case the white, working class, could be enticed through cultural issues and pandering: country music would come in handy. Reagan used the conservative Christian countermovement to oppose “abortion, feminism, and homosexuality”⁴⁵ to encourage voters to vote for the “soul of America,” rather than for their personal economic interests.⁴⁶ By using religious and socio-cultural issues as motivators, the populists were “filled with cultural rage of the people but stripped of questions of class equality.”⁴⁷ This helps to explain how the white, working class was encouraged to vote against their interests, and country music was swept up in that message. As American politics continued to fracture, and the post-war era liberal consensus fell apart, so too did country music.

The cowpunk and alternative country developments of the 1980s presented a country music rebellion against Reaganism. At the time liberal country stars were quitting mainstream country, adding to the ranks of what would soon be known as alternative country.⁴⁸ Kris Kristofferson, the outlaw country ancestor of the cowpunk musicians coming up, became explicitly involved in socialism and the United Farm Workers movement.⁴⁹ Kristofferson also disagreed with U.S. interference in Latin America in the 1980s, which led to “emotional debates” domestically and trauma and terror in the affected countries.⁵⁰ His 1986 album *Repossessed* took shots at Reagan and his policies in El Salvador, and he “earned the venom of the right and the

⁴⁴ Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 170.

⁴⁵ Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 91.

⁴⁶ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Picador, 2004), 69.

⁴⁷ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 312.

⁴⁸ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 171.

⁴⁹ Michael Streissguth, *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville* (New York: itbooks, 2013), 241.

⁵⁰ Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 266.

praise of the left” and “struggled to find major label support” afterward.⁵¹ His political statements had mainstream country fans abandoning him, despite their enjoyment of outlaw country when its musicians’ left-leaning politics were left unsaid. Meanwhile, musicians like Dwight Yoakam were defining the cowpunk genre,⁵² and artists like cowpunk legend Mojo Nixon and alternative country icon Jay Farrar railed against Reagan in their more political songs.⁵³ Alternative country musicians were becoming more vocally political in response to the culture wars, a highly publicized, national debate over the culture of the country.

The culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s were the nail in the coffin for the politicization of country music. Conservatives were not happy about obscenity in music, movies, and art,⁵⁴ and in response to hearing “Darling Nikki,” a lewd Prince song, Tipper Gore formed the Parents’ Music Resource Center, ultimately leading to hearings over whether to mandate parental advisory stickers on albums with explicit lyrics. The measure was opposed by many musicians, including members of the broader country umbrella John Denver and John Cougar Mellencamp.⁵⁵ Mellencamp spoke at the PMRC hearings that took place in September of 1985.⁵⁶ Mojo Nixon was also active during the period, and even faced off against Pat Buchanan on CNN’s Crossfire over the PMRC hearings. Politically, Mojo describes himself as “where the anarchists meet the liberals next to the moonshine still late at night,” and said that cowpunk musicians “want to be the commie folk singer causing trouble.” Of course, with political views

⁵¹ Michael Streissguth, *Outlaw: Waylon, Willie, Kris, and the Renegades of Nashville* (New York: itbooks, 2013), 242-243.

⁵² Paul Kingsbury, "Dwight Yoakam: Honky-Tonk as Cutting Edge," *Journal of Country Music* 11, no. 1 (1986): 12-14.

⁵³ Stevie Simkin, “‘The Burden Is Passed On’: Son Volt, Tradition, and Authenticity,” in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt. Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 212.

⁵⁴ Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 175.

⁵⁵ David Zucchino, “Rock Censorship: Big Brother Meets Twisted Sister,” *Rolling Stone*, Nov. 7, 1985.

⁵⁶ Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 154.

like those, Mojo was no fan of Pat Buchanan, Ronald Reagan, or the PMRC. According to Mojo, “when I did CROSSFIRE, this guy sitting next to me goes, you know, you sound really fired up, you should come in calm. I came in calm and Pat Buchanan was handing me my ass, you know, because he came in... And he said, you're killing babies, you're destroying America, you know, he comes in full blazin', so I had to up my game...”⁵⁷ Politicians and pundits were pandering to constituents’ emotional and moral concerns, and tensions were high on both sides of the aisle. The worsening feud between the two major parties and the echo chamber effect of the expanding media sources in the 1970s and 1980s⁵⁸ contributed to the further polarization of the nation and, in turn, the country music subgenres.

