‘Trailer-park, trash talking roots’ (Neal, p. 555) - How Gretchen Wilson brought the country hick to the cultural forefront.

As debut studio albums go, Gretchen Wilson’s ‘Here for the Party’ garnered prohibitive success for the genre. Country music was not, and never will be dead; Wilson’s revival of the oft shunned and belittled hick sounds left a lasting legacy that enables artists like Blake Shelton and Miranda Lambert to express their country sounds. With a population of under 1000, the village of Pocahontas in the Prairie State is the quintessential rural setting for the hick psyche that Gretchen Wilson became fiercely proud of. ‘Here for the Party’ saw release in May 2004, and earned Wilson four Grammy award nominations, as well as a Grammy for ‘Best Female Country Vocal Performance’.

Country music prides itself on a willingness to change, stylistic accommodation, and fiercely territorial loyalty to its endemic roots. The culture of the south is inseparably intertwined with its music. Cobb notes that with the advent of technology, the traditional religious values of the south and their music was advertised, rather than diminished through fear of change; ‘Technology, [...] seemed to pose a formidable threat to the region’s traditions and values, yet these contraptions also served as vehicles by which southern music would reach listeners around the nation [...] and encouraged the lyric and stylistic intermingling and cross-fertilization that marked souther music from the beginning’ (Cobb p. 41) The roots of country music take their inspiration from working class surroundings and regional values for rural white people. The influence of the black community is pronounced, with contributions at the very heart of the country visage as the banjo is of West African origin, and popularised by early African-American communities. Ayers adds that southern culture ‘developed in a process of constant appropriation and negotiation.’ (Ayers p. 385) The misconception about the insularity of the redneck/hillbilly communities is disproved in their embrace of multiple facets of musical style.

The primary hurdle to tackle when accessing and dissecting a country artist is their authenticity. The discourse focuses on the natural and the carnivalesque; ‘as the “natural” - unspoiled rural life, farming, and folk wisdom. But it has also been figured as the “carnivalesque”: Nudie suits, big hair, gaudy production numbers. Such performers (Hank Snow, Porter Wagoner, Dolly Parton) are distinguished from the smooth, sophisticated style of contemporary soft country acts such as Trisha Yearwood.’ (Fox, p. 245) Arguably, neither is more authentic than the other, as both inevitably display similar characteristics and pointers. Gretchen Wilson is defined as the more natural country identity but the very nature of the natural hick is to be brash and fiercely proud of classic tropes like riding tractors, or using hay stack props in music videos. The “carnivalesque” is the ‘coiffed and made-up sexual tease (Dolly, Tanya)’ (Fox, p. 247). Dolly may not seem like the bastion of authenticity, as her whole image is defined by excess, but it is her experiences that have shaped her version of carnivalesque authenticity: ‘In true country carnivalesque fashion, then, Parton’s life story verifies her own authenticity by recuperating abjection - allowing it to take another, more Desirable, form. That form may be an explicit construction, both in terms of her intangible image and very real body.’ (Fox, p. 259) Gretchen Wilson’s moniker of the Redneck Woman is as much an authentic character to maintain as ‘Dolly Parton’. The “natural” is more representative of the hard country image; Wilson represents the masculine presets of the Redneck and hillbilly. She makes a point of being one of the boys, beer-drinking and hard working, as opposed to being soft country. However, both the natural and carnivalesque have a ubiquitous appeal to the populist movement, as both represent powerful and emotive images of women in the country, rural, provincial spheres.

