You Ain’t Woman Enough: Country Music and the Women’s Liberation Movement

by

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Country music is perceived and presented as an intrinsically conservative genre, built around the cultural paradigms that defined mid-20th Century American conservatism. Often centred around ideals of domesticity, labour and religion, the genre has found a geographic hub within America’s largely conservative Southern states. The logical assumption to follow this would be to assume that the women of country music follow a similar conservative political path. However, when compared to the Women’s Liberation Movement, a largely leftist political movement, we can see that ultimately this is not true. Though the women’s liberation movement was centred around the urban Northeast, when observing the lyrics, interviews and public perceptions of prominent women in country music we can see considerable similarities between their actions and the motivations of the movement. By observing the work of Kitty Wells, we can see an often-contradictory understanding of the role of the housewife, as she appears prominently as a pioneer within the genre and her family’s primary breadwinner. Tammy Wynette’s music, though thematically very different, features considerable similarities to the form of activism known as consciousness raising, and Loretta Lynn consistently presents lyrics and themes that subvert what is expected of her as a Southern woman. Ultimately, an observation of these women’s careers shows us two things; firstly, their success points to a Southern market in which the ideals of the women’s liberation movement are valued. Secondly, their collective works are indicative of a less conventional approach to Southern conservatism; one which is able to reconcile feminist ideals into a historically conservative context.
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Introduction

You Ain’t Woman Enough: Country Music and the Women’s Liberation Movement.

In 1992 First Lady hopeful Hillary Clinton appeared on 60 Minutes in an attempt to defend her husband against allegations of infidelity. Clinton declared her love for her husband, clarifying to the American public that she was not simply doing this because it was expected of her as a woman. “I’m not sitting here, some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette,” she proclaimed.¹ Throughout her career, Clinton has proven to be a deliberate orator, and this was no exception; especially not on a heated campaign trail that sought to unseat an incumbent president. Clinton was attempting to express her own autonomy, but to do so, she was forced to juxtapose herself against another prominent white woman in American popular history: Tammy Wynette. In Clinton’s interview Wynette occupies a specific space; she is the embodiment of a woman without autonomy, existing in a world dominated by men.

Clinton is tapping into a historic perception of Wynette and, more broadly, the women of country music. Wynette’s musical peak roughly corresponded with the growth and apex of the women’s liberation movement, though her lyrical content was often understood in direct conflict with the ethos of emergent feminism. This was an open feud of sorts, with both parties disparaging each other openly.² This clearly acted as an inspiration for Clinton’s


Clinton was attempting to convey something relatable to the American people; suggesting that this perception – of the Southern Woman shackled to her man – was widespread. If the Country Music Woman was understood as powerless, then Tammy Wynette was their spokeswoman. It is this notion that Clinton presumed in her speech. And its success as a statement – still one of her most famous – would suggest that it tapped into a conception of women in country music that was immediately recognisable to the American public.

What is ultimately presented here, however, is a major misconception of women in country music, specifically that from the period between the end of the Second World War and the mid-1970s. This thesis aims to challenge this simplistic notion of women in country, whilst providing evidence for a stronger connection between country music and the women’s liberation movement. To do so, it will be divided into three chapters, sorted both by artist and theme. The first of these will look at the works of Kitty Wells in the post-war era. Wells was a poster-child for female domesticity in the wake of the Second World War, a concept that came into conflict with her real-life status as a genuine country music superstar. This chapter will attempt to do two things; firstly, to analyse Wells’ lyrics, statements and the contemporary media reaction to her, to illuminate country music as a reflective genre; one which absorbs the interests and perspectives of its target audience. This will not only prove useful in justifying the arguments made in later chapters, but will also be used to understand Wells’ own political and social standings. Secondly, it will attempt to present the women of this era as holding a complex stake in their political world that cannot simply be defined in terms of traditional notions of Southern
conservatism or domesticity, nor the women’s liberation movement ideals that would gain prominence through Wells’ later career.

The second chapter will focus on Tammy Wynette, the most prominent of these artists to openly clash with the women’s liberation movement in a conflict born of her perceived upholding of gendered domestic values. This chapter will not only provide a deeper analysis of Wynette’s lyrics and statements than has previously been provided by scholars, but also draw a connection between Wynette’s work and the form of activism known as consciousness raising. Consciousness raising centred on the idea that “the personal is political,” and used the recounting of personal stories to form a shared consciousness amongst women.3 Wynette’s music acts in a similar way, opening a dialogue that attempts to connect to women on a personal level; providing a notion of common ground through her lyrics. Though the content of Wynette’s music was a far cry from the values espoused in consciousness raising, she nonetheless used similar tactics to present these messages. At the same time, Wynette was careful not to betray the conservative roots that she remains associated with.

The third chapter will discuss Loretta Lynn: her complicated relationship with conservative political viewpoints, and her open and frank discussions of women’s rights. Lynn has long been a controversial figure within country music, often attracting negative attention for her focus on women’s issues such as birth control, and the double standards of gender roles and behaviours.4 Like

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Wynette, Lynn openly disparaged the women’s liberation movement, yet her career complicates this relationship considerably. Though she may not have actively proclaimed herself as part of the movement, there are considerable similarities between her political proclamations and the intentions of second wave feminists. Most notably, there is a consistent trend of subverting the expectations of women. Just as the women’s liberation movement attempted to shift the perception of how women should act, so too did Loretta Lynn. The major difference between these two was that Lynn’s activism was largely confined to a Southern conservative context; like Wynette, she achieved this subversion without betraying her cultural roots.

Though this thesis concentrates on three prominent women in country music, it is as much about the concept of womanhood in the South as it is these particular artists. In many ways, these singers, their discographies and public personas are simply an extension of the political realities of Southern women. Coming into contrast with a political movement that centred itself amongst big cities, and was dominated by middle and upper class women, these artists will be used to explore how key concepts of the women’s liberation movement were translated into a Southern, working class setting.

Though literature on country music exists, it is hardly an expansive academic area. One of the key issues with this is that many of the texts available rarely cross over into discussions of womanhood – and when they do, it is often only a fleeting analysis. Oermann and Bufwack provide one of the most

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5 Lynn and Vecsey, *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, p. 80.
extensive looks at women in country music, covering the genre’s development and history. Dedicating specific subchapters to the contributions of Kitty Wells, Tammy Wynette and Loretta Lynn, this book would appear an ideal text for supportive analysis. Indeed, there is a considerable amount of useful information throughout these chapters: Wells’ housewife role is discussed, as is Lynn’s working class attitude and Wynette’s “traditional values,” all of which are essential to understanding this analysis. What is lacking, however, is a comparative analysis that places these women in conversation with wider political developments, such as women’s liberation. Oermann and Bufwack do an admirable job contextualising these women, placing them within the larger narrative of country music, but don’t engage with them outside of this musical lineage. Their Loretta Lynn chapter, for example, touches on the connection between these artists and women’s liberation, arguing that “none of them would ever call themselves ‘feminist,’ but all of them reflected working-class women in song.” This may seem like a potential useful introduction to Lynn’s connection to the feminist movement; but ultimately it proves to simply be a line in summation of Lynn’s connection to the people.

This is not to imply, however, that there is no useful literature on country music. Instead, there is simply too large a gap for it to be considered anywhere near complete. One of the more notable entries in the literature is Bill Malone’s *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin*. Malone tracks the relationship between country

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music and a sense of working class pride, arguing that the two are inherently interwoven. The working-class mentality is a key aspect of traditional country music to Malone, yet his argument is more one of identity. He is dismayed by country music’s departure from its working-class roots, and of its entry into a middle-class identity. For Malone, this transition debases country music’s authenticity. Malone’s perspective is useful in providing a background to country music’s working class identity – which in turn illuminates contemporary conservatism. However, it offers very little insight into the careers of the women who form the central component of this thesis. This is one of the major pitfalls within the literature of country music; when it focuses on social issues and their influence on the genre, it often leaves out the contributions of women, or fails to discuss their influence more broadly. When, on the other hand, it does concentrate on women and their contributions, it is often a narrow analysis, with not enough insight given to external political forces.

Because of this, a more succinct analysis is needed. This thesis aims to fill a gap in the literature, which connects the women of country music to the women’s liberation movement in a meaningful way. That is not to say that the literature on country music will not prove useful throughout, but because of its gaps, much of the evidence for this argument will be found in primary evidence – namely, song lyrics, interviews, and contemporary media responses to these artists. Further, given how closely this topic intersects with two major political movements – the silent majority and the rise of conservatism, as well as the

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women’s liberation movement – literature on the social and political context will be prevalent throughout. For the silent majority, the focus will be on the rise of conservative religious morality and populism in the south, which was contemporaneous with the careers of Wells, Wynette and Lynn. Meanwhile, because of the importance of understanding the perspectives of women throughout this era, women’s liberation texts will also be primary based; built around the actual opinions expressed by political activists.

For the silent majority, Cowie’s *Staying Alive* is particularly useful.\(^\text{11}\) Cowie connects the rise of conservatism specifically to working class discontent. Establishing his narrative specifically in the political moments of the 1960s and 1970s, his book corresponds succinctly with the peaks of Loretta Lynn and Tammy Wynette’s respective careers. Cowie’s analysis is strong, and broad. He focuses on a variety of aspects that fed into the growth of the Silent Majority, including working class discontent, Democratic Party failures, and religious morality. He understands that this is a nuanced subject, which is particularly important in the discussion of these women, as this is an argument built around the idea that these women have a more nuanced political alignment than is usually afforded to them. The main issue with using his analysis is that, though he does speak of the political developments in the South and the populist movement that proved popular amongst working class Southerners, his is ultimately a broad analysis that assesses the political ramifications on a national

This lack of geographic specificity complicates our ability to transpose Cowie’s argument onto the careers of Wells, Wynette and Lynn.

Much of the literature on country music paints an image of the genre that erases its female participants. In analyses of what country music is, or should look like – or its relationship with wider American society – female artists are excluded; treated as outliers to the country mainstream, regardless of their success. Take, for example, Barbara Ching’s *Wrong’s What I Do Best*, a book about “hard country” and its relationship to the rest of the genre. Her take on country does provide some useful insights; it demonstrates the genre’s propensity towards relaying personal stories, and encourages an understanding of the genre as having some separation from the American mainstream, but its reception of women in the genre leaves much to be desired. Lynn, Wynette and Wells are treated as footnotes in her discussion. Admittedly, Ching’s aim is to speak to a specific subset of country music, to which these women do not necessarily fit, so her lack of analysis is understandable. Yet this in and of itself is a key part of the problem; analysis of country music is either too specific or too broad to give any kind of consistent analytical base.

Pecknold and McCusker’s *Country Boys and Redneck Women* does provide some insight into Lynn’s career. This, however, consists of a collection of essays rather than a specific and consistent piece of literature and as such is

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limited in its insight. Only one of the essays in the anthology concentrates on Lynn specifically, despite its attempt to open a dialogue on her relationship to her gender. Heidemann’s Lynn chapter places her within a wider social frame in which the expectations of contemporary women are clarified. Ultimately, Heidemann determines that Lynn’s work is foundationally working class in theme and context. She aims to demonstrate the range of working class and gender identity by comparing Lynn to her contemporary Dolly Parton. She does this with a close textual analysis of two thematically similar songs: “Jolene” by Parton and “Fist City” by Lynn. There is a considerable amount of worthwhile analysis here, but her focus on these two songs limits the scope of her analysis.

There is a recurring theme within the literature on country music of authenticity. There appears to be an anxiety both within the genre and amongst those who study it that concerns itself with whether or not what is being sung about is “real.” This most consistently manifests within the relationship between working-class pride, themes and values, and the artists who espoused them through song. There is a consistent message that the proliferation of a “top 40” style country music disconnects the genre from its roots. This recurring thesis is present in Malone, Ching and Jensen, and makes up a core base of the literature. This is undoubtedly an important discussion for country music; a genre built on the idea of telling authentic and relatable stories. These

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17 Heidemann, ‘Remarkable Women and Ordinary Gals’.

discussions will thus prove useful when discussing the concept of relatability and the importance of the working class in country music.

