

LAVENDER COWBOY

NO. 4



nope
@LilNasX

u think they ready????!! 🐱🐱 @peppapig



7:53 PM · Jul 22, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

6.7K Retweets 69.3K Likes

Yippee-i, yippee-oh
Yippee-i, yippee-oh, yippee-ay
Which sounds rather silly, but ev'ry hillbilly
Spends half his life singing that way

He was just a lavender cowboy
With only three hairs on his chest
And he rode on a filly called Daffydowndilly
The prettiest horse in the West

Ev'ry morning they went out together
While the others looked on in dismay
'Cause he'd round up the cattle a-ridin' side-saddle
Because he preferred it that way

He was just a lavender cowboy
Who committed a terrible sin
He went out on a bender and slugged a bartender
And stole all the strawberry gin

So the posse was sent out to find him
And bring him back dead or alive
And they knew as they went they were hot on the scent
By the smell of Chanel No.5

And they found him a-lyin' unconscious
With blood running all down his chin
Till they looked a bit closer and what do you know, sir
They found it was strawberry gin

So, they shot the lavender cowboy
And said as they layed him to rest
You'll be happier now, boy, you can't be a cowboy
With only three hairs on your chest

—Harold Hersey, "The Lavender Cowboy," 1923

INTERSECTIONS AT THE OLD TOWN ROAD



The week of March 19, 2019, Luke Combs’s “Beautiful Crazy” was at the top of the country charts, beginning what would be an eleven-week run at the number one spot. “Beautiful Crazy” is mostly unremarkable as a country love song in 2019: there are some strings that bear a loose connection to early country music, and Combs has a Southern twang. Fairly new to the country scene, Combs himself is a white guy with scraggly facial hair, an ex-football player from Asheville, North Carolina—one of the more liberal enclaves of the American South. He is very much a Nashville country act; his follow-up single was filled with a Lynyrd Skynyrd-style big guitars and rife with similes (always a hallmark of country) about football teams and references to Carolina. It was called “Beer Never Broke My Heart.” If you heard “Beautiful Crazy,” you might recognize it as a

country song, but it could easily crossover to the pop charts as, say, an Ed Sheeran single. Highly produced, digestible noise.

“Beautiful Crazy” is a footnote to the story of the March 19 Billboard charts, however, shadowed by the number nineteen entry, which would only spend one week on those charts. Riding high on the waves of the Yee Haw Agenda, Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” would become the musical event of 2019, combining Southern hip-hop influences with country and sounds of the American West. Sonically, it brushes up against what has been called “urban music” with its trap influences but its imagery, its video, and in many ways its core sound would fall within the genres of country music. Billboard declared otherwise, the internet think-piece farm went into overdrive, and country’s racism was taken to task. Lil Nas X would win the brass ring, spending a record-setting nineteen weeks at number one. Billy Eilish would overtake Lil Nas X at week twenty, but Blanco Brown, who operates in a similar hybrid mode as Lil Nas X with an equal flair for virality over Tik Tok, would have his own run atop the country charts. The stereo bandwidth widens, country becomes more inclusive, case closed.

In promotional material for his documentary on country music, Ken Burns said of Lil Nas X: “I sort of believe that the reason things are so tightly categorized is commerce insists on this. We’re upset commerce isn’t going to put him on a list, at least initially, even though this is a great country song. And it’s because people are so short-sighted.” Burns adds that Lil Nas X’s success is an affront to his detractors at Billboard. Lil Nas X becomes a symptom of an (long) emergent force in the culture concerning racial belonging, style, and content.

But the success of Lil Nas X does not undo history or the forces that caused the uproar. Lil Nas X’s stick in the country mud did not dissolve into a clear picture of racial and cultural harmony. Rather, his phenomena begs a closer look at the sonic expectations of country music and hip-hop, their geographical and

landscape connotations, and the visual economies that each genre relies on and traffics in and holds onto for these commercial interests. Effectively, these are questions of genre and the expectations that each musical category lays out; these are not merely aural but social and political, embedded in complex histories of place and the sounds and images that connote that.

The geography of country & western music has aligned with the Tornado Alley region, Texas, and most notoriously the American South—regions that have less to do with borderland cowboys and, since the Southern Strategy, gets tied up in a conservative leaning political programs. Country music concerns itself with the ground of the country and its core values: it is avowedly American in a patriotic and even nationalist sense. Johnny Cash plays the masculine cowboy, Tammy Wynette the faithful wife. Kid Rock trades in his rock-rap gambit to play country songs at Mitt Romney rallies. The Dixie Chicks are scorned by the country establishment for their excoriation of George W. Bush's war mongering. In response to Toby Keith's decision to play the pre-inauguration festivities in Washington D.C. in 2017, Ron Pen of the John Jacob Niles Center for American Music at the University of Kentucky "If you superimpose maps of listening demographics of country music versus urban music, you'll probably find a one-to-one match."

The assumption lurking behind Pen's claim is perhaps a common one, and one that is easily to find evidence for in the outright homophobia of Big & Rich, the masculine posturing of bro country favorites Blake Shelton and Brad Paisley, or the gun-toting, Fox News favorite Hank Williams, Jr. But on the flip side are the likes of Kacey Musgraves and Rascal Flatts, the former's whose personae especially trades in a certain form of marketable liberalism, or Chely Wright who traded in her "Single White Female" days to marry a woman. Of course, the reality here is always more complicated: Tammy "Stand by Your Man" Wynette gets married five times, and Paisley avows his support for Obama. To be American, and to be country, is to contain contradictions.

Of course, country is the musical equivalent to the romance novel or the horror film: hugely popular but relegated to the place of “genre” music. Hip-hop lacks the falsely neutral charge of “pop” but is ubiquitous, undeniably the most significant musical force in America and maybe the world. Racialized much like country music, hip-hop is an outcropping of R&B, Motown, and Soul, a hallmark of what radio DJs would begin calling “urban music” in the 1970s.*

If we take these definitions, country and hip-hop seem to posit two primary oppositions around place and race: black and white, urban and rural (and perhaps a third, blue and red). How to parse this field of opposites in a post-Lil Nas X world? Enter Welsh country queen Raymond Williams, writing in 1973 that “the contrast of country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society.” These dichotomies—country and hip-hop, urban and rural—are part of a sustaining fantasy of how we chop up and categorize styles and people, grouping identities and understanding the tastes, preferences, and ideologies that animate producers and consumers. I am interested in what happens where the Old Town Road meets the JMZ, when the inner-city freeway speed limits rise five miles per hour faster.