The meteoric rise of Gretchen Wilson is built upon the foundation of ‘Redneck Woman’, and the moniker she bestowed upon herself has stuck. The cultural impact of the song was so profound that *Rolling Stone* ranked it amongst the ‘100 Greatest Country Songs Of All Time’,

and described it in its summary as a song of ‘upbeat swing and beer-drinking, Walmart-wearing identity politics’ (Murray)

> ‘The neck of her guitar even proclaimed “REDNECK” in mother of pearl inlay. More than a nickname, the handle keyed to a network of images, attributes, and attitudes that Wilson represented and that, for fans, represented her in an essential way. Loretta Lynn was the Coal Miner’s Daughter, Johnny Cash the Man in Black, and now Gretchen Wilson was the Redneck Woman. Anyone curious about the meaning of any of these monikers could simply listen to the eponymous song.’ (Hubbs, p. 45)

The imagery prescribed by the moniker was supported by Wilson’s conduct; the mother-of-pearl inlay spelling out ‘REDNECK’ is eponymous of country glamour, and evokes a strong connection to Dolly Parton. Much like Wilson, Parton came from extremely rural and humble beginnings, with her township’s population of under 600, and locale next to a National Park. What Wilson sacrificed in country glamour in the rest of her image, she supperceded with her grit and fiercely proud hick nature. Despite the album containing a song of the same name, ‘Redneck Woman’ is the instantly recognisable staple of the Gretchen Wilson experience. Whilst etymologically, redneck is derogatory, country starlets have seldom shied away from embracing the moniker to empower themselves. For Wilson, ‘redneck’ is not merely an image to rally the rural populace; she embodies those trash talking roots; ‘I ain't no high class broad / I'm just a product of my raising’. Wilson’s raising is precisely how Neal describes it; trailer-park, trash talking, and unashamedly in the front yard with a baby on her hip. There is immense pride in her own ability to drink beer with the boys in a honky tonk. The image serves as an identity badge for the southern person, as well as a staunch badge of honour that shields one from the glaring judgements of those who think better of themselves. ‘Redneck Woman’ is a deliberately chosen

persona for Gretchen Wilson, and it is one that she owns with fervour and honour. Her assertions in the song ‘stake serious claims for her resourcefulness, country affiliations and tastes, desirability, and, especially, agency. Indeed, the song de-essentialises and thus remakes a subjectivity long disowned and devalued in the dominant culture and once labeled the “Virile Female”’. (Hubbs, p. 47) ‘Redneck Woman’ also addresses the topic of identity politics (whether deliberately or not), which has been a fervent topic for the country music genre. Murray states in *Rolling Stone* that the identity is Walmart-wearing, mirroring Gretchen Wilson’s assertions that she ‘still look[s] sexy / Just as sexy as those models on TV / No, I don't need no designer tag / To make my man want me.’ For her adoring rural fans, she is the quintessential girl next door, and represents the psyche that men find devilishly attractive. The low rise jeans, and shorter tops evoke rock vibes, and whilst certainly influenced by the fashion trends of the early 2000s, Wilson states that she ‘know[s] all the words to every Tanya Tucker song’. Tanya Tucker, in the late 1970s, cultivated an image of the Outlaw country movement, which utilised stylistic qualities reserved for rock music to evoke more traditional honky tonk musicality, as opposed to the polished Nashville sound. The irony is palpable in Gretchen Wilson producing the studio album under Epic Records Nashville. It is important to understand the symbiotic relationship between the Outlaw image and the identity politics that pervade ‘Redneck Woman’, as well as other records on the ‘Here For The Party’ album.

The Outlaw image is first and foremost an exercise in exploring a crisis in masculinity, and proceeded to develop into a supposed opposition to the Nashville factory of country music:

> ‘Studios frequently booked as many as four sessions every day,
> including Sundaysm and cut an average of four songs per session.
> Session musicians, many of whom played on more than one session
> each day, set up their equipment, sketched out head arrangements of

the songs to be recorded and worked quickly to record the requisite number of songs in each session' (Stimeling, p. 343)

