

**Wrong's What I do Best:
Hard Country Music and
Contemporary Culture**

Barbara Ching

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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*Hard country music
and contemporary culture*

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Introduction

Learning the hard way

This book is about hard country music for two reasons.

First, it's impossible to really understand country music, now one of the most popular forms of music in the United States, without recognizing that its "country" is a disputed territory where a mainstream-oriented pop production style reigns over a feisty and less fashionable form—"hard country." Second, hearing hard country music offers an important perspective on the bewildering cultural situation, often called postmodernism, in which we find ourselves. Conversely, once we recognize the postmodern rhetoric of cultural distinction embedded in contemporary hard country, we can hear the music as something more significant than a stylistic variant of a harmless breed of popular music. Although cultural critics like Susan Sontag may well assert that contemporary culture has done away with the traditional distinction between high and low culture,¹ you don't find them writing an appreciative essay on George Jones. Country music—let alone hard country music—has not figured in any of the now canonical discussions of postmodernity. The difficulty of imagining it may suggest just how remote country music is from intellectual discourse, and thus how overlooked it is in contemporary cultural politics.

"The strength of country music is its lyrics," says hard country star Waylon Jennings. "Your melody goes where the words take you."² The voices of the hard country stars also underscore the importance of the words although they

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scarcely have voices in the classical terms of musical accomplishment. Always expressive, often beautiful, but almost invariably untrained, they are the kind of voices that would have made music in many homes before the invention of the phonograph: intimate, personal, raised to convey the words of the song rather than to display vocal prowess. According to Peter Guralnick, Ernest Tubb “has often insisted that part of the basis for his popularity is the very modesty of his talent, encouraging the guy in the tavern who hears an Ernest Tubb record to say, ‘Heck, I can sing as good as that.’”³ The listeners’ point of hearing, too, focuses most intently on the words. *Country Song Roundup*, the longest-running fan magazine, has filled the bulk of its pages since 1949 with song lyrics. Thus, learning the hard way requires going where the words take you.

I am neither an ethnomusicologist nor a musicologist. My training is in literary criticism and cultural theory, a discipline that seems particularly useful for discussing this genre of music that relies so heavily on the creation of remarkable characters and lyrics. Moreover, I was a fan of hard country long before I acquired the ability to analyze it in the language of academic discourse. Now that I know both languages, I know that both can be richer and more useful when they exchange words. This is not to say that I’ve ignored the music; hard country’s sounds and techniques contribute to its meaning, as does its history. As popular music specialist Simon Frith puts it, “song words are only remembered in their melodic and rhythmic setting.”⁴ This book thus interprets hard country music by analyzing its setting, by comparing it to mainstream country music, and by placing it in a sociocultural context. I look at the stars, their songs, and their performance styles as texts. I describe the characters that hard country portrays and describe how its lyrics and characteristic sounds convey complex meanings (as opposed to clichés, commonplaces, and unvarnished “reality”). I consider how these texts address each other as well as an audience, thereby recognizing hard country music as a signifying practice that invites humanistic interpretation even as it takes place in specific historical and cultural contexts. So much writing about country music insists that it presents the life of ordinary yet exotic people: not us. At the other extreme lies a bland insistence that the music represents us all. While neither of these perspectives is completely wrong, hearing hard country isn’t that easy. We can learn more, hear more, and enjoy more by listening to it otherwise.

Scholars who have broached the subject of hard country have occasionally been willing to approach it as art.⁵ My focus is on the kind of art it is: self-consciously low, and self-consciously hard, a deliberate display of burlesque abjection. As Porter Wagoner put it, “I don’t try to do anything for the uptown people.”⁶ He doesn’t expect us (readers of university press books) to be recep-

tive to his message, which is why learning the hard way requires us to listen for complexity wherever we think we hear simplicity. To keep that paradox in the forefront, I've tried to write in an essayistic style that juxtaposes academia's theoretical vision with the flamboyantly colloquial language favored by my subject(s). In other words, I've tried to talk about the music as both a scholar and a fan. But my words can't completely substitute for those of the musicians, so I urge you to listen to them sing. While some of the performances I cite are obscure, most public libraries will have a reasonable collection of records by the stars I refer to most often. Unless an endnote indicates otherwise, you can assume that the star who sang the song under discussion also wrote it. The dates listed are the first release dates of the recorded version of the song. In most cases, the date of composition is unknown, and in some cases, the copyright holder is unknown.⁷

When Richard Nixon made a presidential appearance on the *Grand Ole Opry* in 1974, he praised country music for representing "the heart of America. It talks about family. It talks about religion . . . Country music makes America a better country."⁸ Likewise, in his retirement, George Bush wrote an essay for *Forbes* explaining his love for country music by comparing it to "a Norman Rockwell painting. It captures the essence of the American spirit and portrays experiences that those who work hard and play by the rules can identify with."⁹ While they seem blithely unaware of a rift between country music styles, the former presidents are talking about the heart-warming qualities of mainstream country. Hard country, although it may be patriotic on occasion, unfolds in another country altogether. While sociologist Richard Peterson has recently summarized the stylistic differences between what he calls "hard-core and soft-shell" expressions, the message of "hard country" still remains uncharted territory. Nevertheless, Peterson's list of traits provides a valuable starting point. In contrast to mainstream singers' unremarkable accents, standard American English, and smooth singing style, hard-core stars tend to sing in nasalized, nonstandard English with strong "southern" or "southwestern" accents. While mainstream stars often sing about widely shared emotions and experiences, hard country stars seem to be "telling personal experiences," usually unhappy ones.¹⁰