When discussing the women’s liberation movement, this thesis will concentrate primarily on contemporary political texts and releases. *The Feminine Mystique*, though a work of liberal feminism predating the peak of the women’s liberation movement, presents a contemporary understanding of the role of the housewife, and where that role fits into wider American understandings of womanhood. As such, this is an essential text; especially given it was published at the height of Kitty Wells’ career, a figure who famously embraced the stereotypes of contemporary housewives. Whilst this text is useful for providing a foundational understanding of the issues facing women at the time, it is not expansive enough to be used alone. Instead, it can easily be supplemented by the contemporary writing of the feminists that would gain prominence in the wake of *The Feminine Mystique*.

This is an area best covered by primary sources rather than secondary analysis; what is of concern is what the women of this era were expressing, and how they were expressing it. Thus, the works of feminists such as Carol Hanisch are most useful in their original state, allowing for them to be compared and contrasted with the actions of the contemporary women in country music.

There is only so much that can be gained from the many discussion of authenticity, and the heavy focus on this issue means that not much weight is

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20 Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political’. 
given to other topics of discussion. The reality is that there is a considerable gap in the literature surrounding country music, and this thesis aims to contribute to filling that gap. The three women concentrated on throughout are proportionally underrepresented in literature despite their considerable fame and success, as well as their complex and complicated political motivations. The lack of in-depth analysis in this field means that this thesis will rely heavily on primary material; songs, interviews and contemporary news clippings will be used to supplement the secondary analysis.
Chapter One:

Kitty Wells: The Honky Tonk Angel

Following the end of the Second World War, the position of American women in the public arena changed. As soldiers returned from the front, women who had been encouraged to fill labour shortages during the war were now compelled to return to the domestic sphere, where a post-war baby boom placed further obstacles on their engagement with the workforce. Shortly after, Kitty Wells rose to prominence as one of the first major female country stars of the modern era. Although she was a music superstar, Wells was also a housewife. This identity was incorporated into her musical persona, as emphasized in her songs and public statements. Wells was the prominent public housewife that the nation needed at this moment: a reminder to Southern women of the realities of domestic life in post-war America.

This is certainly how her contemporaries viewed her, and the characterisation has remained; within the Southern consciousness she has long occupied the dual role of “country queen” and successful housewife. A 1992 article on her legacy described Wells as “the pure image of a prominent Southern lady,” which proves an apt means of describing her career. Throughout interviews and media releases, she has always made sure to remind

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the public that, ultimately, her music career was not her first priority. Indeed, throughout her career she framed her success as partly accidental: the result of the right circumstances falling into place at the right time. Starting her popular career as the singer in her husband’s band, Wells’ initial acclaim came not for her musical abilities but rather her positioning as “an outstanding wife and mother, in keeping with the finest traditions of Southern womanhood.”24 This was a descriptor given to her by Frank G. Clement, the then Tennessee governor, who was clearly keen to promote these traits in Tennessee women. The nation needed housewives of prominence, and Wells fit that role to a tee.

It is important to note that this was by no means simply a persona thrust upon her; it was a personality she herself encouraged, even if there was an obvious desire for such a woman to enact this public image. “I never really wanted to get typed as a honky-tonk singer,” she once stayed. “Actually, I never planned on being a big artist to begin with. I’ve always been more home and family oriented.”25 She clearly accepts and even prioritises her role as a housewife, embedding this identity into her public image, even if it is at times veiled in her songs. At one point in her career, for instance, she released a cookbook of Southern cuisine curated during her time on the road. Her musical career was presented as an extension of her home-life; “besides singing, there’s nothing I’d rather do than cook,” she commented in the introduction.26 Though here she appears to be prioritising her singing career over her family, she


26 Wells, *Country Music Cook Book*. 
ensures that the two cannot be separated. They are inherently connected, and to
discuss her music without acknowledging her housewife persona would be to
misrepresent her.

Wells’ duty as a housewife clearly extended beyond her own household; it
was expected of her even when acting as the primary breadwinner for her
family, travelling the nation on tour. Her recipe books are simply a physical
manifestation of this ideal of family togetherness, which she described as a
“warm fellowship” grounded in the duties of the typical housewife. This is an
indicator not only of her role as a social figure for whom motherhood and family
values were a high priority, but also of a society that sought to promote these
standards of womanhood. This chapter will argue that the stories, songs and
figures of country music are ultimately reflective of the social values of their
audience, providing a foundation for the chapters to follow. It will argue that the
success of these artists hinged on their ability to connect to a Southern public
who, unlike the folk revivalists in New York for instance, had been conditioned
to hearing songs that corresponded with their own lives: a collective experience
that Tichi describes as a “channel of grief and mourning.”

Heartbreak, loneliness, religion and poverty are common themes because they were at this
moment important social aspects of Southern life, and Wells’ work ultimately

27 Kitty Wells, Country Kitchen Cook Book, vol. 1, in The University of North Carolina at Chapel
Hill Southern Folklife Collection: Box 23, folder NF-2162.

28 Cecelia Tichi, High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music, (Chapel Hill:
shows us that the need for a traditional family is prioritised as a bulwark against the concerns of the era.29

Having painted Wells as a housewife first and foremost, it is important to note that she is a far more complex figure than this alone. Though she may have publicly dedicated her social life to a traditional understanding of womanhood, she is an incredibly important artist in the development of independent women in country music. She is one of the earliest proclaimed “Queens of Country Music,” and for good reason. While there had been a plethora of female country music artists through the 1940s and 50s, some of whom achieved moderate success, contemporary media reports look to her as the forerunner; a consistent headliner, she was one of the first to achieve consistent success while singing from a female perspective.30 Her nearly 30 top ten country hits in the U.S. placed her as one of the earliest measured successes of the Billboard Era, providing a template for generations of female country musicians to follow.31 Loretta Lynn, for example, saw Wells as a major inspiration for her career, not only at the musical level, but also as a measuring stick for what women could achieve in the genre. Lynn stated in regards to Wells that, in hearing her music she “knew there was a lot of women who lived like me.”32 Her career is thus far


30 The Carter family, for example, must be included in any conversation about the history of country music. For details on Well’s rise to fame see Geoff Lane, ‘The Queen of Country Music,’ Country Music, (December 1974), p. 41. in The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Southern Folklife Collection: Box 23, folder NF-2158.


more important than simply that of a travelling housewife or an indicator of the socially conservative values of the time and setting. Indeed, there is an interesting contradiction here. Wells’ was an idealised symbol for how a woman in a nuclear family should act, consistently proclaiming that her ultimate priority was to support her family. This is a role that was intended to exist within the private sphere, yet Wells enacted it publicly.

We need look no further than her first hit single to see that her musical output reflected these complexities. “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” remains one of her most recognised songs and, though not written by her, became something of an anthem for her.33 The song itself was a response to an earlier hit by Hank Thompson, “The Wild Side of Life,” which placed blame on a woman for faithlessness and immorality.34 In the song, Thompson scorns his former partner, attacking her desire to go out in the evenings and be independent. Thompson describes the “gay night life” as having “lured” his lover away, removing her autonomy and making clear that her socialising in public is to blame for their separation; he is absolved of guilt because he is the one who has been left, and his former partner is painted as cruel and sadistic in her treatment of him.35

Songwriter J.D. Miller took issue with the song, penning a reply that was passed on to Wells, who returned from a brief musical hiatus to record the

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track. The lyrics flip Thompson’s script, as it is Wells who is recalling “when [she] was a trusting wife.” The last two lines of the chorus sum up the response succinctly; “There’s many times married men think they’re single, that has caused many a good girl to go wrong.” There is a clear attack on what Wells and Miller view as a double standard for women in relationships; their freedom is viewed as treacherous and an act of betrayal, even when it is enacted in retaliation to the actions of men. It is important to note that while such double standards would remain prominent in her songs over the following decades, Wells still accepts her role as a housewife in the song. She is not disputing her position in society, nor is she arguing for a new understanding of how women should be represented: she is simply drawing attention to the gender expectations while at the same time idealising a relationship of trust. When she declares: “it’s a shame all the blame is on us women,” she is protesting how women are perceived, but shows little interest in changing where they are positioned.

Well’s musical career and personal life are in many ways at odds with one another. She is clearly a devout housewife and believer in traditional roles for women, though she subverts these expectations through her music. In a way, her entire career operates as somewhat of a paradox, and she simultaneously attempts to prove her worth as a prominent figure of domesticity whilst existing in an entirely different sphere: constantly travelling the country on tour while

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37 Wells, “Honky Tonk Angels.”

38 Wells, “Honky Tonk Angels.”

39 Wells, “Honky Tong Angels.”
releasing scores of hit singles. This paradoxical identity makes her one of the most compelling artists of her generation. She wasn’t confined to any easily definable moulds, and her expansive career set the trend for a plethora of female country singers to follow.

What is most important, however, is the way in which these duelling identities reflect social trends of the time. The reality of this era is that it too presented somewhat of a paradox with regards to women’s rights, as the pressures to return to the home sphere became increasingly prominent. Wells is an embodiment of this struggle, and her oeuvre offers not only a window into the political motivations and interactions of Southern women during this time period, but also a framework through which to present country music as a “relatable” genre that adopts the voice and concerns of its social and political environments.

A key to understanding how these musicians acted as reflectors of their wider social conditions involves an analysis of their representation in contemporary media. These were women for whom success was dependent on appearing approachable to their fans. They were expected to be constantly available to their audience, forging a relationship that was personal just as it was commercial. Such was the extent of this dynamic that correspondence

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40 For evidence of these themes, see Kitty Wells, “Family Gathering at Home,” The Kitty Wells Family Gospel Sing, Decca, 1965.
42 In a 1977 interview Lynn assured readers “I’ve got so many fans that I recognize all around the country,” adding “We women have got to stick together.” Quoted in Curtis W. Ellison, Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), p. 183.
with fans was expected; Patsy Cline, for instance, reported personal stories and anecdotes to the president of her fan club. Meanwhile, the physical space of these artists was often violated for the sake of pleasing their listeners; Loretta Lynn went so far as to start wearing a wig to prevent fans from cutting off locks of her hair at meet-and-greets. This brings us back to the idea that these women acted as public housewives – which is to say, the emotional labour associated with the home sphere was charted onto their public lives and personas. What is most important here is that it was not gender politics driving these expectations, but rather a desire to promote a certain openness that was itself inherently gendered. That they put up with noted instances of harassment and made themselves emotionally available for fans is an indicator of their dependence on promoting a specific public persona to maintain this connection.

This makes the media response to these artists all the more important as a conduit for their image of reliability. In the case of Kitty Wells, it was her maternal nature that was emphasised. She was not a deliberate superstar; she stumbled upon success while pursuing a hobby that was secondary to her primary focus of maintaining a typical Southern household and family life. Despite often being presented as a trailblazer for women artists (there was an acknowledgement of other women’s success in the media, though Wells was consistently referred to as the first superstar, the first claimant of the Queen of Country Music title), this was not overstated so as to maintain her image of


45 Christgau, ‘Kitty Wells,’ p. 211.
reliability. Rather than being framed as a deviation from the status quo, her success was accounted for in terms of an ability to speak to “everything that a Southern country woman is and knows.” To her audience, Wells was required to remain grounded, even upon achieving a level of success unprecedented for a woman. It was not acceptable for her to simply exist on this higher plane of music superstardom; her first and foremost priority was to connect to her audience at the personal level.

It is this context that makes the content of her songs all the more important. Though her major hit remains “Honky Tonk Angels,” she was far from an explicitly political singer. Indeed, this is one of her few songs that can be seen as having an overtly political message. Typically her songs were interested in depicting the frank realities of Southern life. Thematic concerns of heartbreak and faith are common, and occasionally interconnected. In terms of political and social engagement, there is little to be garnered from these narratives. They do not lend themselves to textual analysis, and as a result have driven simplistic narratives of her music and career. But when understood within this framework of public connection and relatability, they take on an added complexity, grounded in an inherently emotional language. Take for example her 1958 track “I Can’t Stop Loving You.” The song is only two stanzas long, yet conveys an easily interpreted narrative of loss and heartache.

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47 Lane, ‘The Queen of Country Music,’ p. 43.