The aversion to the regimented styling of country music in Nashville's Music Row created a breakaway group determined to publish and produce their vision as they saw it. Tanya Tucker was infamously the only woman involved in a staunchly masculine movement. The insular movement resulted in infusing 'Nashville's country music scene with rock's overtly masculine rhetoric of creativity, self-sufficiency and anti-authoritarianism by bringing to country music what Motti Regev has described as the "rock aesthetic" (Stimeling, p. 345), with the crucial focus of this aesthetic being on 'spontaneous techniques of vocal delivery' (Regev, p. 253). Gretchen Wilson demonstrates these spontaneous rising intonations on the names 'Charlie Daniels' and 'Tanya Tucker' in 'Redneck Woman', which act a strong point of emphasis, especially the reference to Tanya Tucker. It is important to note the self-sufficiency of Wilson's debut album, as a breakaway from a support group like society of country artists in Nashville. Much like the Outlaw breakaway artists, it focuses on the upbringing and experiences from her town of Pocahontas, where she was 'thought of [me] as one of the boys' and lived tough, tending a bar at 15, surrounded by the classic redneck and hillbilly trope. For example, Loretta Lynn in 'The Pill' disrupts the classic homemaker role of the country woman:

'But all I've seen of this old world
Is a bed and a doctor bill
I'm tearin' down your brooder house
'Cause now I've got the pill' (Lynn)

Consequently, Wilson demonstrates a punchy assertiveness in taking control of her own image of a redneck. She certainly leans away from country music's traditional family values:

> (...) where men are men who appear to spend most of their time drinking and catting around and women have babies,take care of the house, accept the double standard, and, in the words of Tammy Wynette,“stand by your man.” Despite this historical sexist orientation (or not so historical if one listens to Bro Country), country music has always had strong women as either performers(e.g., Mother Maybelle Carter) or as the driving force behind male singers. (Meier, p. 95)

This is precisely where the relationship of the Outlaw genre and identity politics intersects, as the rise of populism and right wing associated patriotism adopts certain styles of country music, and proceeds to anthemise them, due to the shared experiences of voters and artists alike; ‘a tendency of identifying the “nation” and the “people” with the audience for country music’ (Mellard, p. 461) It is far too derivative to relegate country music’s politics as staunchly right wing or left wing, as what country music does best, is to appeal to the emotional populist reaction to events, and separate them into factions. In a two party system in the US, perhaps ironically, both parties will engage with the country music scene to gain support, which enforces the intersectionality of the genre. At the crux of the utilisation of country music, is the distinction between right and wrong, and the relative simplicity of expression in lyricism. ‘Here For The Party’ and ‘Pocahontas Proud’ have an identity-affirming tone for the rural communities of the south, and the genre as a rule ‘follows [country’s] fascination with hearth and home, its concern with displacement and betrayal’ (Mellard, p. 464). The identity is inseparable from home: ‘I'm the biggest thing that ever came from my hometown / And I'll be damned if I'm gonna let 'em down / If it's the last thing I do before they lay me in the ground / You know I'm gonna make Pocahontas proud’. Home does not just mean a place for Gretchen Wilson. In ‘When I Think About Cheatin`’, she states the following: ‘When I think about cheatin’ / I just think about you

leavin' / And how my world would fall to pieces / If I tossed your love away'. As much as she does not subscribe to the traditional country stereotype of a homebound woman, she is devoted to her man as much as she is devoted to her home, as they're intertwined. The theme persists throughout the whole album, as she is 'Holding you holds me together' in 'Holdin' You', even if her world starts falling apart. Naturally, the personal appeal of such lyrics resonates with the populist ideals of politicians. Country music is never homogeneous or monolithic, but it can be manipulated and moulded to suit an agenda; the spirit of the genre is seldom disingenuous, which is precisely the uniting quality that cultivates appeal. Mellard mentions Senator Ted Cruz's response to the 9/11 attacks, and provides the following quote:

> 'My music taste changed on 9/11. I actually intellectually find this very curious, but on 9/11, I didn't like how rock music responded, and country music collectively, the way they responded, it resonated with me, and I have to say just at a gut level, I had an emotional reaction that said these are my people. So ever since 2001, I listen to country music. But I'm an odd country music fan, because I didn't listen to it prior to 2001.' (Grow)

Whilst country music does evoke emotional reactions on a popular scale, the Senator's choice of words is curious and odd, as if to drive divisions amongst the demographics of each genre. Perhaps this is less curious once analysed in the context of Senator Cruz and his presidential bids. One suspects that 'Here For The Party' may have appealed to Senator Cruz, despite the anti-establishment rock influence. Once again, the album is a stark reminder of the intersectionality of the genre. It is in constant conflict with itself, and is open to interpretation, but never explicitly names an enemy; 'Modern country work songs do not dwell exclusively on nostalgia or pride; they sometimes bristle with anger and class consciousness. They express resentment, not radicalism. Although problems abound, the "enemy" remains ill-defined.'