What's most important about these differences is that they create *meaning*, especially once "hard country" became conscious of itself as something more than a set of stylistic traits. By the mid to late '60s, artists and other agents of the country music industry could adapt and adopt the rough edges that characterize the "hard core" in order to articulate hard country's special themes. Likewise, they could retroactively characterize artists from the recent past, such as Hank Williams, as hard country. In this light, it is entirely possible for

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a country artist to use hard-core traits without being “hard country.” Much of the cast of the *Grand Ole Opry*, for example, might qualify as hard core by Peterson’s standards even though they belong to the symbolic heart of Nashville’s music business establishment. Hard country, on the other hand, is not the kind of country music that beams forth from the *Opry* every Saturday night. It does not grace mainstream magazine covers and doesn’t fill the newer dance halls. Recently, it is heard *only* on small or remote radio stations and in marginal honky-tonks specifically devoted to it. Nevertheless, it rarely sings about life in the country, and it can’t be isolated by a label like “Honky-Tonk Music.” Its scope is far wider than barnyards and bars. It sings about the pains and pleasures of losing the American dream in a style that demands both devotion and alienation from its audience and dares the rest of the world to be disgusted. It complains in a punning, wailing, whining, twanging, thumping, grandiosely emotive style. Like hard luck, hard work, hard feelings, hard knocks, and hard times, the emotions that hard country evokes are ambivalent, a blend of anger, regret, sadness, and other dark feelings lightened sometimes by survivor’s pride. Like hard words and hard science, though, hard country also conveys a certain daunting disputatiousness. Like hard rock, hard porn, and hard drugs, hard country seeks its most extreme, objectionable, and definitive form. Yet definitive does not imply unchanging; rather, because of its constitutive need to oppose the soft and easy, hard country is a position rather than a well-defined entity.

As the presidential commentaries indicate, mainstream country music is readily associated with this country’s most obvious attempts to keep up appearances. While mainstream country does occasionally articulate controversial themes, more often it can be heard as a toe-tapping form of assent to the status quo. In contrast, hard country assents more begrudgingly than benignly. It certainly expresses interest in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness although it more often focuses on the opposite in order to amplify the resentment and resilience of those whose pursuit has been arduous. Paradoxically, this emotion-laden skepticism draws further power from the fact that while our culture seems to be undergoing rapid change, little has changed in its approach to hard country. This is not to say that hard country hasn’t changed. Now almost entirely represented by a handful of aging white men, hard country sounds increasingly embattled. Its interactions with both mainstream country music and mainstream culture outside of country music remain at worst adversarial and at best invisible. This attitude dovetails with an approach to country music that is almost as common as the all-American praise cited above: condescending scorn or blithe disregard. In fact, hostile relations with mainstream culture are now essential to hard country music. Chapter 1 intro-

duces this tendency by illustrating the way country songs often take country music or “countriness” as their theme and by contrasting several hard country approaches to this theme with mainstream country songs. This introductory chapter thus looks at how hard country talks about itself—in songs and other aspects of performance—as well as how hard country gets talked about or ignored. This chapter also explores the origins of the term “hard country” in order to explore its adversarial history.

Chapters 2–4 concentrate on the music and the musicians. In order to emphasize hard country’s adversarial function both within country music and outside it, I have eschewed a strictly chronological or encyclopedic organization in favor of an exploration of key issues and stars. Through an analysis of the comically abject and unsavory characters created by George Jones, Merle Haggard, and David Allan Coe, chapter 2 explains why hard country now functions as an all-male no-man’s-land. In chapters 3 and 4, I focus on the way hard country music consciously carries on musical traditions and cultural disputes as well as on its deliberate attempts to innovate in the face of its rustic reputation. Chapter 3 explores the legacy of Hank Williams Sr. While Williams’s predecessors such as Ernest Tubb used the hard-core techniques outlined by Peterson, Williams drew the eyes of an unfriendly outside world into the music, hardening it in all the pejorative and self-conscious senses of the word. His son, Hank Williams Jr., needed to hoe an even harder row to consider himself a legitimate heir, and thus his struggle provides particular insight into the metaphorical range of hard country. Chapter 4 is about the Bakersfield sound, important for its freedom from Nashville’s profit-maximizing, mainstreaming pressures. In particular, I focus on the exploratory missions undertaken by Buck Owens and Dwight Yoakam as they survey hard country’s boundary lines. In the conclusion, I speculate about hard country’s future by briefly exploring still more self-conscious creations of legacies and rebellions: the Outlaw movement of the 1970s and an ever-lengthening chain of George Jones followers.