48 Wells, “Honky Tonk Angels.”


Though set in the present tense, the song engages solely with the past. Memory is a recurring theme; the singer would rather remain in the past with her lover than exist in the present without him. The song is in this sense stunting; it refuses to move forward. Because of this, it remains fixed, unable to develop, and instead becomes enthralled by a rhetoric of vulnerability. With “lonesome times” and a “broken heart,” the narrator wallows in their sorrow.51

Utilising this rhetoric and stagnant narrative, it is clear that in “I Can’t Stop Loving You” Wells is attempting to appeal to an emotional core. There is literally no space within the song for materialistic concerns, as it instead focuses on presenting a story that speaks to base human emotions and feelings. There is no specificity of gender, place or person: simply a relatable feeling of despair. And while this does not necessarily speak directly to Southern womanhood, it is important in establishing an understanding of Wells’ music as relating to a specific audience. Christgau depicts Wells as having no specific identity, flitting through seemingly contradictory thematic concerns within her music.52 Another way to interpret this, however, is to observe the broad audience to which she allowed herself to appeal. By portraying herself as a thematic blank slate she is able to broaden her connectivity to her target demographics. Such a reading of Wells’ career increases the importance of a song such as “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” and is revealing to the nature of her success.

It is important to note here that this track was not an original Wells composition. Unlike Wynette and Lynn, Wells was not noted for her prowess as

51 Wells, ‘I Can’t Stop Loving You.’
52 Christgau, ‘Kitty Wells.’
a songwriter. She instead had songs written for her, or picked songs from other artists to cover. This example is one of the latter. While this could be read as indicating a level of marginalised autonomy, it also demonstrates the extent to which she was a vessel for broader social attitudes and concerns. The songs of Wynette and Lynn, especially when written by themselves, frequently address controversy and conflict, whether within their Southern milieu (“The Pill”), or the country more broadly (“Stand By Your Man”). In having her songs selected for her, Wells rarely had to deal with this issue. She instead was able to specifically curate a discography that reflected the concerns of her audience, ensuring that she was publicly presented in the most relatable manner possible. This is a sentiment reflected by her long-time producer Owen Bradley, who argued that if she “stuck” to the formula of curating a relatable persona she “had a hit” on her hands.

This is apparent in her 1950 track “How Far Is Heaven,” which was written for her by songwriters Jimmie Davis and Tillman Franks. Though it preceded her ascent to superstardom, and was recorded during a period in which she was still performing in her husband’s show, it contains the hallmarks of a relatable country song, based around loss and sorrow while at the same


54 For instance in “Country Girl,” released at the height of her fame, Wells assures her listeners: “If you’ve never been [to Los Angeles] you don’t know how lonesome big towns can be. Oh, what I’d give to be a country girl again, to be with my people, my man, and my kids.” Kitty Wells, “Country Girl,” Singing ‘Em Country, Decca, 1970.


time expanding its concerns to a wider realm of Southern social life. The song blends faith and heartache simultaneously, introducing a narrative that presents these themes as twin pillars within Wells’ career.57 This is a familiar setting for country music, centred on a broken family with a single mother trying to support her children through adversity. Unlike Wynette’s better-known 1968 hit “D-I-V-O-R-C-E,” however, this is a family torn apart by death rather than marital breakdown.58 Wells once again utilises emotional language, presenting the perspective of a mother overhearing her daughter plead to be reunited with her father in heaven. This is a song without emotional reprieve; the only resolution is the characters’ conviction that “we’ll meet him by and by.”59 Faith is presented here as the response to grief.60

Wells’ use of faith here is telling. If we understand her career as being specifically marketed so as to be as relatable as possible, then we can use these thematic concerns to garner much about her contemporary society. We can thus see considerable emphasis placed on a broad understanding of religion and faith, both of which are presented as a generic response to the most fundamental of human emotions as well as an essential part of the Southern experience.61 This, of course, is not a new sentiment. The South has long been


59 Wells, “How Far Is Heaven.”

60 For a slightly different take on divorce, nonetheless wrapped up in these twin themes, see Kitty Wells, “I Hope My Divorce Is Never Granted,” Decca, 1954; Kitty Wells, “Will Your Lawyer Talk to God?,” Decca, 1962.

understood as a stronghold for religious ideologies throughout the nation, but our analysis of popular music forms can tell us more: it is an indicator of how exactly religion was utilised within this setting. Here faith is not specific, but is presented in generic terms. Other than the references to heaven, there is no mention of or reference to institutional religion.

This demonstrates the way in which religion in the South existed within the personal sphere. To Wells and her audience it is an essential component of the human experience. This is not necessarily a point essential to understanding Wells as an artist, or her relationship with her audience, though it is important nonetheless. As we will see in the chapters to follow, the heavy religiosity of the region played a key role in developing the conservative morality present throughout the careers of Loretta Lynn and Tammy Wynette. But in order to understand the songs of these artists and their complex relationship with conservatism, we must first understand how religion existed within country music and, by extension, how it was presented in the popular media of the South.

Having observed through Wells how country music can be perceived as an inherently relatable and reflective genre, we must now use this framework to garner an understanding of the realities of the post-war South; specifically, the way in which Wells’ life exists as a paradox between humble domesticity and considerable socio-economic success. She is undeniably an outlier from the typical Southern woman of this time, even when placed among other


63 This again is typical of Well’s treatment of religion. See for instance Kitty Wells, “Gathering Flowers For the Master’s Bouquet,” Singing on Sunday, Decca, 1962.
contemporary musicians of this era. Most importantly, she was the first female country star who managed to maintain her success over a number of years. This undoubtedly separates her from other female country singers, none of whom would achieve the kind of success enjoyed by Wells until the rise of Patsy Cline and countrypolitan. This makes a comparative analysis between her and typical social conditions particularly difficult. In spite of her relatability, she existed in an entirely different sphere to her typical audience, and her status as primary breadwinner for her family complicates her outward presentation as an idealised housewife.

This is considerably different from the role women in the United States were expected to occupy in the years following the end of the Second World War. With women consistently struggling for labour rights, and expected to occupy the role of housewife under the Cold War nuclear family model, there was limited space for them in the workforce, even less so for the primary breadwinners of families. This is far from the life Wells led, as she provided a level of financial support typically expected of men rather than women. We must thus approach Wells’ life and career with the understanding that she is far from the typical housewife, her fame and fortune separating her considerably from the working-class demographic to whom her music was directed.

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64 As noted before, while there were other female country music stars to be sure, Kitty Wells was the most successful through the early post-war era, remaining popular with a string of hits through the 1970s.


While this framework of country music relatability might typically provide a window into the lives of Southern women, the paradox of Kitty Wells’ life makes this a more complicated undertaking. We could easily observe her public presentation of a housewife and declare that this is reflective of the political desires of the time. Alternatively, we could observe her considerable financial and social success as evidence that women were buying into the idea that they were capable of achieving wealth and fame. The reality is that, though these seem to be contradictory statements, both prove to be true. Wells’ music and career, and its resonance with such a considerable audience, is reflective of an inherent tension within the lives of Southern women at this time. This is not the type of tension that necessarily manifested in political protests or social movements, but is an obvious reality driving Wells’ success.

Taking first her appeal as a housewife, we can observe through her music and public persona a clear desire to present herself in this manner to her audience. This is a key element of public presentation.67 The consistency with which she proclaimed herself a housewife ensures that it departs the realm of personality trait; this is a genuine tool that Wells’ uses, as part of her marketable persona, to appeal to her audience. And this is key to her music, as well. She is emotionally expressive throughout, an element of female country music that Saucier argues as being key to women’s expression within the genre.68 Saucier discusses the key themes of country music as “love, liquor, work and the passing

of the good old ways.”  

But one could also include faith and religion within these categories, as is demonstrated by the high crossover between country music and Southern gospel.  

Saucier understands that these themes are not exclusive to gender, but rather, universal traits of the broader genre. What is telling is the difference in response between male and female artists.

Saucier argues that, thematically speaking, the men of country music respond to their woes and hardships with alcohol. Liquor is a pervasive theme within country music, presented as a solution to other hardships communicated throughout.  

Women, on the other hand, are not afforded the luxury of materialistic relief. They are instead expected to bear the brunt of the emotional trauma caused by the realities of these themes. “The man doesn’t need to be “strong” because the woman will always be there to provide emotional support,” argues Saucier.  

This is a theme that is prominent throughout Wells’ work, and can also be seen within the music of Wynette, and, to a lesser extent, Lynn.

Wells’ “Heartbreak U.S.A.,” a number one hit from 1961, sees many aspects of this theory manifest. The song deals with Wells’ partner travelling abroad, and her concerns that he will be unfaithful. It is obvious that his absence is taking a considerable emotional toll on her; her “aching heart” is placed next to imagery of a “cold and lonely dawn.”  

Meanwhile, his life is

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70 For such crossover see Kitty Wells, *The Kitty Wells Family Gospel Sing*, Decca, 1965.

71 There are many notable examples of this this theme, including Webb Pierce, “There Stands the Glass,” *The Wondering Boy*, Decca 1954.


presented as full of temptations that impact her, rather than him. She pleads with him to ignore the pleasures available to him abroad, pleading “don’t let those geisha girls get your heart into a whirl and if you meet some sweet Fraulein remember you’re mine.”

These other women are temptations to which her only solution is to demonstrate that she will provide emotional support for him, as she pleads for him not to forget her and the life they have created. In this relationship, it is her that is paying the emotional toll for his actions.

It is clear that Wells exists in a sphere in which a key part of her womanhood is inherently tied to this conception of emotional labour. She is expected to provide this both for herself and her man; if labour is a key theme within country music for men, then surely emotional labour is its counterpart within female country music. There is a notable visual within this song; though it exists on a wider scale, the female narrator is confined to her home, while her partner is permitted to travel around the world. This further grounds Wells’ narrative within the home sphere. The song was a resounding success and proved to be one of Wells’ major hits. It is thus safe to say – using Owen Bradley’s own formula for success – that the message and themes of the song resonated with her audience. From this, we can glean an understanding of the importance and prioritisation of these expectations and concerns, especially for Wells’ target audience, which would have largely been Southern working-class women.

74 Wells, “Heartbreak U.S.A.”


76 George, “Honky Tonk Angels.”
This contrasts with Wells’ standing as the first major prominent female country singer. Occupying a role that seemingly conflicts with her personality as a housewife, Wells was the breadwinner for her family and an archetype for a woman who achieved financial success without betraying the Southern sensibilities that framed her public persona. This too was obviously a concept that resonated with fans. Lynn’s aforementioned admiration of Wells’ success is an indicator of this; her repeated reporting of Wells’ success as being ground-breaking for a woman in country music demonstrates that this was an aspect of her career that appealed to her audience. As much as the public felt they needed to see a housewife in a prominent position, there was a hidden impulse towards the promotion of women’s financial success and independence.

This is a notion that would later be expressed and gain prominence in The Feminine Mystique, which was considered a seminal text in the pre-women’s liberation era. Dealing primarily with the disillusionment of life as a housewife, the book explored the perception that women would be unhappy unless they confined themselves to a life at home. Author Betty Friedan ends her first chapter by stating “we can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.’” Friedan speaks of this as a continuous urge for women, especially those expected to be housewives. There is thus an obvious comparison to be made; Wells is a personification of this “voice,” even if she still espouses typical housewife rhetoric.

In this sense Wells offers a physical representation of the complexities of Southern women’s lives at this time. Observing her and her music as a reflection of broader social and political realities, we gain an insight into how the expectations of the housewife clash with the desire for more independence in the post-war era. The conflict of Wells’ life – stuck between her reality as an independent, financially successful woman, and her public presentation as a housewife – provides an insight into how these seemingly opposing notions coexisted for Southern women. Through her music and presentation we are afforded a window into this desire for greater independence – a concept that would gain traction in later women’s liberation texts – and a consistent presentation of traditional expectations for women.

Such an analysis is of course not possible without first understanding how country music can so effectively reflect the desires of its audience. This is evident in Wells’ lyrical content, as well as the perspectives she provides in her interviews and public statements, which actively position her as a relatable figure for Southern women. In this sense, we can understand her music as part of a broader attempt to continue this relationship between artist and audience by providing relatable content to her listeners. This allows for an analysis of her music as reflective of the social and political realities of her life and audience, and is a framework that will be built upon in the chapters to follow.
Chapter Two:

Tammy Wynette: I Don’t Wanna Play House

It is safe to say that in terms of expressing progressive ideologies of women’s autonomy, Tammy Wynette is far less explicit than Loretta Lynn. In fact, Wynette has often been the focal point for criticism by feminist groups, particularly for her chart-topping 1968 hit “Stand By Your Man” and her consistent narratives of female domesticity.79 A Newsweek article on the music of women’s liberation went so far as to characterise her “a salve for the beleaguered housewife who grits her teeth as destiny dumps its slops on her head.”80 This is an entirely one-dimensional view of Wynette. Indeed, her music offers a far more complex understanding of womanhood in the South than one might expect.