The 1970s and 1980s brought technology that gave people options. Television and radio channels began to target specific audiences, and there was “no need for a commons anymore.”⁵⁹ Music radio became more targeted even as it consolidated, and AM radio stations, usually in rural areas, began to sound differently from FM radio stations, which were more common in the rest of the country.⁶⁰ This sound specialization in radio stations included a differentiation between mainstream and alternative country music channels. The mainstream country music of the past few decades is “pop music for Middle America,” according to Eleanor Whitmore, an alternative country musician who plays the fiddle for Steve Earle’s band the Dukes. Whitmore continued to say, “That's not very nice. I mean, I can't really think of a nice thing to say about it. It's not country music. Like the lyrics are... I'm just trying not to be a jerk... for the most part, it just sounds like the lyrics are garbage, they're talking about pickup trucks and barbecue and...”

⁵⁷ Mojo Nixon, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, July 8, 2021.

⁵⁸ Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 135.

⁵⁹ Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 144.

⁶⁰ Aaron A. Fox, "Beyond Austin's City Limits: Justin Treviño and the Boundaries of 'Alternative' Country," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt. Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 99.

I'm not inspired by it at all. It just sounds commercialized... It's just not very elevated.”⁶¹

Whitmore’s complaints are musical in nature, but to the middle Americans who listen to mainstream country, it would be yet another example of the “musical elitism [that] combines with Democratic political elitism to create a climax that only feeds Southern conservatives’ underdog pride.”⁶² Despite mainstream country music’s history of achieving far greater commercial success than alternative country music, the belief that politics and culture are biased against Republicans is the lens through which Republican, mainstream country music fans find themselves to be the rebels against the establishment.⁶³ Alternative country musicians, in return, say the opposite is true. Mojo Nixon, who is a longtime host of SiriusXM’s Outlaw Country radio channel, which began in 2004 and caters to alternative country fans, says “country music, a lot of times, people in country music, they wrapped themselves in the flag. They wrapped themselves in Jesus. Country music is fucking music for Saturday night.”⁶⁴ To Mojo, mainstream country music is the establishment. Eleanor Whitmore, whose music with the Mastersons and with Steve Earle has played on SiriusXM’s Outlaw Country, asked the program director how her music fit in with the outlaw genre, “and he was like, outlaw is like pushing the boundaries of everything. And so he really thought of it as more of a kind of open thing. Just basically pushing away from the machine in other ways is outlaw.”⁶⁵ In their separate spheres, alternative country musicians and mainstream country musicians were positioning themselves as the authentic rebel, with Nashville and Reagan as the “establishment” for the former and the larger Democratic party as the “establishment” for the latter. As the ability to choose what news and culture to which one

⁶¹ Eleanor Whitmore, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, July 12, 2021.

⁶² Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 10.

⁶³ Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Picador, 2004), 137.

⁶⁴ Mojo Nixon, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, July 8, 2021.

⁶⁵ Eleanor Whitmore, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, July 12, 2021.

was exposed grew, the predominant worldviews of the two subgenres began to become more and more different.

While mainstream country music was mostly located in Nashville, most of the alternative country developments were occurring in or around Austin, which was quickly becoming the home base of alternative country. Austin is known as “a city with a history of country music outside the mainstream,”⁶⁶ but according to Chris Willman, author of *Rednecks & Bluenecks*, “Texas-favoring Nashville-phobes” say that alternative country is based in Austin, when really all of the business is happening in Nashville.⁶⁷ Regardless, the music scene in Austin created an environment in which alternative country could grow, with “redneck rock” leftover from 70s, rockabilly, roots rock pickers, western swing ensembles, and young, college-educated musicians from other big cities to encourage the genre.⁶⁸ According to Matt Eskey, also known as Earl B. Freedom, the bassist for Mojo Nixon’s band the Toadliquors, “the Austin thing is driven by playing and not the business, and Nashville is driven by the business, not the other way around.”⁶⁹ Echoing that sentiment, Mojo Nixon said that “Nashville is a company town and people like me will never be in the company. We're too crazy.”⁷⁰ The lack of corporate influence in Austin allowed country musicians to experiment with sounds that could potentially not make any money. In contrast, according to Austin-based alternative country musician Kelly Willis, in mainstream country, “they are trying to find hits, right? They're trying to make hit songs, which is hard to do, and a lot of times what they end up doing is just trying to recreate the last hit,