The project takes into account country and Southern hip-hop not only because of their sites of production but because of how those sounds and their related visuals construct our sense of place—the places they emerge from and produce fantasies of. Country music, not only because of its relationship to Nashville, generally connotes the South and wide open spaces of Tornado Alley, despite its appeal and origins outside of it. Hip-hop on the other hand emerged in the Bronx, but hit the the rest of the country in the 1980s hard in fast. The South (particularly the urban South) became a critical region for the genre in the 1990s, and those various styles have exerted an incredible influence since. While acts such as 2 Live Crew in Miami (really a California

*The term “contemporary urban” has its roots with DJ Frankie Crocker, promoting jazz, disco, and R&B on New York’s WWRL (as well as at Studio 54, in Blaxploitation films, and later at LA’s KUTE. Crocker had a golden touch and helped this become the heart of pop music, though the term “urban” would later meet flack, perhaps most famously with Tyler, the Creator calling “urban music” “a politically correct way to say the n-word” in 2020, a call which spurred some change in a still racist music industry.

act that was made popular in Miami by Luke Skyywalker) or Da Brat and TLC in Atlanta are relevant to these regional history as are Petey Pablo and Young Money, my reading focuses especially on acts that explicitly trade in some sonic or visual notion of the South. These include early foundational contributions to trap in Houston, Atlanta's running away with the trap baton, New Orleans bounce, and Memphis crunk. Fundamentally, the question asked is how these genres construct our sense of the South, of rural, and urban, and how their categorical limits are undone by the realities of the music.

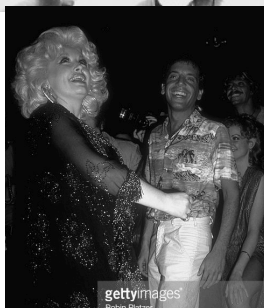
THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY:

yee haw agenda edition

In the late 1970s and through the 1980s, Dolly Parton was perhaps at the peak of her visibility (it's tough to say fame: icons are forever), regularly appearing on television and in films. She was living part-time in New York where she was frequently caught on camera with some of the eventual gay icons of the era, acting as an unlikely point of contact between the Steve Rubell era of clubbing in midtown and the muddier East Village scene.

In 1980, Parton gave a tour of her Upper East Side apartment to Huell Howser for a *Country People* segment on Manhattan's CBS affiliate. At the time, Parton was shooting what would be one of the most self-assured film debuts ever in *9 to 5*. The apartment, decorated by Barbara Rosen, is filled with books she claims to never have read, save a white leather copy of the New Jerusalem Bible. The walls of her apartment are full of art. An article published in the March 11, 1979, issue of the *Daytona Beach Sunday News Journal* notes that Parton's manager at the time, Sandy Gallin, had built Parton's art collection, which includes two works by Claes Oldenburg and a single Rauschen-

Friends of ~~dorothy~~ dolly



berg. Parton admits a preference for the Chattanooga-born Ben Hampton, whom she tells calls a Tennessee Norman Rockwell. More accurately, Hampton is a down-home Thomas Kinkade. His canvases (and prints) cast a nostalgic depiction of natural decay and settlements belonging to lower-class rural folks. His class politics, even if accidental, are far more interesting than the most



nostalgic version of Rockwell Parton is likely conjuring.

Of her art collection, Parton tells the paper: “When I see a picture I like, I buy it, whether it costs a lot or a little. But I to be honest and tell you some of the pictures in this apartment cost a lot and I can’t help thinkin’: ‘Good Lord I coulda done that in the first grade.’ Guess that just go to show you I ain’t got no taste.” Parton’s here plays a familiar appeal as a down-home country person, whose dalliance in the city with its urban/e constructions and “high art” have had no effect on the essentially Southern character. Always knowing her brand, Parton sheds the implications of her urban sophisticate home, positioning herself as a Jesus-worshipping working woman.

This trope of simple country folk is one on which ideas of country are commonly understood, and we see it play out again in Jimmie Allen’s 2019 video for “Make Me Want To,” in which a shrouded woman visits Allen in his humble Airstream trailer home seeking alms. Allen obliges, and the white woman reveals herself to be a blinged-out fairy godmother. She gifts Allen a





magic wand that allows him to class up his life; when he flicks his wrist, he upgrades the trailer to one of those six-figure new builds that characterize the pricier planned communities of growing Southern cities like Atlanta and Nashville. Allen goes to his strip mall juice bar job (not the type of bar one would imagine when he sings of hole-in-the-wall joints and barstools). He meets a girl and, with a flick of his wand, upgrades his car from a beat-up sedan to a Porsche (the same car Lil Nas X name drops in “Old Town Road”), until his female companion nixes that idea; he waves his wand again to transform the vehicle into a more country-appropriate F-150 with flashy rims, American (not Italian) made; ready for country roads and country jams. The video then follows the couple to a white cube-style art gallery, the apotheosis of their magical class transformation, where they jump into a Caillebotte-esque rainy street scene (ignoring the urban melancholy of that allusion to Industrial Revolution Paris).

Allen’s video demonstrates something about the limits and possibilities of country as a genre, particularly in its visual cues. The track sounds in every way like a country song from 2019, big guitars from a post-Garth Brooks stadium era, and the video visually conveys a familiar narrative of good Southern values, with kindness and charity guiding Allen to a life of riches and heteronormative love. Even if Allen’s relationship to wealth is more

Aladdin-style aspirational than Parton's, who walks a tightrope with her wealth (successful but still down-home), the undergirding values are the same. Good Christian values—country values untainted by the ills of the big city—win out.

Allen's success within the genre of country music is important insofar as it shows that country is not necessarily a whites-only space. Country has embraced Charley Pride and DeFord Bailey in past decades, and more recently Mickey Guyton and Darius Rucker, the latter being one of the few people of color in the Country Music Hall of Fame. But the spectrum of skin tones at the Grand Ole Opry for the most part remains light on melanin, and there are plenty of examples that show the policing of the genre along racial lines, well beyond Lil Nas X. We see it when Beyoncé's performance of "Daddy Lessons" with country pariahs the Dixie Chicks at the 2016 Country Music Association Awards causes traditionalist Alan Jackson to walk out of the awards and triggers a social media backlash ("#KeepinItCountry"). We see it again when the Grammy's country committee rejects the same song from eligibility, despite its resolutely country sound. (As a comparison, Beyoncé's one-off performance of "Irreplaceable" with Sugarland at the more pop-focused American Music Awards in 2007 hardly registered.) Jimmie Allen or Kane Brown can have success in the same way that Luke Bryan can because he ascribes fully to the country way of life: its values, its ethos, its





images, its city, its region. When Lil Nas X starts mixing up these symbols, or when Beyoncé wants to dip her toes in the water, they face blockages and are treated as strangers in a strange land despite hailing from the exact geographies of the south, Atlanta and Houston respectively.