The reality of Wynette’s career is that, although she occupies the role of housewife notably, she distorts the archetype presented by artists such as Kitty Wells. Wynette is realistic in her depictions of womanhood, and though her focus remains on domesticity and traditional ideals of femininity, her practical deconstruction of such – commonly framed around divorce and heartbreak – works to undermine them.81 Her songs avoid speaking to an idealised audience, and instead deal with the realities of these concerns. If we view this as an extension of country music relatability, then Wynette is speaking directly to her

79 Tammy Wynette, ‘Stand By Your Man,’ Stand By Your Man, Epic, 1968.


audience about the fractures within these constructions. At a time of rising divorce rates, Wynette speaks directly to an audience through songs that mirror her own life.

The function of this dynamic is remarkably similar to that of consciousness raising within the women’s liberation movement. This will ultimately be the function of this chapter, to present Wynette’s career and musical output as operating in a similar frequency to the forms of communicative activism simultaneously gaining prominence within movement. As with Lynn, Wynette operates in a precarious space between women’s liberation and Southern conservatism. For Wynette this manifests in the considerable similarities between the ways her songs and public persona are presented, and the practicalities of consciousness raising techniques.82 Both function in the same way: presenting a personal narrative to appeal to an audience’s emotions and build unity within it through the recognition of shared experience. Wynette is notable for the way she frames her songs so as to connect directly with her audience. Tichi views her singing style in “D-I-V-O-R-C-E” as utilising the “contrastive sob,” the act of switching one’s vocal style abruptly so as to make it appear that the singer is crying.83 This emotive technique is used by Wynette to convey to her audience the “desperation of a disintegrating family,” thus demonstrating a shared connection at the emotional level.84 As will

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be discussed, this is a sentiment evident throughout Wynette’s musical career, demonstrated both in her songs and wider public persona.

If we start with an analysis of “Stand By Your Man,” perhaps Wynette’s most controversial song, we can do well to undermine the popular perception that Wynette’s songs were concerned with upholding a conservative idea of gender relations.\(^8^5\) The song opens with Wynette acknowledging the uncomfortable position her male partner puts her in; “sometimes it’s hard to be a woman,” she declares, instantly ensuring that the rest of the song is framed in a manner that concerns itself with overcoming this difficulty.\(^8^6\) Wynette is not pretending that concerns surrounding women and their welfare are not important, but instead chooses to look past them and concentrate on supporting her husband. It would be easy to see this as a distinctly anti-feminist message, as she prioritises the issues and concerns of her husband, though a more nuanced analysis would demonstrate that she is simply offering a more complicated presentation of domestic life. Throughout, the woman is presented as somewhat of a protector for her man; she provides him with “arms to cling to, and something warm to come to.”\(^8^7\) This undermines popular perceptions of the song as it is the woman in the narrative who ultimately appears be in control. Wynett acknowledges difficulties of womanhood, while at the same time advocating for a stronger understanding of the difficulties of male life in the South. This is ultimately a more nuanced framework than that offered by many in the women’s liberation movement, who Cobble demonstrates were often

\(^8^5\) Wynette, ‘Stand By Your Man.’

\(^8^6\) Wynette, ‘Stand By Your Man.’

\(^8^7\) Wynette, ‘Stand By Your Man.’
naïve to the realities of labour relations and, by extension, working-class women’s issues.\textsuperscript{88}

The political context is extremely important here. “Stand By Your Man” was released in 1968, a moment at which Richard Nixon was engaged in his second campaign for the presidency. The ascendency of social movements and political liberalism through the 1960s had begun to face a backlash, embodied specifically in what Nixon termed the “Silent Majority”: an informal coalition of conservative voters, dubbed as such due to their perceived lack of voice amid these movements. This was a loose group, made up of working-class voters from the Rust Belt and the South, as well as the suburban Sun Belt.\textsuperscript{89} There is no specific, singular agreed upon reason for the rise of the Silent Majority, but academic literature consistently points to a number of deciding factors. Firstly, the waning of the ‘New Deal’ Democratic power, which had garnered the support of the unions and, by extension the working class, through much of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. There was a sense that the Democratic Party had abandoned its political base in favour of Civil Rights and other left-wing causes, leaving a disgruntled base whose votes conservative politicians – including establishment Republicans like Nixon, and populists like George Wallace – were able to attract.\textsuperscript{90} Among this broad base existed a dissatisfied group of working-class


individuals, to whom the Democrats and their liberal brand of politics no longer held appeal.

This movement was complemented by the rise of religious morality. McGirr and Cowie both point to the increasing influence of conservative morality through the post-war era.\footnote{McGirr, \textit{Suburban Warriors}; Cowie, \textit{Stayin’ Alive}.} For McGirr it was this morality that allowed groups of conservative voters to organise, centred on a desire to push the nation toward a moral future.\footnote{McGirr, \textit{Suburban Warriors}.} Meanwhile, Cowie argues that with the fading of economic-based voting blocs, morality, and specifically religious morality, became an increasingly prominent tool identifier in new political groupings.\footnote{McGirr, \textit{Suburban Warriors}.} Ultimately, for one reason or another, increasingly large groups of working-class voters came to gravitate towards conservative politics. This is certainly a category that Wynette falls into, given she openly proclaimed her support for George Wallace, whose blend of racist and anti-elitist rhetoric found support in its famous catch-cry of “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”\footnote{For broad details see Carter, \textit{The Politics of Rage}.} This populist brand of politics was popular throughout the South, appealing specifically to a Southern working-class demographic.\footnote{Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, \textit{Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music}, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993), p. 238; Carter, \textit{The Politics of Rage}.}

It is this demographic that Wynette is speaking to: a group of disenfranchised poor whites seeking music that they could relate to. Country music is more than just the genre of the white South; it was born of a “crucible
of poverty and pain,” formed and moulded by working-class artists.96 Within this context “Stand By Your Man” gains an additional layer of meaning. Rather than a tale of blind domesticity, it is instead a call for solidarity and support at a time of disenfranchisement. In declaring “and something warm to come to, when nights are cold and lonely,” Wynette shifts the song’s framework toward a context concerned with labour. Although she remains rooted in a traditional realm of domesticity, it is clear that she sees this role as a consequence of working class conditions as much as her gender. She exists in this role because he must work – “after all he’s just a man” – meaning both are restricted by their genders, though it is his need to financially support the family that drives the song’s narrative.97 This is particularly notable given the economic situation throughout the region at the time. Considerable layoffs in mines, a heavy employer throughout the South, had forced those who remained employed to increase their workloads. Placing a major burden on working-class men throughout the region.98 It was this Southern audience that Wynette was addressing, and an acknowledgement of such shifts the meaning of her anthem from one of female domesticity to one of working-class support and solidarity.

It is thus apparent that even when Wynette is covering familiar ground in her music, such as in portraying her own Southern domesticity, there is a need for closer analysis. Wynette’s music differs from Lynn’s in that it does not contain a specific political motivation. Within “Stand By Your Man,” however,


97 Wynette, ‘Stand By Your Man.’

we are granted an understanding of how her content is shaped. The often-tragic themes in her music speak to a specific audience, one severely impacted by the political and social developments of the previous decades. In this case, it is the poor working class of which Wynette is undeniably associated. Jensen remarks that, regardless of her success, she was unable to transcend her social landscape of “trailer parks and runny-nosed kids.”99 This is reinforced in her lyrics. In “Good,” she presents the persona of a “waitress in a barroom no future in sight,” before a relationship is able to draw her to a “good world.”100 Her presentation of the woman as “from the wrong side of town” is telling, as it immediately connects her to a working-class identity.101 Through her music and lyrics, she presents a relatable narrative to her audience, using emotive language to draw connections. Indeed, Wynette takes the relatable nature of country music, as seen in Wells’ discography, to the next level. Though Wells too presented her music in a personal manner reflective of her audience, this interchange typically took place at a purely emotional level; and though she often presented a female perspective, it was done in a way that revolved around typical narratives of romance and heartbreak. Wynette, on the other hand, moves these themes into the political sphere, utilising similar emotive approaches for the purpose of addressing women’s social roles and the hardships of the working-class. This is most obvious in “Good,” in which Wynette’s depiction of the working class is grounded in a sense of helplessness and economic frustration – one that was


101 Wynette, “Good.”
simultaneously finding mobilization through the construct of the Silent Majority.¹⁰²

This relationship was dependent on her ability to offer narratives that related to her audience at both the emotive and political level. We can see this most obviously in Wynette’s shift in lyrical content through the course of her career. Most tracks on her early albums were written from a genderless perspective, describing relationship troubles in an open sense without delving into the specifics of gender.¹⁰³ Songs such as “There Goes My Everything,” “Send Me No Roses” and “Walk Through This World With Me” fill this mould precisely.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, her debut album contains only four songs written explicitly from the perspective of a woman. With the release of I Don’t Want to Play House, however, Wynette’s lyrical content took on a voice that spoke directly to working women.¹⁰⁵ During a period of increasing divorce rates, Wynette speaks to women impacted through songs such as the album’s title-track “I Don’t Want to Play House.”¹⁰⁶ Here she explores the emotional effects of divorces on both women and children, speaking to the vulnerability of both groups. Divorce rates were rising through the end of the 1960s, with the United States government reporting a rate that had almost doubled in the previous thirty years.¹⁰⁷ This is

¹⁰⁴ Wynette, Your Good Girl’s Gonna Go Bad.
¹⁰⁵ Tammy Wynette, Take Me To Your World/I Don’t Wanna Play House, Epic, 1968.
not the only Wynette song to discuss divorce, as her hit “D-I-V-O-R-C-E” demonstrates; having herself been married five times, Wynette was quick to represent these shared experiences in her music.\textsuperscript{108}

There is an obvious complication in analysing Wynette at the social level, or attempting to locate political meaning in her songs. She does not seem interested in subverting the expectations of domesticity, as Loretta Lynn did with her work, yet she simultaneously is quick to ensure it is not represented as idealised. She understands its realities as it relates to her contemporary Southern woman, and the emotional difficulties associated with higher divorce and separation rates. She is more of an emotional realist than any kind of politically inclined figure. And although this may seem minor, it is particularly important to our understanding of how womanhood is expressed in country music.

The themes Wynette address, and the manner in which she expresses them, are reflective of approaches utilised by the women’s liberation movement. The movement, which rose to prominence through the late 1960s, was based largely on the concept of “consciousness raising,” in which women discussed their concerns, experiences and insecurities in a group setting. The aim was to promote a mutual understanding and commonality, locating these concerns within a larger framework of patriarchal dominance.\textsuperscript{109} Wynette was hardly interested in dismantling the patriarchy in such a way, and yet there is a strong similarity between the movement’s impulse toward communication and self-

expression, and her own hyper-realistic depictions of relationships. Although she did not do so in an attempt to politicise her audience, as artists explicitly aligned with women’s liberation did, their mutual use of testimony in storytelling is notable to consider.

If we are to frame Tammy Wynette’s songs as an extension of this communicative activism, we must be careful to take into consideration the differences between the two forms. For one, consciousness raising was designed to be a two-way conversation, which was meant to lead to a specific point. Recorded music, by contrast, presents itself as a one-sided conversation between the artist and audience. “Woman to Woman” offers an interesting example of this, providing a narrative in which Wynette warns her audience of the dangers of other women. “A woman to woman, me to you,” she declares, making explicit the conversational nature of her songs. Indeed, such a reading ignores the inherently conversational register in which country music operates. Its desire to present itself as a relatable genre and speak directly to the human experience makes it far more permeable a type of music than its contemporaries; and it is obvious in Wynette’s music that she is speaking to such experience. Country music lyrics are generally devoid of metaphor – their narratives are presented as simple messages, supported by expressions of emotion. “Woman to Woman” provides a practical example of this dynamic. The song is explicit in its representation of infidelity, and when Wynette proclaims that “she’s a whole lot better looking than me and you,” she demonstrates, using clear and simple language, that she is speaking directly to a human experience.

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110 Hodgeland, Feminism and its Fictions, p. 23.
by presenting a practical situation. There is no dramatic message of autonomy or independence here, though she still can be seen as a conduit for a wider realisation of the realities of Southern womanhood. Within these songs we are thus given not only an insight into the realities of southern domesticity and womanhood, and the trials and tribulations associated with them, but also an understanding of this communicative tool and its similarity in function to consciousness raising. This allows for a greater modicum of analysis, and provides additional context not only to the lives of southern women, but the ways in which they are expressed.