⁶⁶ Aaron Smithers, "Old Time Punk," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt. Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 178-179.

⁶⁷ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 17.

⁶⁸ Aaron A. Fox, "Beyond Austin's City Limits: Justin Treviño and the Boundaries of 'Alternative' Country," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt. Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 95.

⁶⁹ Matt Eskey, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, July 12, 2021.

⁷⁰ Mojo Nixon, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, July 8, 2021.

because that's their whole goal is to have hits.” An Austin Chronicle article from 1996 mentions alternative country’s booming panel at SXSW that year followed by a dismal mainstream music industry showing,⁷¹ further evidence of alternative country as a critical darling but far removed from commercial success. It took a liberal, Texan country music band succeeding in mainstream country before eventually being banished for their politics to find out just how divorced the “company” had become from the alternative country scene in Austin.

In the 1990s, these isolated cultural spheres based on one’s personal preferences were happening in tandem with increasing political partisanship in the news on a grander scale. George H. W. Bush, Reagan’s successor, used the culture wars to his advantage, campaigning on the message that his opponent, Michael Dukakis, had allowed a Black man out of prison just so he could commit heinous crimes on leave.⁷² The story of Willie Horton, the Black man in question, heightened political tensions, played into the racist narratives that came with the culture wars, and dominated the media at the time. Meanwhile, U.S. Representative Newt Gingrich of the Republican party was using C-SPAN, the public channel broadcasting the proceedings of the federal government, as his own personal reality show. He used the “extended time set aside for ‘special orders’” to give speeches attacking his Democratic rivals when virtually no one else was there to defend against his attacks.⁷³ The development of Conservative talk radio and the popularity of Rush Limbaugh, the host of the Rush Limbaugh Show, also contributed to further ideological isolation.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the narrative that the Vietnam War was lost due to a lack of support at home for the soldiers abroad began to gain popularity and was

⁷¹ Jim Caligiuri, “The Great Roots-Rock Scare of ‘96,” *The Austin Chronicle*, Dec. 27, 1996.

⁷² Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 247.

⁷³ Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 213.

⁷⁴ Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 215.

used to justify the Gulf War on both sides.⁷⁵ This increasing support for militarism on both sides was heightened by the September 11th terrorist attacks in 2001, but that political coherence didn't last long,⁷⁶ helping to explain why the reaction to the Natalie Maines of the Chicks' statement against U.S. aggression in Iraq was so fervent.

What happened to the Chicks, then Dixie Chicks, was a bad omen for American politics. Before mainstream country fans ousted the Chicks from their good graces, their new album *Home* was set to be a crossover bluegrass hit.⁷⁷ The Chicks were an all-girl country music band from Texas with liberal ideology and connections to the alternative country scene, but their mainstream popularity and more polished sound kept them from the alternative genre label. Following Maines' criticism of George W. Bush, the Chicks were forced to leave the mainstream country genre, largely if not entirely because of her statement.⁷⁸ In response, Grant Alden, coeditor of the alternative country zine *No Depression*, said that *Home* was the best record of 2002, and urged his readers to show their support for the Chicks.⁷⁹ In the case of the Chicks, their political affiliation ended up dictating their subgenre within the overarching country music genre. As alternative country artist Todd Snider observed, “‘The *No Depression* crowd is mostly liberal and the CMT crowd is mostly conservative... seventies outlaw country was the last batch of cowboy liberals.’”⁸⁰ When the Chicks attempted to break free of that dichotomy, they were

⁷⁵ David Sirota, *Back to Our Future* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), 129.