The geographical landscape of country is of course a historical phenomenon dating back to the patterns of white settlement in the United States and of course relies on the migration of Anglo-Celtic music to musical traditions from black slaves, which are at the heart of all American music. This musical style would eventually earn the name hillbilly music, though more appreciatively would sometimes be called folk.

These patterns of migration shed light on how sounds and images developed across decades and through spaces. The namesake of this publication is an excellent example. Originating as a poem by Harold Hersey in 1923, the poem detailed the story of a cowboy with “only two hairs on his chest” who, despite his small frame, is presented as a hero, dying to save a woman. When it was committed to song in the 1930s as part of a rise in cowboy culture (more on that later), songwriters began to shift the song into a mocking example of failed masculinity. The lavender cowboy no longer expressed the variability of the physique of a hero; instead, he served as a negative example. Cover versions of “Lavender Cowboy” by Ewen Hall, Bob Skyles, Burl Ives, and Sons of Erin each play out different dimensions of their era’s

homophobia, differently reveling in the cowboy's death. As the twentieth century played out, country music gained popularity in Great Britain and Ireland. It returned to its origins, but with the accrued influence of black blues and soul music, as well as the many instruments that had come to the United States through the slave trade, perhaps most notably the banjo.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Sons of Erin became a popular musical act on the rocky shores of Newfoundland with their Celtic folk song. In their repertoire, however, they included songs such as "Lavender Cowboy," camp-ing up their performance in a mocking vein. If Sons' performance evinces the obvious homophobia of the post-war country period, it also helps explain the white-washing of country music. In its export and transmutation away from its context and point of origin, country music began to serve a folk culture that was European in focus, which is to say, white. Further, this export to Newfoundland might help explain this country-as-folk appeal of the genre. That is, Newfoundland is working class, largely disenfranchised, and a part of the Maritime Provinces, on which violence was committed against both indigenous people and earlier settlers. Not only are there ties between the displayed Acadians and Louisiana, there are moments of its history that rhyme with the American South. A folk culture feeds identities for these people, even if the artifacts of that culture arrive from elsewhere.

This folk identification has been an enduring surface feature of country music. Think Loretta Lynn singing "You don't see no city when you look at me / 'Cause a country is all I am / I love runnin' bare footed / Through the old corn fields / And I love that country ham," from which you can draw a direct line to the more explicitly nativist shout of something like Shelton's "red red red red rednecks" in "Boys 'Round Here" who "don't know how to do the Dougie." While country has been guilty of its own self-parody, its most explicit form came from Sweden's Rednex, whose "Cotton Eyed Joe" remains one of the most notorious singles of the 1990s. Despite its techno beat fuelling 'Eurotrash'



Lavender Cowboy (Sons Of Erin)

13,558 views

42

8

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oldirishladdie

Published on Mar 18, 2010

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Jody Coady 2 weeks ago

This wouldn't fly today. Cute and funny, love the SOE



REPLY



Lav Cow 6 years ago

The lavender cowboy will not be corrupted by the ruthless ideals of the wild west.



REPLY

fantasies, “Cotton Eye Joe” is a long-standing country tune that dates to before the Civil War. The music video for “Cotton Eye Joe” depicts the send-up implied by their name: toothless country bumpkins fiddling and hollering in a hay barn. In other videos, Rednex play Civil War soldiers or don indigenous-style garb. While their recordings and “Cotton Eye Joe” prove the sonic

elasticity of the country song, they rely on tropes of the backwards South, ingratiating class-insensitive images and stereotypes to novelty effect that remains beloved by Americans at baseball games.

The sonic and visual pun of Rednex—which plays out in cowboy/Native American fantasies—is valuable for pointing out the enduring figure of the hillbilly in what was once called hillbilly music. Anthony Harkins writes that the enduring popularity of the hillbilly in popularity is rooted in its multiplicity. “‘The Hillbilly’ served the dual and seemingly contradictory purposes of allowing the ‘mainstream,’ or generally nonrural, middle-class white, American audience to imagine a romanticized past, while simultaneously enabling that same audience to recommit itself to modernity by caricaturing the negative aspects of premodern, uncivilized society.” This phenomenon—of the hillbilly as the white other of Appalachia and the Ozarks—of course belongs to a longer tradition of ethnographic fascination with the American South by the Northeast, running through the twentieth century. As an image, it becomes emblematic of whiteness. In a key work to this broader history, Goodie Mob namecheck Bill Clinton—someone clearly trading on hillbilly ideas—in their track “Dirty South,” referring to him as a Clampett: “Do you think that Clampett will sick his goons on me?” And while Goodie Mob’s evo-



cation cites an important racial dimension to the term, it bears mentioning there is an alternate history to both the hillbilly and the redneck. In postwar Chicago, Southern ex-pats settled in a region called Hillbilly Harlem, many of whom engaging in intersectional struggles with the Black Panthers in the 1960s. While this is an offshoot of a term whose etymology dates back to around 1900, redneck had an earlier association in the 1920s and 1930s, suggesting interracial struggle and communism in the class struggles of the United Mine Workers. In this context, redneck was used interchangeably with “Bolshevik.” While these etymological ruptures have little bearing on the history of country music, it is worth flagging them only to challenge the perceived racial discord suggested by each term.

More broadly, country music’s great historian Bill C. Malone has laid out a rigorous history of the genre that attends to its developments and debts. He writes that because of the genre’s many strands, off-shoots, and contradictions, no term can encapsulate the essence of what we call country: “It is a vigorous hybrid form of music, constantly changing and growing in complexity, just as the society in which it thrives also matures and evolves...the massive commercialization it has undergone is merely a facet of that larger technological and communications revolution which has so radically transformed American popular tastes and steadily worked to pull the rural, socially conservative South into the homogenizing mainstream of America.”