The issue with this form of analysis is that in Wynette’s songs she maintains a relatively small thematic range. Many are concerned with domesticity or its disruption, with only small deviations. At the same time, there is much to unpack from even these minor deviations. In “Kids Say The Darndest Things,” for example, Wynette returns to a narrative of divorce and heartbreak, though this time she exclusively concentrates on its psychological effects on her child. Whilst this is a theme also addressed in “I Don’t Wanna Play House,” that song revolved around her own emotional reaction to her child’s offhand comments. Within “Kids,” however, the narrative is grounded in the child’s reaction, which is shown to be abnormal among their peers. With lines such as “now where did she hear that” (in response to her daughter saying she wanted a divorce), and “my first grader just said a four letter word and I’m sure it wasn’t

112 Wynette, ‘Woman to Woman.’
114 Wynette, ‘I Don’t Wanna Play House.’
love,” Wynette expresses concern over her child’s waning innocence as a result of her own marital issues.115

This is given more meaning when placed alongside the American prioritisation of the family unit, particularly within the religious conservative groupings of which Wynette and her target audience were associated.116 This was particularly notable in the 1960s, as Johnson’s Great Society agenda aimed to assist working class families through its War on Poverty programs.117 In including a discussion of the effects of divorce on children, Wynette expands the domestic narrative from relationships, and truly grounds it within the American family tradition. Divorce is not just heartbreaking, but destructive. Throughout her music, Wynette made it clear that her priority has been the maintenance of relationships; divorces are presented as dramatic, last options. Unlike Loretta Lynn, separation is not presented as not freeing or subverting the expectations of women. It is through her depiction of the impacts of divorce on the family unit that we can see how Wynette and, by extension her audience, understand and communicate about divorce and family. Ultimately, this both works as a useful tool in understanding the importance of family in this era, but also can be seen as an extension of the same justification that powered the consciousness raising movement.

This leads us to another key facet of consciousness raising and the women’s liberation movement more broadly: the idea that the “personal is

115 Wynette, ‘Kids Say the Darndest Things.’

116 McGirr, Suburban Warriors.

117 For relevant details on the family assistance programs of the Great Society see John R. Burch, Jr., The Great Society and the War on Poverty: An Economic Legacy in Essays and Documents (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2017);
political.” Feminist Carol Hanisch popularised the term in 1969 to refer to the idea that the nature of patriarchal oppression means that women’s personal issues are inherently politicised.\textsuperscript{118} This is a framework we can easily transpose onto Tammy Wynette’s music, which perhaps more than any other of the artists discussed, worked to create a relatable message for its audience. To Hanisch and other feminists of this era, the frank discussion of the emotional effects of heartbreak and divorce was an inherently political act, relating specifically to the emotional labour and domestic expectations of women. Hanisch’s ultimate thesis argued that there were no “personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.”\textsuperscript{119} At its centre was the realisation of collective issues; the realisation that women were going through similar experiences was crucial to the women’s liberation agenda.\textsuperscript{120} Wynette’s music functions in a similar way, providing relatable messages in order to gain a better understanding of shared experience.

Towards the end of her essay, Hanisch addresses women who reject women’s liberation, dubbed “apolitical” for their rejection of the movement.\textsuperscript{121} She acknowledges the narrowness of women’s liberation, and its relatively small demographic parameters, highlighting an emphasis on middle-class, progressive women, usually educated and from urban areas of the North. Hanisch calls for an understanding of “apolitical” women, a term she believes to


\textsuperscript{119} Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political.’

\textsuperscript{120} See Echols, \textit{Daring to Be Bad}, pp. 83-98.

\textsuperscript{121} Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political’.
be an unfair. These women, Hanisch argues, are not “apolitical”; they are indeed motivated by patriarchal oppression, but find it difficult to identify with such a narrow movement. Hanisch cuts to the core of the present argument. In order to understand the ways in which women artists presented their music, messages and themes, they must first be presented as outsiders in the mainstream political arena. This is exactly how Hanisch understands them. Further, her argument gives weight to the idea that the concerns of those outside the movement were as engaged with the “personal is political” structure as those within it.

Hanisch’s framework allows us to understand Wynette and others singers as having a strange conflicting relationship with the women’s liberation movement. Though they undoubtedly exist outside of it, their music and actions mirror quite closely those of feminists of the time, albeit in a way that focused on the women of the South; thematically, they present ideas of solidarity, personal politics and independence in conjunction with pre-existing standards of domesticity and working class conservative gender roles. This is something Wynette was conscious of as well; she knew the realities of working class Southern life and moulded her songs and public image accordingly. At time dominated by the grassroots political actions of civil rights, antiwar and women’s liberation movements, Wynette disavowed the protest tradition, specifically as it pertained to Southern life. “Country people don’t think about protesting... They accept a hard way of life,” she declared in the early 1970s. This statement is important in two different levels. For one, there is a sense of

122 Hanisch, ‘The Personal Is Political’.

contentment with Southern life, even in the face of considerable hardships. Wynette is painting this area of the nation as inherently separate from the rest of the United States, which had obviously been drawn into a period of social and political turmoil. Wynette dismisses these protest movements, instead idealising a Southern populist language of hard work and labour, declaring at one point “I have no desire to be freer than I am.”\textsuperscript{124}

Despite the obvious pride in her Southern heritage, and detachment from the idea of political activism, Wynette still acknowledges the hardships of Southern life. Though she presents Southern people as hard working and free (obviously speaking specifically of white Southerners, given the concentration of Civil Rights protests in the rural South), she still acknowledges that they may have concerns worth protesting.\textsuperscript{125} It is this understanding of the South and Wynette’s placement within it that we must utilise when analysing her songs. Though she may not speak with a geographic specificity in her songs of heartbreak, divorce and emotional struggle, her public statements and persona allow us to ground her work in a Southern context, and observe her opinions through a conservative social lens.

In assessing this evidence, we receive a relatively clear picture of Tammy Wynette and the precarious social and political space she occupied. We know she rejected liberal notions of political activism and does not believe they fit with a Southern ethos. Instead she publicly presents herself as a conservative figure, standing up for traditional ideals of womanhood and protecting southern

\textsuperscript{124} Clift, ‘Queen of Country Singers,’ p. 40.

\textsuperscript{125} Clift, ‘Queen of Country Singers,’ p. 40.
religious heritage. Her understanding of womanhood is juxtaposed with a heightened presentation of relatable social messages about the emotional impacts of divorce and heartbreak as well as the realities of relationships. As with consciousness raising, this manifested as a testimonial style of activism, one that presented and shared relatable stories of oppression. But whereas feminist discourse focused on patriarchal oppression, Wynette’s form of consciousness raising attended to the emotional burdens associated with Southern femininity and domesticity.

This is certainly how she is depicted by her contemporary media, which has made sure to highlight her hardships, presenting her as a persevering figure who found success not through political protest but hard work. A Penthouse interview opened with an account of her health troubles, marital issues and kidnapping attempt; these are the events that have defined her in the public eye.\textsuperscript{126} She is inherently a figure of overcoming hardships and triumph, but this does not exist in the political realm. The article goes on to describe her songs as “sad-sobbing tearjerkers” to which “anyone can relate.” She is thus a figure of personal triumph – her message intended not for political debate but rather to convey the achievements that can be made through hard work and personal sacrifice – and relaying an appealing messages to her Southern fan base. As with consciousness raising, Wynette’s relatability was grounded in understanding rather than direct political action. But while feminists erstwhile participated in social and political movements, Wynette dismissed any such identifiers.

This depiction of Wynette as a relatable figure is particularly important. Wynette succeeded in being relatable to her audience and presenting tales that

disrupted patriarchal ideals of domesticity without disrupting her connection to conservative working class roots. Wynette explicitly sympathises with key arguments of the women’s liberation movement – equal pay, double standards – yet still rejects the movement and its activists. “Sometimes I feel like the ladies making the most noise are the least liberated,” she declared, pointing to her status as breadwinner to present herself as a liberated woman. Her liberation is once again based around hard work and the working class priority of being able to provide for one’s family – rather than political activism. These are messages that she evidently believes relate to her audience: “I do feel that I’m an average woman in that I can relate to the woman that comes to see me. I’ve gone through the same things.”

Though Wynette admits that she is publicly at odds with the women’s liberation movement, it is apparent that she is fulfilling a similar role for southern working-class women distanced from progressive movements. She simultaneously occupies a space of upholding conservative values (declaring herself “old-fashioned,” and speaking approvingly of chivalrous gender expectations) while also presenting herself as a figure of liberation. Though she does not necessarily make this connection herself, it is clear that these are two spheres she is simultaneously occupying. This is apparent in her discussion of her own songs, especially in relation to their public response. She offhandedly dismissed criticism from the women’s movement, claiming “Stand By Your

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128 Wynette, throughout this interview, refers to ways she believes she should act as an ‘old-fashioned’ country gal, liking a man to light her cigarette and having doors opened for her. ‘Tammy Wynette.’ Penthouse.
Man” to be just a “pretty love song.” It is immediately apparent that this is not the group Wynette wrote the song for; she discusses the song and its messages as they pertains to her own personal issues, specifically her marriage to fellow country singer George Jones. With regards to the line “if you love him, you’ll forgive him,” Wynette states that she “had to believe that.” She is countering the political argument for liberation with a narrative of personal hardship. Ultimately this demonstrates that Wynette’s relationship with the women’s liberation movement was marred by the latter’s inability to take into account her own personal struggles and triumphs which, as she further stated, she believes can be understood as the struggles and triumphs of Southern women in general.

The above discussion contrasts sharply with most scholarship on the politics of country music and, more specifically, Wynette herself. It is important to note here that the scholarship on Wynette is considerably weaker than Wells or Lynn. The small amount of literature that does represent her is often confined to discussions of her outfits and dress sense, and the ways in which these fit a Southern stereotype. It is Bufwack and Oermann who provide the most expansive analysis of Wynette’s life and interactions with politics, and thus will be used primarily in the discussion of secondary literature. Bufwack and

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129 ‘Tammy Wynette.’ Penthouse.


132 Bufwack and Oermann, Finding Her Voice.
Oermann also preach this conception of women in country music as being interested in politics without being overtly political.\textsuperscript{133} They acknowledge the political conservatism of the women of country music at the time, though they ensure to contrast it with the men of this era, who were often outwardly conservative. Bufwack and Oermann argue that the women of the genre harboured similar political motivations, but instead presented themselves in conversation with their own expectations as housewives and southern women.\textsuperscript{134} They express a conservative mindset through narratives of their lives and relationships, in conjunction with personal triumph and heartbreak. It is in this realm that their political convictions are expressed, as is demonstrated by the connections between Wynette’s music and consciousness raising.

Bufwack and Oermann are sure to present Wynette as a complex figure, even if she did hold explicitly right-wing views. They place her within the political moment, describing her as a strong supporter of populist George Wallace.\textsuperscript{135} Within Wallace’s various gubernatorial and presidential campaigns, he consistently campaigned on platforms based around working class social values and pride, which acts as an indicator that this was a aspect central to her conservatism.\textsuperscript{136} Yet there is still a point to be made for her presentation of gender. Wynette presents her own relationship with gender as being somewhat reconcilable with women’s liberation, though she still maintains her separation from the progressive movement. In relation to the fewer opportunities granted

\textsuperscript{133} Bufwack and Oermann, \textit{Finding Her Voice}, pp. 328-329.

\textsuperscript{134} Bufwack and Oermann, \textit{Finding Her Voice}, pp. 326-259.

\textsuperscript{135} Bufwack and Oermann, \textit{Finding Her Voice}, p. 328.

to women in country music (which she admits is due to their expectations as housewives), she confessed “we had our own “liberation movement” going, but I don’t think any of us were aware of it.” There obviously exists a tension here – which even Wynette does not acknowledge – between Wynette’s conservative ideology and her desire to present herself as a strong working woman. Utilising the framework of a relatable genre, one reflecting the needs and desires of its audience, these statements offer an understanding that there was a marker for this style of consciousness raising politics, that Wynette filled.

Indeed, this offers not only a representation of the separation between women’s liberation and southern society, but also an insight into how women’s rights are understood in the realm of the South. They are undoubtedly classified in terms of economic success; to be liberated in the South is to be able to present oneself as financially independent. Wynette simply wants to be given her fair dues for her hard work, rather than dismantle the system that established such gendered practices, as might the women’s liberation movement. This is a concept that is compatible with traditional Southern expectations of women; Wynette and her contemporaries straddle the line between traditional domesticity and the women’s movement’s demands for autonomy and power.