⁷⁶ Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 251.

⁷⁷ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 23-24.

⁷⁸ Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox, "Conclusion: New Alternatives?—Top 40 Outlaws' Gretchen Wilson, Miranda Lambert, and the Dixie Chicks," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt. Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 228.

⁷⁹ Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox, "Introduction: the Importance of Being Ironic--Toward a Theory and Critique of Alt. Country Music," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt. Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 13

⁸⁰ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 234.

rejected by mainstream fans and embraced by alternative fans, ultimately placing them within its divisions anyway.

It is easy, while able to look back at the larger historical trend, to predict what happened to the Chicks in 2003. It was less easy to predict in the moment. According to Kelly Willis, whose brother-in-law, Charlie Robison, was married to Emily Burns Strayer of the Chicks at the time, “back then I don't remember feeling any pressure one way or the other about my political opinions... I had never thought about whether I could say what I felt before, I just did. And it didn't matter. And so that was a game changer, I think.”⁸¹ Alternative country musician Robbie Fulks commented that “when it happened, I mean, my reaction... was like, well, of course, that happened, you know, didn't they know who their audience was? But I don't know if it was that predictable, you know, before it happened.”⁸² Matt Eskey was also surprised at the mainstream country music world's reaction, and said “when the Dixie Chicks were just like blackballed from the industry, which is amazing because they made them so much money, yeah, that was a real big moment, you know, for sure, and the battle lines were drawn probably forever after that...” He continued, “it showed us what we were in for... The Dixie Chicks thing didn't make it happen, but it was telling us that it was going to happen.”⁸³ Rather than simply telling musicians what was going to happen, it was alerting them to trends that had been developing for decades. Politics had latched onto genre delineations in country music like a parasite; disentangling the two was no longer an option.

The overarching country music genre has become fractured by politics to a degree unseen in any other popular American genre. Alternative country “is often defined by what it's in

⁸¹ Kelly Willis, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, June 15, 2021.

⁸² Robert Fulks, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, July 20, 2021.

⁸³ Matt Eskey, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, July 12, 2021.

opposition to”⁸⁴ and has been said to be a member of an “...emergent class of musical genres not based in an aesthetic of music production but in an aesthetic shared by consumers”⁸⁵ Chris Willman goes as far as describing alternative country as a lifeline for “blue souls trapped in red electoral bodies.”⁸⁶ When trying to describe specific sonic differences between alternative and mainstream country, it becomes difficult to pinpoint anything specific: Kelly Willis described it as “a little messier” and “more organic and less polished.”⁸⁷ Many alternative country musicians sound differently from mainstream musicians, but more “polished” artists like Kacey Musgraves and the Chicks are still considered alternative due at least in part to their politics. Mainstream country musicians who lean left refrain from publicizing it, like Tim McGraw⁸⁸ and even Toby Keith, who, according to his producer and label chief, James Stroud, used to be a “Democrat that is a staunch patriot.”⁸⁹ He’s now registered as an Independent. According to Kelly Willis, “mainstream country people don't want to get into [talking politics]... it's dangerous for them to get into it. And the alt country people have less to lose. Their audience is a safer audience to share their political opinions with.”⁹⁰ This may be true if their opinions are liberal, but the question remains of whether an alternative country musician could proudly pronounce their love of the GOP and not lose fans in droves. Regardless of whether a country musician writes political songs, it thus far appears that their public political affiliation directly affects their ability to succeed in either realm of the country music subgenres.

⁸⁴ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 208.

⁸⁵ Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox, "Introduction: the Importance of Being Ironic--Toward a Theory and Critique of Alt.Country Music," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, ed. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 12.

⁸⁶ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 212.

⁸⁷ Kelly Willis, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, June 15, 2021.

⁸⁸ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 183.

⁸⁹ Chris Willman, *Rednecks & Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 64.

⁹⁰ Kelly Willis, interview by Emma Jane Hopper, June 15, 2021.

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