While some of these historical patterns flows into Texas and Oklahoma, an alternate landscape and cowboy economy provided a different set of visuals. These started to coalesce in Mississippi (or maybe Alabama?) born Jimmie Rodgers, the godfather of country music, as he adopted Texas as his home, but matured in Gene Autry, whose evolution in the 1930s from a hillbilly singer to a more polished radio act in Chicago eventually landed him acting jobs in Hollywood on Westerns. Malone writes, “Largely as a result of Hollywood exploitation, the concept of ‘western music’ became fixed in the public mind.

After the heyday of Gene Autry the term ‘western’ came to be applied even to southern rural music by an increasing number of people, especially by those who were ashamed to use the pejorative term ‘hillbilly.’” It was then in Hollywood that the idea of the cowboy became instilled, with Nudie the Taylor producing rhinestone-studded country attire and inspiring what would then have more accurately been called hillbilly acts—regardless of their provenance on the Eastern Seaboard, the Gulf Coast, the Southwest, or Canada and Australia—to adopt the image and the style of the cowboy.

Blips and outliers would of course complicate the political arc of the cowboy and cowboy culture narratives. Once again tipping my hat to Malone, even Autry sang labor songs including “The Death of Mother Jones.” Further, the Hollywood machinery and success of Autry would encourage economic interests from all corners: Los Angeles radio became a popular source of country music, and New York became a hotspot for writing country & western songs, attracting songwriters from around New England, some with classical training. The pervasiveness of the cowboy figure and its related romanticism—particularly during the Depression and wartime—might have fed into a national imaginary that fed on Manifest Destiny myths and nostalgia, but its manifestation in the twentieth century and as a hallmark of country music was largely a consequence of a Hollywood symbolic order, more a free-floating signifier than anything with authentic ties to



the countryside where buffalo roam.

In the wake of Gene Autry, cowboys would become a bona fide sensation, consuming the visual field of country music. There would be singing cowboys to satisfy every identity category. Even the racial lines were crossed when Herb Jeffries debuted as the singing black cowboy. But this was still an era of the white-hat cowboy. In subsequent decades, country music would face mounting pressure from the onset of rock 'n' roll (itself a Southern phenomenon in dialogue with British culture, borrowing heavily from black music). In response to this pressure, the Bakersfield Sound would emerge in the 1950s in California with folks including Merle Haggard. Nashville would develop its own sound, purged of the steel-y sounds of strings and hillbilly instruments, popularized by folks including Tammy Wynette and Charley Pride. This more radio-friendly sound would adopt the name "Countrypolitan," one of the surest linguistic signs that country music had grown from its hillbilly origins.

If the rebellious nature of rock had another lesson for country to teach, it would come in the form of personae. Country music often traded in family values despite the tempestuous and tormented personal lives of its leading families. Haggard, Willie Nelson, and Johnny Cash would herald a new era of heightened masculine performance. If country had gone urban, it had also traded in its white hats for black ones. The 1970s would become an age of outlaws, a turn that reflects in the masculine performance that pervades country to this today.

Like always, country would contain contradictions. But the Countrypolitan sound and the outlaw image seem to be the moment that confers a loose sense of definition onto the genre. You can draw a line from Dolly Parton to Kacey Musgraves without having to go on too many detours. And these artists would gleefully invest in their country images; cowboy boots and hats were a must, as was country charm, nevermind that the cowboy garb was more proper to the West than the Southern hills and farms

many of these artists hailed from.

And despite the urbanization and expansion of country music across its history, it has remained invested in this nativist fantasy. Quoting Harkins again, the enduring popularity of the hillbilly in popular culture was because the figure of the hillbilly “allowed [audiences] to come to terms with the ambiguities in their own lives in a time of rapid and often disorienting change.” Country music thus casts an odd figure, constantly evolving and changing, expanding across the United States and world, while doubling down on a lost, down-home vision. It becomes valuable to attend to country music as a genre. Lauren Berlant writes that genres “provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art. The waning of genre frames different kinds of potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates.” It becomes valuable to see country music in this light. Though it is a broad field, it constantly produces something that is nostalgic and backward looking, relying on its fascination with its self, and a tie to roots that is fantasizes but often fails to understand, producing a challenged notion of place and whiteness.

If country’s herstory spans centuries, hip-hop has a much more contemporary one, taking off in the Bronx in the 1970s and finding its second home in greater Los Angeles. Categorically, a definition of hip-hop could be taken from Ronald Savage’s “six elements of the hip-hop movement,” named in 1990 in response to Public Enemy: Consciousness Awareness, Civil Rights Awareness, Activism Awareness, Justice, Political Awareness, and Community Awareness in music. The sonic differences of early Bronx beats and Public Enemy point toward the breadth and expansion of the genre and the difficulty of pinning down something essential about hip-hop, but these elements exemplify something of its ethos and guideposts. Or, to evoke Berlant again, to think of the ways it operates as a genre, “a state of animated

and animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become an event.”

In the late 1980s, the New York-Los Angeles stranglehold on the popular consciousness and airplay of hip-hop was largely still active, though the South saw some action especially out of Houston. But in 1994, Atlanta duo named Outkast released its debut album, pushing forward an agenda of bouncy beats and drawled lyrical styling. Their *Southern-playalisticadillac* funky music that would become a hallmark of the Dirty South style of hip-hop, making space for future acts such as Master P and T.I. This initial album was grown like a Georgia peach, recorded in Atlanta, produced by Atlanta legends Organized Noize, and released by L.A. Reid and Babyface’s Atlanta-based LaFace Records. When André 3000 accepted the award for best new artist at the historic



1995 Source Award to derisive outcries from the audience, he rebuffed the crowd: “the South got something to say.”

Southern studies scholar Regina Bradley calls André 3000’s Source Awards decree a rallying cry for contemporary Southern black folk “with no expiration date.” For Bradley, Southern hip-hop and Outkast especially respond to a historically configured identity of the Southern black victim that was defined through the triangulation of the Antebellum South, the Reformation, and the modern Civil Rights era. Southern hip-hop gave voice to figures who had never ascended to MLK Jr.’s mountaintop. “[Outkast] took being outcasts and utilized it to move past something that is called South-ness—which is the connection of ideas, experi-

ences, realities to the physical region we know as the South—to Southern-ness, which is the conceptualization of South, the ability to create worlds outside of the physical, cultural, and historical renderings of what it means to be Southern.” Outkast achieved this through their work with Organized Noize, creating Cadillac hip-hop that relied less on sampling than horns and bands, pulling from Atlanta’s funk tradition. This was music for blasting on a car stereo (this facet of driving culture would be crucial to Southern hip-hop overtaking of New York’s ‘subway’ hip-hop on its way to becoming American hip-hop). But Outkast also took a deeper view onto the South, calling on an Afrofuturist tradition on their 1996 *ATLiens*, taking this further in 1998’s *Aquemini* which offered Southern-style storytelling as key to their Southern hip-hop.