Country music has often been preoccupied with a self-presentation of anti-elitism. Its seclusion in the South, and concentration on subject matter unique to this region, have combined to ensure that anti-elitism has remained prominent within lyrical content, academic review and artist statements. There


is a pride that comes with these artists’ presentations of their Southern, working class roots, and it is as much a part of their music as themes of domesticity have proven to be. This is ultimately a useful framework for understanding Tammy Wynette. While Wells offers an insight into the political potential of country music, and Lynn provides us with an understanding of the internal conflicts of women in this era, Wynette’s is far more grounded in practical political rhetoric. The connection that can be easily made between consciousness raising, itself existing primarily within this elitist world to which country reacts, and her work demonstrates a particular engagement with these issues.

This anti-elitism often manifested in the form of intense patriotism. There was a sense of pride in America, especially with Nixon as the conservative Commander in Chief. His position as leader of the nation conflicted with the plethora of protesters who permeated the nation’s political sphere, and there was a clear representation, both throughout country music and the wider political sphere, that these protesters were inherently unpatriotic.\footnote{Scott J. Spitzer, ‘Nixon’s New Deal: Welfare Reform for the Silent Majority’, \textit{Presidential Studies Quarterly} 42, no. 3, (2012), pp. 455-481.} Not only were they standing against the government and the U.S. army’s efforts in Vietnam, but were also appeared morally and socially bankrupt; they were the antithesis of what middle-America was trying to represent. Those who opposed the liberal groups that were dominating American news cycles made up a crucial demographic in country music’s fan base, argues Malone.\footnote{Malone, \textit{Don’t Get Above Your Raisin}, pp. 240-241.} Merle Haggard’s conservative anthem “Okie From Muskogee” “tapped an enormously large audience throughout the nation whose rage against hippies and student
protestors had been welling up for years,” Malone states, clearly painting country music and its patriotic sentiments in opposition to the social movements that had been growing in support in urban centres, but had met resistance in the conservative south.\footnote{Malone, \textit{Don't Get Above Your Raisin'}, pp. 241-242.} The heavy concentration of these groups in the northeast and west contributed to a sense of elitism, which was obviously not in tune with the sensibilities of country music.

Malone specifies this argument in relation to Wynette’s own conservatism, particularly her support of George Wallace. Wallace was a popular figure amongst country singers, Malone argues, because he actively courted the support of these Southern celebrities. Country music was “self-conscious of its alleged inferiority” and Wallace’s active presentation of solidarity with a group that views itself as maligned within the popular American imagining did well to court open conservative favour amongst country musicians.\footnote{Malone, \textit{Don't Get Above Your Raisin'}, p. 238.} Country music was, at this time openly showing its alignment to conservative politics, identifying with a specific political position ‘for the first time in its history’.\footnote{Malone, \textit{Don't Get Above Your Raisin'}, p. 239.} Country music was, to the nation’s cultural elite and liberal sections of the media, a public extension of the Nixon administration’s politics.

There is obviously a distinct separation between country music, and by extension its conservative politics, and the liberal sections of the nation that dominated political movements of the period. This separation was felt in the efforts of women’s liberation movement as well: a distinctly left wing,
progressive movement which centred on big cities and suburban women, far from the traditional settings of country music. It is here that this anti-elitist narrative is so successful. If we are to understand Tammy Wynette and her work as an alternative to consciousness raising, we must first understand why Wynette herself could not be included in this narrative. Country music scholars make it apparent that country music in its entirety was presented, and accepted, as undeniably conservative both thematically and in the political leanings of its figures. This political separation did not mean, however, that there was no semblance of women’s liberation politics within country music – as Tammy Wynette’s overtly personal narratives indicate.

Wynette’s songs operate in much the same way as consciousness raising; a narrative is presented without political expectations, simply aiming to provide an empathetic representation of the realities of womanhood. Through her presentation of domesticity and divorce, Wynette does exactly this, though with a continued understanding that she is preserving social conservative morality. Though the women’s liberation movement may not have been geared toward conservative women with a desire to uphold traditional social values, through Wynette’s work we can see an engagement with similar themes and approaches.
Chapter Three:

Loretta Lynn: Fist City and Subversions of Traditional Expectations

It would be simple to discuss Loretta Lynn as an outwardly conservative figure, presenting traditional ideals of domesticity and patriarchal values to the American public. After all, she explicitly rejected the women’s liberation movement at its peak, and was open about her identification as a traditional Southern girl. These political affiliations were often contradicted by her lyrics and actions, however, which in many ways mirrored the ideas of the movement, even if they were not always expressed in a way that mainstream feminism would endorse. Take for example her 1962 hit “Fist City”: a narrative of jealousy in which the narrator feels the need to physically threaten another woman for coming too close to her man. On the one hand, this is hardly the typical image of domesticity we might associate with country music, and one would be forgiven for failing to imagine Lynn in her flowing Grand Ol’ Opry gowns threatening a fist fight at a Southern bar. Yet this is the narrative Lynn put forth. She eschewed the traditional Southern elegance that country music had long promoted through its striking visual similarities to the Southern debutante tradition. Yet at the same time there is a familiarity in representations of domesticity found through Lynn’s work, which explored relationships in a


manner similar to that of Wells and Wynette. Her primary focus was on the maintenance of her marriage, forgiving her husband’s faults (“I’m not sayin’ my baby’s a saint ‘cause he ain’t”), and drawing the narrative back to their own personal relationship (“lay off my man”). But for a song focused solely on an interaction between two women, especially one that so openly subverts traditional Southern standards of behaviour, the narrative still manages to centre on the man, and is clearly as much about upholding the status quo as it is deviating from it.

These duelling notions of conservative social values and subversive representations of women create a notable tension throughout Lynn’s work, visible in her lyrical content as well as her presentation and public persona. If we build on our understanding of country music as an inherently reflective genre, a framework drawn in the previous chapter, Lynn’s career provides a wider set of political influences and motivations emergent throughout the South. We tend to understand the women’s liberation movement as inherently middle-class and urban, concentrated specifically on educated North-eastern women with experiences far removed from Lynn’s working-class South. Yet in exploring the tensions in Lynn’s music, such as in a song like “Fist City,” we are presented a more complex understanding of Southern desire towards notions of women’s independence.

The primary function of this chapter will be to explore this tension and its manifestation in order to gain a greater understanding of the wider political

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147 Lynn, ‘Fist City.’

realities of this time and setting, using Lynn’s work as a case study for the ways in which prominent features of the women’s liberation movement were reconciled within a working-class Southern context. In order to do this, however, we must first understand how this tension manifests. Like Wynette, Lynn’s work is reflective of one of the primary features of the women’s liberation movement. We can see in her work a subversive take on established expectations for women, which in a similar vein to much of the activism of the movement, was built around demonstrating “the visible power of women’ and challenging social perceptions.”149

Loretta Lynn’s life and career have consistently been as presented as inextricably connected to the working class. She proclaimed herself a “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” a term that has become synonymous with her life. It is the title of her autobiography, a biographical film, and of course one of her most prominent songs.150 And it is within this song that we see some of the most concrete examples of her working-class roots. Lynn opens the song by fondly proclaiming “we were poor but we had love,” making it clear that materialistic wealth was not one of her high priorities. Instead, the family finds comfort in their mother reading the Bible by “the coal oil light.”151 The presentation of the Bible – and by extension, religious ideology – as a comfort amid considerable poverty is notable. It grounds the narrative within a Southern religious tradition, one that had become increasingly visible in the public sphere through


151 Lynn, ‘Coal Miner’s Daughter’. 
the rise of the Silent Majority, a conservative voting bloc of working-class Americans partly responsible for Nixon’s victory in the 1968 presidential election.\textsuperscript{152} Cowie argues, among other things, that this group was united by an increasing need to vote based on conservative social values, within which religion was entwined.\textsuperscript{153} This is a concept that McGirr expands on in \textit{Suburban Warriors}. Religious identity, and particularly the sense of conservative morality that came with it, was a key identifier of an increasingly conservative voting public throughout this time.\textsuperscript{154} This of course was a morality directly opposed to the political liberalism of the 1960s, including the emergent women’s liberation movement.\textsuperscript{155} Lynn’s open and profound affiliation with this working-class religiosity is thus a key aspect in understanding the tension apparent within her work, especially when compared to later songs concerned thematically with the messages and approaches of the women’s liberation movement.

Furthermore, the song’s recurring theme of the plight of the coal miner poses interesting social and political implications for the surrounding context. A key element of the Silent Majority’s success as a conservative voting bloc can be attributed to its lack of faith in the labour movement.\textsuperscript{156} Those in this


\textsuperscript{156} Cowie, \textit{Stayin’ Alive}. 
demographic had often been New Deal Democrats who had supported the party due to its working class foundations and positive relationships with the unions. With the rise of various social movements, however, and the Democratic Party’s perceived lack of focus on its traditional base, many began to feel dislocated from the party of the New Deal, particularly within the context of a precarious labour market and increasing job dissatisfaction. The considerable connection between working-class disillusionment and growing conservatism in the United States ensures that Lynn’s song can be instantly connected to conservative ideologies. If country music is intended to be a genre relatable to its audience, then the political climate of the United States at this moment means that those who most effectively connected with Coal Miner’s Daughter would likely have been part of this increasingly conservative public.

On the opposing side of this political spectrum is Lynn’s commitment to the presentation of narratives that thematically concern themselves with women’s independence and autonomy, while at the same time subverting traditional expectations of women’s roles and behaviours. Though she explicitly stated her opposition to women’s liberation, Lynn frequently presented songs that offered similar thematic concerns to those espoused by the movement. In her 1967 hit “Don’t Come Home a-Drinkin’,” Lynn offers twist on the traditional narrative of domesticity and relationships as presented in country songs such as Wynette’s “Stand By Your Man.” Instead of offering support to her husband, or accepting that “he’s just a man,” Lynn chastises him for his boorish behaviour. She is open about his faults and flaws, and openly critical of them.

157 Cowie, Stayin’ Alive.
Though this is nonetheless a narrative of domesticity, displaying a level of emotional vulnerability critical to its success, Lynn grants herself considerable autonomy throughout the song. In declaring to her partner that he simply should not come home if he’s drunk, she demonstrates her control over the couple’s private sphere.

This sense of autonomy is presented by Cobble as a common source of anxiety among working men.\textsuperscript{159} Though Cobble focuses on women who successfully entered the workforce, specifically those involved with labour unions, there is an underlying sense that this was not the norm for women during this era. She interviewed Katherine Ellison, for instance, who thought her position as a worker unusual, and felt it may be a “threat” to her husband.\textsuperscript{160} Addie Wyatt, a Southerner, was too scared to even tell her husband of a leadership position she had been granted in her employment.\textsuperscript{161} Ultimately, these sources demonstrate that while a desire for autonomy in relationships was a key concern among leftist women’s groups, there remained considerable tension between expectation and actuality.

Crucially, there is no radical departure from typical narratives of domesticity in Lynn’s song. Although she still attempts to present an idealised version of a relationship, the female narrator is hardly one-dimensional, asserting a degree of autonomy over her own life. It is the woman who is the centrepiece of the story, even if the man is the subject; the narrative rests on how his actions impact her, rather than on the hardships of his life. In this way,

\textsuperscript{159} Dorothy Sue Cobble, \textit{The Other Women’s Movement} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{160} Cobble, \textit{The Other Women’s Movement}, p. 36.

\textsuperscript{161} Cobble, \textit{The Other Women’s Movement}, p. 32.
Lynn offers a departure from the narratives of domesticity (whether idealised by Wells, or fractured by Wynette) that frequented country music throughout this era, even if only subtly. It is here that we can see this tension manifesting quite explicitly; indeed, these are competing interpretations and depictions of women within the one song. She is both subverting the passive depiction of women observed in Wynette's work, whilst also upholding traditional domestic standards. Within “Don’t Come Home a-Drinkin,” we are given an insight into how these two concepts co-exist, and how Lynn is able to transpose ideals from the women’s liberation movement (subversion of traditional expectations) into a Southern conservative context.