(Malone, p. 48). The enemy is only defined by opposition to what country music represents, which Hubbs surmises;

> ‘Country music traffics in thematic, linguistic, and musical conventions that connect to identities characteristically working class (although Americans rarely self-identify as such) as well as rural; souther, southwestern, and Midwestern; white; Christian; and heterosexual. Country trains an intent focus on these social identities and is arguably the most widely circulating discours on white working-class - not to mention southern and provincial - life and identity in American culture.’ (Hubbs, p. 53)

Hubbs’ assertions about the demographics for country music ring particularly true in the current climate in America. The Republican Party and its fervent support amongst the white, Christian, rural populace tie in strongly with the sentiments expressed by artists such as Wilson. The people are fiercely proud, but lean towards tendencies which are insular and ignorant, which is in direct contrast to the roots of country music. The bastardisation of country music remains a pertinent issue as a result.

Being released in 2004, it would be remiss to exclude the impact music videos for the album had on the visualisation and perpetration of the image Wilson cultivated. ‘Redneck Woman’ shows Wilson mudding around on a quad bike, singing to a crowd of adoring peers, drinking beers, and undressing to reveal sexy Walmart underwear. ‘Here For The Party’ shows Wilson performing live, with intermittent backstage shots, and adoring crowds of redneck women. Wilson is seen performing in a music hall, with a red barn backdrop in ‘When I Think About Cheatin’, with ghosts and visions of country artists of yesteryear in her vision. If the music videos helped to establish the persona, Gretchen Wilson’s actions that followed affirmed it;

> ‘The elaboration of Wilson as Redneck Woman continued with the 2007 release of an autobiographical book titled *Redneck Woman; Stories from My Life.* In early 2010 Columbia Nashvillen issued *Gretchen Wilson: Greatest Hits* with a rusting, battered mobile home pictured on the cover. And two months later Wilson announced her fourth studio album, *I Got Your Country Right Here,* as the first release of her own label, Redneck Records.’ (Hubbs, p. 56)

The question of the authenticity of such an image is what Peterson discusses in ‘Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity’, and argues that the image best accepted in a certain time period hinges on the demand of the populace;

> ‘As is the case in other aspects of commercial popular culture, creative people propose ideas (be they for recorded music, movies, videos, magazines, or computer games), the industry adapts them in the process of putting a product on the market, and the public chooses some while rejecting others.’ (Peterson, p. 6)

Naturally, the rejected supply has no appeal to the production studios which crave whatever the most commercially successful will be. Following 30 years of a redneck psyche resurgence, Gretchen Wilson was an immediate bastion of success, and championed as the darling of the genre as a result.

The transformative nature of Gretchen Wilson’s ‘Here For The Party’ is multi-faceted, and has resonance into the current decade. The culmination of a commercially successful redneck artist reflects the wave of populism in the years preceding the release of the album.

The Outlaw artists of the 1970s deviated from the soft country norm, and Wilson embraced their trail-blazing to strengthen the hard country community that was desperate to express oneself; ‘the narrator attests that she *chooses* her working-class, redneck affiliations with hard country and rock artists, beer over champagne, discount intimates, and declasse front-yard spectacles.’ (Hubbs, p. 66) Wilson’s agency is the driving factor behind her appeal. She is unashamedly herself, authentic, and expresses her love of the redneck demographic in every song and emotion, like she does in ‘When It Rains’:

> ‘When it rains I pour a couple more rounds
> 'Til the hurtin' and the heartache start to drown
> I turn out the light, I turn up Dwight
> And I lock my door when it rains
> When it rains I pour’

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