On 2000’s *Stankonia*, Andre 3000 announces he is coming “live from the center of the Earth. “Seven light years below sea level we go / Welcome to Stankonia, the place from which all funky things come / Would you like to come?.” The center of the Earth is a deeper underground than the basement where Organized Noize changed hip-hop, a stranger, blacker science fiction than Jules Verne’s, and also one that is directly under the Southwest Atlanta that introduced the bounce sound to hip-hop. Bradley calls this intro track a dispatch where Outkast declare the creation of a “new world with the south as the center of identity, the south as the center of politicking, the south as the center of music.”

Outkast’s discography stands out as an auteur case of hip-hop rather than a more generic example of what Southern hip-hop, but Bradley’s articulation of their shift to Southern-ness exemplifies something critical to the story of Southern hip-hop as it pertains to place. That is, Southern hip-hop became what it is because of its ability to think critically about what the South is and could be sonically, visually, rhetorically, and historically. This story is largely of the urban South, but it is a version of the South that, as typified by the 1995 Source Awards, was built in dialogue with the region and how it seen by its neighbors.

Outkast's rise was followed by a single that would provide an even more declarative sense of Southern hip-hop. In late 1995, taking a term from Cool Breeze, Goodie Mob dropped their album *Soul Food* featuring the track "Dirty South," a collaboration with Big Boi and . Riddled with jabs at Bill Clinton and OJ Simpson, the chorus asked, "What you n****s know about the Dirty South?" continuing an attitude of Southern pride in a regionally divided hip-hop game while also recognizing the ways in which the South was cast as other. The eventual success of T.I., Master P, Lil Jon, Young Thug, Lil Pump and a slew of other acts would prove the South as a fertile ground for hip, though the phenomenon had begun years earlier with numerous groups in the South.

In Houston, rap had caught on in the 1980s with folks heating up the Rhinestone Wrangler club. Houston's Geto Boys dropped their self-titled third album in 1990, produced by Rick Rubin. That album featured the track "Gangsta of Love," which despite its dubious gender politics, is noteworthy here for its heavy sampling of "Sweet Home Alabama." While it's worth bracketing Lynyrd Skynyrd's as Southern Rock and thus a different field of music than what we've explored thus, their music did influence stadium country music and trades in some of the right-wing, ethnonationalism that is not foreign to Nashville's big export. Skynyrd was also brazen in its use of the Confederate flag, conceiving the track as a diss to Neil Young's left-leaning "Alabama" and "Southern Man," a fact that of course makes the Geto Boys' use of the track all the more charged.

Although he was talking about Run DMC, Spike Lee, the brothers Marsalis, Kellie Jones, and Lorna Simpson, Trey Ellis nodded to this phenomenon when he wrote "The New Black Aesthetic" in 1989. Recognizing a shift from black artistic production of the Civil Rights era and the seventies, he saw at the end of the 1980s an aesthetic "that shamelessly borrows and reassembles across both race and class lines." Ellis's excitement was frequently

criticized, not least for its class politics, but his point would be important to understanding a kind of porousness in cultural production and the way that black artists navigate white spaces.

“Gangsta of Love” nods to earlier Houston-born blues musician Johnny “Guitar” Watson, whose 1957 “Gangster of Love” became his biggest hit in the 1970s. Watson’s record set the imprint for the later work of Geto Boys, describing a lothario who takes any woman he wants and strikes fear in the heart of famed cowboys Billy the Kid and Jesse James because of this swagger. “Gangster of Love” plays with the figure of the cowboy much like country music does, or later hip-hop would with the gangster, reminding us that these two figures are cut from the same cloth: macho figures with an individual sense of justice and morals. “Gangster of Love” is an important example because it draws parallels between the temporal and visual associations of the cowboy and the gangster (a favourite figure in rap circles) within its lyrics. Much as Lil Nas X would later draw comparisons between the steed and the whip, Watson sings, “I jump on my white horse, Cadillac” and then rides off.

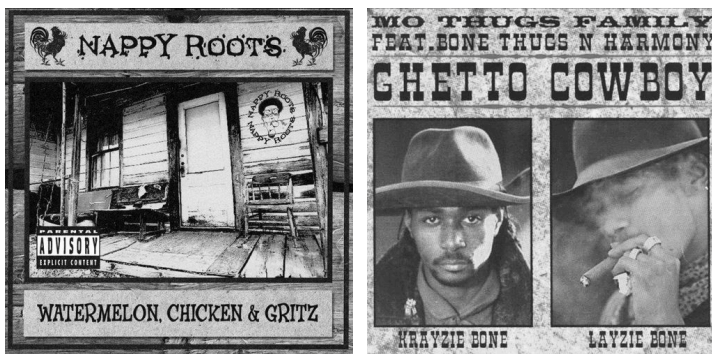
Geto Boys and most of the Organized Noize helped set the stage for Southern hip-hop’s most organized sub-genre: trap. Seedlings of trap can be found in Port Arthur, TX duo UGK’s early EP *The Southern Way*, which featured “Short Texas,” a classic early 90s track on buying drugs in the trap. On *Hip-Hop Evolution*, UGK’s Bun B would later claim, “The mentality of being a Southern rapper, even more specifically a Texas rapper, was the fact of how people looked at Southerners in general, as being a slower, less intelligent individual, as opposed to an East Coast or Northerner. We were fighting not just against each other but against the outward image of who we were. So if we wanted to be heard, we had to scream loud.” Generally speaking, trap would be characterized by a heavy use of drum machines with a slightly slower sound than Northern or West Coast hip-hop, more gospel, more soulful, even in the trap.