Lynn is an interesting figure within the shelf of literature on country music. It is clear that she deviates from the expected behaviour of women artists, and is determined to present an independent female perspective, yet even when scholars acknowledge this, there is a lack of complexity in their analysis. Bufwack and Oerman, who perhaps best understand Lynn’s complex relationship with conservatism and women’s independence, do not connect their analysis to wider political movements such as the women’s liberation.162 Further, though they recognise that she is deviating from the expected behaviour of women, there is little discussion of the way in which she did so without betraying her conservative roots. Instead, women and the working class are presented as twin pillars of her identity, and there is no sense of how Lynn

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incorporates women’s independence into a working-class conservative framework.163

Realistically, these concepts are not mutually exclusive, as we can observe in the intersecting concerns of Lynn’s life and music. Her lyrics are often concerned with subverting traditional expectations of women and challenging social norms, most notably demonstrated in her early 1970s hits “Rated X” and “The Pill.”164 These songs contribute to a public understanding of Lynn as an activist for women’s rights. And for good reason, given that the themes presented in these songs echoed so closely key concerns of the women’s liberation movement.165 This does not, however, contradict her conservative working-class identity. Rather, she is able to weave the two identities together, translating the ideals of the feminist movement into a format that speaks directly to a Southern audience.

This tension between women’s independence and conservative working-class morality does not just manifest in her lyrics, but also in her interviews and public persona. Interestingly, it does not operate as a typical conflict. Instead, Lynn weaves themes of independence and autonomy into familiar domestic narratives, integrating these ideas within her working class ideology rather than expressing them in opposition to one another.166 When we consider the

163 Bufwack and Oermann, Finding Her Voice.


166 Other notable examples include Loretta Lynn, “Two Mules Pull This Wagon,” I Like ‘Em Country, Decca, 1966; Loretta Lynn, “Get What’cha Got and Go,” Don’t Come Home A Drinkin’ (With Lovin’ On Your Mind), Decca, 1967.
centrality of these ideas to the women’s liberation movement, Lynn’s presentation becomes even more striking. The movement was typically confined to the major cities of the North, and was certainly not understood to be representative of Southern working-class women.\textsuperscript{167} Yet Lynn’s songs prove that there was an audience for this type of representation, and that these ideals were not only an element of Southern working-class women’s lives, but were also compatible with associated conservative ideologies.\textsuperscript{168}

In order to understand the social and political motivations of Lynn’s music, it is important to discuss her own upbringing, which she undoubtedly used throughout her career as a source for musical inspiration. As has been mentioned previously, she was born a coal-miner’s daughter in Butcher’s Holler, a small mining town in Virginia. The age at which she was married is disputed, though most contemporary sources approximate her to have been thirteen at the time of her wedding, giving birth to her first child shortly thereafter.\textsuperscript{169} This was young for her setting, even in an era when marriages occurred considerably earlier than in modern America.\textsuperscript{170} From this early age, she was rooted within a

\textsuperscript{167} This narrative is further complicated by the activism of southern African-American women, whose similar concerns tend to be placed within frameworks of civil rights and Black Power rather than women’s liberation. See for instance Rosalyn Baxandall, ‘Re-visioning the Women’s Liberation Movement’s Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists,’ \textit{Feminist Studies} 27, 1 (Spring 2001), pp. 225-245

\textsuperscript{168} In “Two Mules Pull this Wagon,” for instance, Lynn complains about her husbands “grouchy” behavior upon returning from work; she accepts responsibility for the “washing, ironing, cooking,” but reminds him that “I know you’ve got a heavy load but … I do my share of pullin’.” Lynn, “Two Mules Pull This Wagon.” See also, Loretta Lynn, “Who’s Gonna Take the Garbage Out,” \textit{If We Put Our Heads Together}, Decca, 1969.

\textsuperscript{169} For broad details on Lynn’s youth, see Lynn, Vecsey, \textit{Coal Miner’s Daughter}.

typical domesticity, even when travelling extensively as a touring artist. She repeatedly recalls in interviews that her husband was discontented with her lifestyle – one of the many ways she publicly subverts the expectations of domestic women – and at times details their marital struggles, which she has used as inspiration throughout her musical career.\textsuperscript{171}

Having grown up poor and heavily religious, it comes as no surprise that her political alignments are similar to the typical working-class conservative of the time. That this has caused a tension within her music is no secret, and has indeed been a talking point throughout her career. This tension is summed up in an article by Laurence J. Zwisohn, who introduces Lynn by describing her as “the spokesperson – in song – for women’s rights.”\textsuperscript{172} The implication here is that her activism exists only through music, not in her private life or political affiliations. Lynn’s political music is presented as being in direct opposition to her personal politics, which is a recurring theme in articles. Songs such as “Rated X” and “The Pill” are often presented with a sense of uncertainty over her public figure, or an anxiety over her political motivations.\textsuperscript{173} In this framework, Lynn is typically understood as being stuck between opposing ideologies. But if we understand these seemingly contradictory political


\textsuperscript{173} A 1977 \textit{Billboard} report implied that she had been overlooked by feminists of the previous decade, something that her marketer John Brown seemed keen to rectify. "Loretta’s visibility has changed... she’s a forerunner of women’s movements,” he told the reporter. ‘MCA Wrapping April Around Singer Lynn,’ \textit{Billboard}, 19 March 1977, p. 57. See also Lynn, “Rated X”; Lynn, “The Pill.”
affiliations as highly public, it adds weight to her considerable success as a subversive artist. Her ability to reconcile social and political movements and retain her popularity in the process is reflective of a social background in which there was a need for certain ideals of the women’s liberation movement even in this Southern conservative culture.

An analysis of Lynn’s lyrics further reveals the extent to which this tension was prominent throughout her work. In “Rated X,” for example, Lynn tells a clear story of the double standards placed on women, specifically within the realm of divorce. Utilising the term “rated x,” to describe women divorcees, Lynn opposes these representations, arguing that divorce can be the key to “bein’ loose and free,” before following this up with a series of statements about the public perception of these women. Lynn is quick to place female autonomy in direct opposition to this, and the examples and anecdotes she provides throughout reflect various restrictions on women’s independence. Lynn herself was never divorced, but she makes sure to frame the song in realistic terms, never once attempting to use metaphors or analogies, but rather depicting and challenging the simple reality of these women’s situations.

There is a stark contrast here between the depictions of divorce offered by Lynn and Wynette. Wynette’s is centred on emotional turmoil, presenting a narrative that reflects on a personal level the realities of divorce. Lynn, on the other hand, views divorce from a political perspective, leaving the personal

174 Lynn, “Rated “X”.”
175 Lynn, “Rated “X”.”
realm and entering a discussion of its social effects in general. This, in a way, offers a concise metaphor for both artists’ engagement with women’s issues and, more broadly, their relationship to the women’s liberation movement. Wynette relates to womanhood on a personal level, and her discussion of Southern womanhood is dependent on a portrayal of these issues as they relate to individual emotions, much like the tactics used in consciousness raising. Lynn, on the other hand, attempts to challenge and subvert public expectations of women, openly confronting social norms through her lyrical content. Malone notes this aspect of Lynn’s career, describing her music as at times questioning “the older hierarchies of patriarchal dominance,” a trait that he argues was near unique for the time.

Lynn’s active protest against this portrayal and understanding of women is notable in that it always remains grounded within a Southern context. Though she is not explicit about this in her lyrics, the musical sensibilities root the song’s narrative in a way familiar to Southern women. This is far from an attempt at a crossover hit; the song opens with slide guitar, an instrument long associated with the Southern country tradition – so much so that Dolly Parton once requested it be added to a song for fear of it otherwise sounding too “pop.” This is coupled with a consistent use of Southern slang to ensure that the song’s message is not universal, but rather a specifically regional one.

177 Lynn, “Rated “X”.” See also Lynn, “Who’s Gonna Take the Garbage Out.” She also frames divorce in terms of social empowerment, such as in Loretta Lynn, “I’d Rather Be Sorry,” You’re Lookin’ At Country, Decca, 1971.


With this comes a range of political and social implications. Lynn compares this double standard to “sin,” ensuring not only that this is a Southern perspective being expressed, but a religious one as well.¹⁸⁰ This harkens back to ideals of contemporary conservatism, which were often inspired by religious morality.¹⁸¹ Within the song, Lynn is able to discuss a prominent issue of the women’s liberation movement, divorce, while keeping her discussion rooted in a Southern conservative world.¹⁸² These concepts are thus able to co-exist. By planting her political message within a seemingly oppositional genre we are given an understanding of how Lynn is able to place a message of women’s autonomy into her music without betraying her conservative working-class background.

We can clearly see Loretta Lynn aligning herself with ideals of women’s autonomy and independence, though not in the way that one would expect of the women’s liberation movement that more or less coincided with the height of her popularity. Whilst songs such as “Rated X” and “Don’t Come Home A-Drinkin’” make it undeniable that Lynn is thematically concerned with women’s rights, there is a plethora of songs that muddy this water, and complicate her overall political message. In her 1966 track “You Ain’t Woman Enough,” for example, Lynn berates and belittles a woman who her husband is allegedly having an affair with. “Women like you they’re a dime,” declares Lynn, not only dehumanising her competitor for the purpose of maintaining her man’s

¹⁸⁰ Lynn, ‘Rated “X”.’

¹⁸¹ For a strong discussion of this relationship, see McGirr, Suburban Warriors.

¹⁸² See also Loretta Lynn, “Home You’re Tearin’ Down,” I Like ’Em Country, Decca, 1966; Lynn, “I’d Rather Be Sorry”; Lynn, “If We Put Our Heads Together.”
attention, but also establishing a clear hierarchy amongst women, within which she places herself on top\textsuperscript{183}. This is clearly a concept at odds with the basic tenets of women’s liberation, which utilised consciousness raising experiences to establish a mutual ground of understanding about the oppressive forces of the patriarchy: what Olcott acknowledges as the “global sisterhood.”\textsuperscript{184} But there is no mutual ground in Lynn’s narrative, as both women are represented as resenting one another rather than locating their common ground – the man who betrayed them both – which would make this an easy analogy for women’s liberation.

It is obvious then that Lynn is by no means aligned with some of the key concepts of women’s liberation. And yet there is still something notable about “You Ain’t Woman Enough” that warrants closer analytical attention. Like “Fist City,” this too is a song that offers a radical departure from traditional, respectable representations of Southern women. After all, this is the region most associated with debutante balls: a tradition built on femininity and elegance, concerned entirely with an ideal of respectable social standing.\textsuperscript{185} Within this context, Lynn offers a different understanding of how the average Southern white woman should behave. She takes control of her situation, positioning her own autonomy as the central theme of the song, above that of both the other woman and her unfaithful partner. This is far from the passive partner that Wells typically played throughout her career. Though the song may have an

\textsuperscript{183} Loretta Lynn, ‘You Ain’t Woman Enough (To Take My Man),’ \textit{You Ain’t Woman Enough}, Decca, 1966.


\textsuperscript{185} Lewis, ‘Secret Sharing,’ pp. 6-25.
approach that contradicts feminist approaches of the time, it still works to establish a sense of independence and autonomy within a framework that is inherently built in opposition to these themes.\textsuperscript{186}

These themes must be placed in conversation with our understanding of the formation and primary goals of the women’s liberation movement. At a time when reproductive rights and equal pay were at the forefront of American feminism, it is clear that the movement was as much about deviating from gendered expectation as it was about achieving social and material gains.\textsuperscript{187} These concerns were clearly political, linked to the treatment of women in American society, and were campaigned for with both with legislative activism and wider social mobilisation.\textsuperscript{188} That the women’s liberation movement was also based around public perceptions of womanhood is reinforced by the practice of “bra burning”: This was an extremely visible aspect of women’s liberation, to the extent that those within the movement were occasionally dubbed “bra burners.”\textsuperscript{189} Although it was not concerned with the same practical solutions offered by legislative activists, it was about disrupting perceptions of femininity, and was expressed in a very public manner: most notably at the Miss America pageant of 1968. A key aspect of this protest, which attracted significant controversy and media attention, was the “freedom trash can,” into which women threw symbols of their patriarchal oppression, including bras.

\textsuperscript{186} Lynn, “Fist City.”

\textsuperscript{187} Ellen Willis draws on many of these themes in her foreword to Alice Echols’ Daring to Be Bad. See Ellen Willis, “Foreword,” in Echols, Daring to Be Bad, pp. vii-xvi.

\textsuperscript{188} Echols, Daring to Be Bad, pp. 3-22.