As a genre, trap would take on greater effect in Atlanta with Lil Jon and DJ Toomp, who was behind a lot of the major hip-hop developments of the 1990s and 2000s and then on T.I.'s (also from Atlanta) second 2003 sophomore album *Trap Muzik*. Conventional definitions of trap focus on its thematics—the place where drugs are sold—and its use of the high-hat. In a 2012 article from Stereogum, Puja Patel goes farther: “It’s a heavy, bouncing pulse that lies within a few degrees of a 75-beat-per-minute tempo and often uses hyper snares and knocking 808s to break the beat into an energetic double or quadruple time. Focused drums are simultaneously reflective of the sauntering swag of the South and the aggressiveness of the trap way of life; high-hats that are shrill and tightly wound and bass that thuds with earth-trembling weight. There’s orchestral depth as well; a melodic loop may be paired with horns and synths that layer upon each other to create massive builds that make way for dramatic drops.” What’s important about trap here is its origins, a Southern original that has been crucial to hip-hop in the twenty-first century. Though its origins are more than sonic or drug related. Producer Burn One notes, “At the beginning [trap] shared a foundation with the blues, like a lot of music from the South.... In Atlanta, trap music is strip club music. It’s hard to play anything else because, as a sound, it hits so hard. It’s brash.” Trap would evolve into trap rave and spill out across the states and into K-pop, but its origins in the South matter to this sense of place. Listen to Young Jeezy, Migos, Future, Lil Nas X, even T.I.’s 2018 *Dime Trap*. Trap was always connected to an Atlanta lifestyle.

An important precursor to trap and Southern rap in general was Kilo Ali’s 1990 “Cocaine.” Recorded by Bronx producer Shy D, “Cocaine” has a ’80s New York beat and a strong hook, channeling the wit of a 2 Live Crew track. But “Cocaine” was written in juvenile hall by Kilo Ali and meant as a cautionary tale. “Cocaine says she loves you, but she really don’t / She say ‘I’ll always be there,’ but she really won’t / Make you a big man, buy you a Uzi She say ‘Go kill your brother, or you gonna lose me’ / You

don't wanna lose her so you do what you are told / Headed for the chair, sixteen years old / Now you're in too deep, and you can't come back." "Cocaine" would exemplify the wit and social engagement of much Southern rap, which would also be valuable in understanding the ways that the gangster figure would migrate into Southern rap both through its own developments and the rise of gangsta rap.

Gangsta rap would start to take its hold on hip-hop as Geto Boys were gaining traction and as Kilo Ali released "Cocaine."

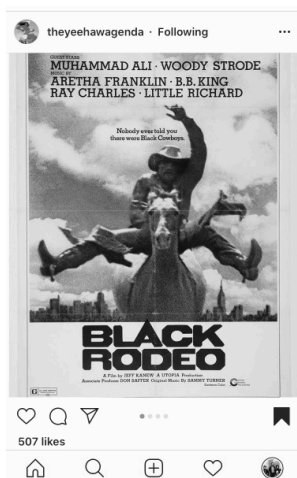


It would make use of a virulent rage at the state of social affairs and thematize the trap, albeit to different sonic effect. But it would impose the gangster as an indelible image onto the fabric of hip-hop. As hip-hop grew in popularity and record companies began pouring more money into it, the gangster would step off the streets and take on different connotations. Scarface—in the Pacino portrayal—would become an important touchstone. But in 1998 hip-hop supergroup Mo Thugs would drop their number one hit "Ghetto Cowboy" (Mo Thugs feat Bone Thugs-N-Harmony). In its music video, Mo Thugs attend to the stylistic cues of rural grit, more wild west than urban cowboy. The track trades in steel-y cowboy sounds and has a slow easy beat about "rootin', shootin', tootin'" and giddyin' up.

"Ghetto Cowboy" was not the first dalliance in hip-hop/western

crossovers. In 1985, Sir Mix-a-Lot dropped his “Square Dance Rap,” and country’s Bellamy Brothers would later release their “Country Rap.” In 1987, Kool Moe Dee recorded his own Western-themed video for the track “Wild Wild West,” which would later be heavily sampled on Will Smith’s track of the same name a decade later. If these tracks, save “Ghetto Cowboy,” feel more novelty, its perhaps because they are. But they help us get toward something important in the rise of Lil Nas X and the intersections of country and hip-hop, which is their shared visual economy. As Mo Thugs pointed out, the cowboy occupies a similar function as the gangster, living at the fringes of the law and following their own moral compass. Cowboys have, however, historically been white. Mo Thugs corrected this, reminding this that the West was in fact populated with many black cowboys who settled in the West during the Reconstruction era.

In 2017, Young Thug would drop a “yee haw” into “Family Don’t Matter.” This would spiral into a full-blown digital movement in 2018 with the Yee Haw Agenda seeing Tik Tok users donning cowboy hats, and celebrities ranging from Lil Nas X, Solange, and Cardi B donning cowboy couture, casting earlier style cues by Mary J. Blige, Dennis Rodman, and Lil Kim into something much bigger. The black cowboy had surfaced at an





earlier stage of history characterized by dramatic political and racial tension when Mario van Peebles released his film not-so-commercially successful *Posse* (1993). In the opening scene, Woody Strode plays a storyteller, drawing us into the world of the film. “There’s one thing

about time. No matter how much or how little passes, it changes things. People forget their past. They forget the truth. But pictures don’t leave. Forgotten gunslingers like Nat Love, Isen Dart, Cherokee Bill, and troops too like the Ninth and the Tenth. See people forget that almost one out of every three cowboys was black.... Over half of the original settlers of Los Angeles were black. But for some reason, we never hear their stories. Here, he call into question historical memory and the often overlooked history of Exodusters.

Posse’s figuring of the black cowboy is of course pertinent to its release in 1993, when van Peebles cast Pam Grier, Isaac Hayes, Nipsey Russell, Tone Lōc, and Big Daddy Kane to star in the film, creating a sort of historical continuum of the attitude and posturing of his father’s earlier Blaxploitation work with the then-emergent hip-hop attitude. The black cowboy was not unseen then. Woody Strode had been an important player in Westerns, notably John Ford’s 1960 *Sergeant Rutledge*, and Melvin van Peebles traded in the genre with his own Sweetback character. But the historical continuum posited by the younger van Peebles matters to this country/urban divide. Van Peebles also tapped Intelligent Hoodlum (now Tragedy Khadafi) to record an original track for the soundtrack alongside his father’s then-new “Cruel Jim Crow.” With its hip-hop credentials, *Posse* established affinities between the black cowboy and rap music and a visual record (even if it was fictionalized) of black folk in rural lands.

[Also in 1993, the US Postal featured real-life cowboy Bill

Pickett in its “Legends of the West” stamp set. Four years earlier, Pickett (1870–1932) had been posthumously inducted into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame, and in 1987, the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo had been established to highlight the ongoing achievements of black cowboys and cowgirls in rodeo.]

How to make sense of this emergent trend when *Posse* and Outkast and Geto Boys feel walled off from the wide surge in popularity that country was having in the early 1990s. In parallel, Billy Ray Cyrus captured the nation or when Garth Brooks was charting as one of the best-selling artists of the decade. As the decade progressed, St. Louis’ Nelly would show us that despite sharing a boot-scootin’ sensibility with Cyrus’s “Achy Breaky Heart,” his Dirty South-style “shimmy shimmy cocoa what” country grammar was a different dialect, if not language, than what they were speaking in Nashville.

The biggest story in country music in the 1990s was of course Garth Brooks, whose stadium production betrayed his humble background in Yukon, Oklahoma, but perhaps feeds a narrative of the urbanizing South (and West). While Brooks is the best case study for this phenomenon, scholar Jocelyn Neal positions it in relation to larger sociopolitical trends. “Country’s popularity also got a boost from the politics of the early 1990s, a time when Middle America latched onto music that purported to represent suburban, middle-class, and working-class values and a (mostly) white identity. These were the years when America elected a Southerner as president, began paying attention to the “soccer mom” demographic in its political rhetoric, and faced an economic recession that directed sympathetic attention to the working class.”

In both country and Dirty South hip-hop, there is always a sense of place, one that can be heard but not necessarily articulated. Dirty South hip-hop shares space with some of the attitudes of a more national brand of hip-hop with an interest in the enduring effects of segregationist urban planning and policy, partying, sex, and bling,



but draws these through the languid humidity of a Southern summer. In Dirty South hip-hop, the South manifests as an affect, taking its broader cues from a more national picture of hip-hop; country music made at the same time avows it values and screams its images, cf. the nativist fantasies of Florida Georgia Line (“Dirt”) or even Tim McGraw’s “Southern Girl”: “Kisses sweeter than Tupelo honey/ Little bit crazy like New Orleans / Memphis blue and Daytona sunny / Soft as cotton in some cut-off jeans.” Of course, Nelly would eventually collaborate with Tim McGraw in 2004 at the waning height of their collective notoriety and again with Florida Georgia Line in 2013. These collaborations, much like any similar ones with Willie Nelson and Snoop Dogg or Taylor Swift and B.o.B., feel more like novelties of a class of fame, but they also point toward country and hip-hop both heading beyond genre limitations or racial expectations and finding some kind of meeting point. (See *Hidden in*

the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music, edited by Diane Pecknold, for more on the history on the deeper history of black and white artists collaborating in country music.)

Perhaps the greatest success in the crossover terrain was Detroit's Kid Rock, whose 1999 "Cowboy" heralded the mainstream-ing of "country rap." Though Kid Rock in earnest began as a rapper, in retrospect his career-making record in the late 1990s feel more at best rap lite, relating more to the bratty posturing of peers like Limp Bizkit with a country rock flare. Country rap would ultimately achieve some noteworthiness through acts like Upchurch and the genre's most famous example Bubba Sparxxx, whose early success with his Interscope debut in 2001 is likely due to the force of Timbaland in the producing chair. Yet Sparxxx's identity has always traded in a country appeal with early tracks such as "Any Porch." On his 2013 track "Country Folks," Sparxxx raps on growing up with Tupac and "bangin'" Hank Williams in the boondocks. "Country fried, baptized in gravy / Can't wash off what the good Lord made ya," avowing a country identity that is indelible, a rite of birth, but still open to the sounds of hip-hop.

As Sparxxx might suggest, country hip-hop as a subgenre is sonically rooted in hip-hop, but it trades in themes more associated with country music: old dirt roads, gun-slinging cowboys, big fields. It is music's cronut: a compelling concept that almost



always fails in execution. It was not purely the domain of white folks, as the Kentucky group Nappy Roots produced a more sustained and critically acclaimed body of work that mixed hip-hop with images of rural and Southern life. “Country livin’, and the country cookin’ in a country kitchen / Good intention and strong religion, it’s a strong tradition / Kicked to mud off my boots and dust off my pants,” they rap on “Kentucky Mud,” another one of these allusions to something entrenched in the earthen material of the country.

Despite biases and industry expectations (cf. Billboard’s genres), there is nothing essential about country music or hip-hop. They are both, however, genres which impose sets of expectations, though these shift with time and the flows of culture. It is worth noting that country hip-hop acts like Bubba Sparxxx played more in hip-hop circles, but country spawned its own interest in hip-hop with acts like Big Smo, who dipped into raps about honky tonks provide evidence of the allowances that can be made in country music for a kind of country-fried hip-hop. Country’s version of the subgenre’s best example is likely aughts act Cowboy Troy, who (brilliantly) called his music “hick hop.” With Cowboy Troy, the backing music was inherently country as were his lyrical themes, even if their deliverance was not. Cowboy Troy’s act was through and through country-fried, even if his clumsy rhyming deliverance was derived more from Memphis or Atlanta than Nashville. Save Kid Rock, Bubba Sparxxx, and Nappy Roots, none of these acts achieved any great success, and posed little threat to the categorical rigidity of hip-hop or country.

As the cross-mingling of genres starts to close in on itself, it seems that country and hip-hop should dissolve into some kind of shared space, but their channels remain resolute. In a 2017 article on Darius Rucker’s country in *The New Yorker*, Amanda Petrusich wrote, “Country, as a genre, is obsessed with notions of patriotism, of purity, of some nondescript American-ness. Rucker has faced vitriol for his views, and for his work.... [But Rucker] has insisted on a path of his own, on breaching a frontier.” If the

frontier was once the untamed spaces of the West, it returns in the present as an abstract space of culture. More than perhaps any other genre since the 1980s, hip-hop has breached frontiers and furnished new languages and images of America. Could the tension between hip-hop and country be in vision: that hip-hop invests in remaking the world, while country is fundamentally invested in conserving it? This perhaps simplifies things too much and ignores the profound sense of place that both country and hip-hop project into the world, each with its own inflections of how those place can and should be. Afterall, neither country nor hip-hop are unified political projects (cf. Cardi B vs. Nicki Minaj, the Dixie Chicks contra Dolly Parton). By tracing histories of each genre, we can start to map the internal contradictions and external frictions that have led us to the current understandings of each genre, and also perhaps give a name to some of the more nebulous features of each genre.