The public nature of this act, combined with its symbolic direct action, was a key indicator of the movement’s concern with subverting expectations of womanhood.¹⁹⁰

Our understanding of Lynn follows a similar logic. Her explicit distancing of herself from women’s liberation means that we cannot make an easy connection between her and the contemporary feminist movement. But her representations of women follow a similar formula nonetheless. Lynn’s music allows us to view her as a subversive woman: one who takes the common public perception of womanhood and subverts it. What separates her from the women’s liberation movement is that she spoke specifically to the experience of Southern women, and the trials and tribulations that were endemic to their social environments. Rather than speak to a middle class experience by promoting female visibility in the workplace or altering public perceptions of gender roles, Lynn spoke to a specifically working class experience based upon the expectations of a housewife and the restrictions of traditional femininity.¹⁹¹ Ellison reiterates this point, arguing that “Coal Miner’s Daughter” reflects “the reconciliation of an assertive woman with her working-class origins.”¹⁹² We can thus see Lynn as an artist specifically concerned with a representation of Southern ideals that can be combined with an unashamed depiction of her own independent womanhood. Even when she is subverting Southern

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¹⁹¹ These themes are particularly evident in Lynn, “Bargain Basement Dress”; Lynn, “Who’s Gonna Take the Garbage Out”; Lynn, “Two Mules Pull This Wagon.”

understandings of female relationships, she is simultaneously upholding traditional identities.

If we understand Lynn to be a subversive figure, then we must address the ways in which she conforms to Southern representations of femininity. This is most evident in her public presentation and heavy religiosity. Lynn was a regular on the *Grand Ol’ Opry Radio Show*, a hallmark of American country music. A prominent feature of these shows, one that is key to their aesthetic, is the dress code for women appearing on the show, which has remained relatively consistent throughout the 20th and 21st Centuries. Country music occupies a central realm for upholding the tradition of the Southern debutante, and the gowns worn by women artists reflect these sensibilities. Other than Patsy Cline, whose aforementioned pant outfit caused scandal at the Opry, almost all country women to this day perform at award shows or large public gatherings in gowns, harkening back to traditional ideals of Southern femininity, which in and of itself were built on a perception of white womanhood and its innocence. This is a key aspect of the culture of country music; twenty years after the Cline incident, Dottie West proclaimed that she was still afraid to wear pants at the Opry. Lynn too conformed to this traditional image, and caused no such controversy as Cline. This could cast doubts on our ability to perceive her as a subversive figure, though in reality it makes the argument stronger; her

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194 The endurance of these trends are discussed in Bufwack, ‘Girls with Guitars,’ pp. 153-187

acts of deviation are highlighted by her willingness to simultaneously perform certain types of expected femininity.

Thus, though one could use such instances of conformity as a counter argument to the view of Lynn as subversive, we should instead utilise them to ground Lynn’s subversion within the realm of conservative domesticity. This points to a wider set of tensions, in which the public understanding of Southern womanhood is not set in stone but rather malleable, and indeed fluctuates between situations. While there was undeniably merit in Wynette’s presentation of women’s issues, she offered a rather one-dimensional understanding of such. Hers was rooted in a traditional understanding of domesticity, and lacked the nuance of Lynn. But while their music is in many ways similar, their differences are more useful for the present argument. Wynette’s representation of women lacks depth, while Lynn’s strength lies in her ability to present nuanced and often-conflicting depictions of how women should act. Conversely, Lynn’s weakness lies in the fact that her often-controversial subject matter proved alienating within her Southern context, and thus loses a degree of relatability paramount to the comparative analysis of the women’s liberation movement and country music. Conveniently, this is exactly where Wynette’s song-writing strength lies.

So what tradition exactly is Lynn deviating from? It is convenient to state that she deviated from the norm, but that is too simplistic a representation of her actions and behaviour. We must contextualise this further, an act that begins with a general understanding of what Southern femininity looked like.

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196 Bufwack and Oermann, Finding Her Voice, p. 311.
The archetype of the innocent Southern woman is one that has dated back to the antebellum South, built simultaneously in opposition to perceptions of black masculinity and a desire to uphold religious ideologies.\(^\text{197}\) Religion has long been synonymous with the South’s political climate, and has permeated its social spheres since inception. As it relates to gender, a key aspect of this religious identification has been wrapped in a sense of white female purity\(^\text{198}\). White women were presented as objects requiring marriage. This was based around the need for them to be received and understood as “sexually pure, delicate, virtuous, religious and devoted mothers.”\(^\text{199}\) White women were thus in a position where their social standing was inherently dependent not only on their ability to preserve their “innocence,” but also their depiction as weak and in need of the protection afforded in marriage.

This image of purity may not have been as strong in Lynn’s era, though it remained a spectre throughout the South and in country music particularly. Southern phenomena such as debutante balls, for instance, revolve around the idea of a woman “debuting” to the wider world, essentially announcing their eligibility for marriage\(^\text{200}\). This reflects a continued tradition that values the innocence of white women and presents them as lacking in autonomy. Their

\(^{197}\) A good analysis of these constructions is provided in Anastasia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women’s Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press), pp. 6-11; 155-189. See also Riche Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Augusta: University of Georgia Press, 2010).


\(^{200}\) It is acknowledged that debutante balls are prominent globally and by no means reserved to the South, though their place within the American imagination is undoubtedly centred on this region.
lives are still dictated by the actions of the men; though in this case they are being presented to the world, rather than protected from it. It is a night outwardly centred on women, but internally controlled by men. For instance, Lewis quotes a mother of five debutantes as saying, “My husband is determined that we don’t give away all the rituals.”

This is hardly an image to which Lynn conforms, neither in her lyrics or actions. A report from 1981, for example, depicts her as having “run a young girl off the property,” when she caught her husband cheating. Within the same article, Lynn laments the double standards that her husband places on her, a sentiment similar to those expressed in “Rated X.” ‘He’d blow my head off if he caught me with another guy,” she states, already deviating from the Southern tradition of womanhood not only by criticising gender expectations, but also shattering any perception of innocence by acknowledging both her husband’s infidelity and his potential threat to her safety.

In a realm where gender ideals were built upon the perception of black men as physical and psychological threats to white women, Lynn offers an alternative: presenting instead her white husband, who would traditionally have been represented as a protector, as a more likely threat.

This type of thematic concern is prominent in Lynn’s career and marks a notable aspect in the delicate tightrope she walked with regards to gender. She

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201 Lewis, ‘Secret Sharing.’


203 Dangaurd, ‘Loretta.’
is precariously placed between two entirely different ideologies and understandings of womanhood, presenting a subversive take on what it means to be a woman in the South – one compatible with the concerns of the women’s liberation movement – while simultaneously rooting herself in a Southern domestic tradition. Lynn is a figure whose success is built on this tension, along with her refusal to disambiguate her own diverse identities within the context of gender debates.

It is this apparent tension that often makes contemporary reviews of Lynn’s work highly inaccurate. An article in *Esquire* from 1977 paints Lynn, alongside Wynette and Dolly Parton, as embodiments of successful women in a male dominated field.\(^\text{204}\) There is an element of anti-elitist rhetoric here, as the author goes out of his way to compare Lynn to household names such as Bob Dylan, praising her work on a higher level. “Loretta was out kicking ass when Gloria Steinem was wearing a bunny suit for an article in *Show*. Some of her terms, you may think, are old-fashioned, but that just makes her more interesting,” Blount argues, employing an “us-vs-them” approach to country music that defines Lynn’s success in opposition to the women’s liberation movement rather than in conversation with it.\(^\text{205}\) To Lynn’s contemporary media, the divide between her music and mainstream feminism is also considerable, though again this is a misrepresentation of how her work manifests. Realistically, her music presents many of the same challenges to an


\(^\text{205}\) Blount, ‘Country’s Angels’, p. 64.
established status quo as that of the women’s liberation movement, and is just as concerned with disrupting perceptions of womanhood in 1960s America.

Lynn paints a more complicated image of country music, and indeed Southern conservatism, than we are usually afforded. Within Lynn’s music, we are given an insight into how Southern women in this context were able to navigate the dual forces of ascendant conservatism and mounting struggles for women’s rights. Though these expressions are typically counterintuitive to what one would expect of the women’s liberation movement, this is because they are often expressed in ways careful not to betray country music’s Southern roots, using the theme of relationships as a means of presenting ideals of independence and autonomy alongside those of traditional Southern womanhood.

In integrating these themes, Lynn subverts traditional understandings of the role of the women’s liberation movement, which was largely focused in the major metropolitan areas of the nation, and certainly far less engaged in the lives of working-class women in the South. Lynn demonstrates that a questioning of womanhood and gender relations were as important to these otherwise neglected groups as they were to urban feminists. If we accept country music as a genre that attempts to relate to its audience, and by extension adopt issues and concerns of most relevance to it, we are given a far different view of women’s liberation ideology in the South than is typically presented. Instead of a region interested solely in upholding traditional understandings of gender, specifically with regards to domesticity and relationships, this analysis of Lynn’s life and career offers a far more complicated view, reconciling female autonomy with conservative southern values.
Conclusion:

Ultimately, this thesis has aimed to address two separate yet overlapping concerns. The first, to put it simply, is the lack of attention paid to the women of country music, whose fame and success has generally been understood within a narrow gendered framework. Perhaps part of the problem is the weight of literature on country music – a shelf of scholarship that either deals with the genre on broad or narrow terms. Needless to say, women have not figured heavily in these analyses. When we are presented with a broad history, it generally concentrates on the genre’s development; its changing degrees of popularity, the thematic concerns that have been consistent through its history, and its relationship with the mainstream. It is high time for such analyses to undergo some revisionism, a need highlighted by the saturation of male artists in relevant historiography, in spite of the key roles played by women in growing and developing the genre. When analysis of the genre becomes specific, it begins to enter niches, of which the women of the genre are hardly an overly represented topic. There is a lack of academic analysis of the role of women in country music, especially analysis that places them in conversation with the political developments that occurred throughout their career.

It is in this space that this thesis has attempted to position itself, contributing to an academic discussion of the relationship between the women of country music and politics. In order to do this, three prominent female country singers were selected and analysed, comparing their careers, lyrics, actions and public personas to the competing political forces of Southern working class conservatism and Women’s Liberation ideologies.
The first of these concentrates on Kitty Wells, one of the first major female artists to achieve continued commercial success as a solo artist. She rose to prominence in the post-War era, and publicly presented herself in a housewife role. She consistently proclaimed her first love and primary duty was to her family, and went so far as to release a cookbook of recipes gathered while on tour; symbolic of the way in which, even when promoting her music, she was still a housewife. In analysing her work, we gain two things. First, we can use her music to garner an understanding of the genre as an inherently reflective one, one that adopts the political and social moods of its audience. Secondly, we can see a conflicting attitude towards the housewife role in general, as Wells consistently contradicted her public persona through her prominent career as primary family breadwinner.

The second of these chapters look at the career of Tammy Wynette, who famously caused controversy with women’s liberation groups through her hit “Stand By Your Man,” perceived to be in praise of passive domesticity. She too frequently grounded her songs in a domestic realm, but unlike Wells did not present herself as a stereotypical housewife. Instead, through her music we can see a continued destruction of the housewife trope, as she reflects the rising divorce rates of the time by consistently singing of failed relationships. This is mostly achieved through a consistent emotive approach to her music; she attempted to speak to her audience about her own trials and tribulations, and in doing so, ensured her career reflected a form of consciousness raising, as gained prominence in the women’s liberation movement. Both Wynette and consciousness raising groups occupied a similar role, though for different
demographics, using emotive narratives to connect to women about shared experiences.

The final chapter focuses on Loretta Lynn, a woman whose unashamed promotion of independent womanhood through her lyrics caused controversy within the South. Her career has been marked by songs discussing issues prominent within the women’s liberation movement, including divorce and birth control. Despite this, she openly rejected the women’s liberation movement, and adhered to many traditional ideals of domesticity. Ultimately, she has proven a subversive figure in the history of country music, undermining many of the traditional expectations of Southern women.

These women existed in a social position halfway between these two movements – even if they occupy opposite ends of the political spectrum – placing them in an intriguing historical position. And yet there is a notable lack of academic analysis that focuses on this. This is what this thesis has attempted to rectify, contributing to a discussion to further our understanding of the genre. Ultimately, these women were effectively able to adopt of the ideologies or methodologies of the women’s liberation movement, and transplant them into a Southern context. Their considerable success can thus be used as a marker to understand the form prominent feminist ideals took in the South throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s.
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