When “Old Town Road” stormed popular culture in 2019 through a wave of memes and Soundcloud support (a platform that is more known for launching hip-hop than country careers), it encapsulated some many of these tensions and contradictions. At its core, the song is an anthem of Lil Nas X’s struggles and his last ditch effort to get the success that he would end up achieving in the first half of 2019. In his annotations on Genius, he writes: Lil Nas X conceived the song as country trap but when pushed by the *New York Times*, said if he had to choose, the song’s

[Intro: Billy Ray Cyrus]

Oh, oh-oh

Oh

[Refrain: Billy Ray Cyrus]

Yeah, I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road

I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more

I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road

I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more

(Kio, Kio)



ARTIST

Lil Nas X 6,838

4 months ago

When the car came along, the horse was basically obsolete at that point. It's like it's not really worth too much anymore. I literally had my dad paying my phone bill and a Twitter account. It's like I've got to make something shake, because I'm not going back to work. It's not happening. The Old Town Road would be where I'm at right now. I'm at this point where I could keep going, and it's limitless at this point.

Upvote +379

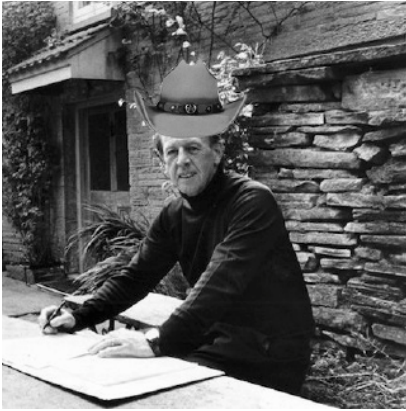
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leanings are more country. The song trades in the classic hip-hop/country dynamics we see, posing the car with its horsepower as the urban equivalent of the steed (in country, this might play out more as the F-150 rather than a Bentley, Porsche, or other whip). In the original music video, Lil Nas X played on the gun-slinging video game *Red Dead Redemption II*, drawing the kind of gangster comparisons we've seen previously with "Ghetto Cowboy" or *Posse* (and begging the question of how the Yee Haw Agenda has played out in video games). But with Columbia Records' and Billy Ray Cyrus's support, Lil Nas X leaned into the lyrics a little more, crafting a five-minute short set in the Old West where he plays a bank robber who awes Sheriff Chris Rock with his riding skills: "When you see a black man on a horse going that fast, you just gotta let him fly," Rock says admiringly.

In the aftermath of his escape with fellow bandit Billy Ray (Lil Nas X warns: "Last time I was here they weren't too welcoming to outsiders," jabbing at Billboard banning him from the country charts), Lil Nas X is chased down a time-warp tunnel that drops him into 2019 where his cowboy couture plays out against the urban locales more familiar to a hip-hop video and ultimately runs into a local two-stepping music hall.

In its visual economy, the video for "Old Town Road" once again



relied on the sorts of juxtapositions we have always seen at the intersection of country and hip-hop. But the attention and backlash that strike the lightning rod of Lil Nas X make us wonder if these tensions can ever be released or transformed into something else. To consider their constant irresolution, it is worth looking to other shores. More than a white Republican

stronghold, country music is a fertile ground for experimentation with rural and Southern life and what it allows. If Dolly Parton can move to New York, if Chely Wright can marry a woman, and if the Lavender Cowboy can live past his many deaths, so too can Lil Nas X (our own Lavender Cowboy) storm the gates of country and reveal to us the scrambled signals that are actively planning out in this zone, shifting the zone of expectations we have for country. Even Lil Nas X's development is an odd grassroots effort that relies on the technologies of German and Chinese companies and gives an entirely other image of that word grassroots. Again, Raymond Williams provides a valuable diagnosis from another country:

“as we see the whole process, we need to put the historical realities to the ideas, for at times these express, not only in disguise and displacement but in effective mediation or in offered and sometimes effective transcendence, human interests and purposes for which there is no other immediately available vocabulary. It is not only an absence or distance of more specific terms and concepts; it is that in country and city, physically present and substantial, the experience finds material which gives body to the thoughts.”

In conjuring Williams, it is perhaps also relevant to think through



what exactly are the desires behind these musical forms. In the forms of hip-hop, so much of the drive has been about an aural and visual language to name and give sound to the present. In the South especially, this has been driven by a malign status as, but the claim of the South in hip-hop in 2019 is undeniable and monumental.

Country music has since its inception had a fascination with its past—be it its Anglo-Celtic roots, the cowboy song, or the modern history of the genre. It has of course grown musically, but always preserves a fundamental nostalgia. Svetlana Boym underscores nostalgia's ethical ambiguities and the direction of its desires. Nostalgia does not desire a whole past but a fragmented one. "Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have direct impact on realities of the future," she writes. "Consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales." If country's recurrent desire for some essential version of the genre it might have been or the landscape it might have come from is ever present, what does this mean for the policing of the genre's boundaries—and the other divisions implied therein.

If the history of country music points toward anything, it is of a music obsessed with the hardships of America. Its very DNA is tied to immigration and dispossession of land, and also its greatest debts are to those who were forcibly removed from it.



As an American art, country music must acknowledge its debts to black cultural expression, and it must note its parallels to hip-hop. These are both musical styles born of place and indelible to a sense of America; these are sounds of the country.

The work of Lil Nas X and all his forebears at the intersections of the old town road and the urban interstate reveal to us adjoining musical worlds that testify to the increasing porousness of these spaces, ever more connected by fiber-optic cables and cars, visual economies and financial economies. Lil Nas X and the unseemly history of every genre-bending act that can before him leads us into a present in which Blanco Brown can ascend to the top of the country charts with his danceable “The Git Up.” Brown, who claims an equal influence from Outkast and Johnny Cash, shuffles between country and hip-hop beats across tracks, perhaps offering the best blending of urban and rural, country and hip-hop.

And then there is February 2019’s brilliant debut “Ransom” by Atlanta/Los Angeles act RMR. Building on the sampling in “Gangsta of Love,” “Rascal” borrows its melody entirely from Rascal Flatt’s 2004 megahit “Bless the Broken Road,” a big country ballad whose chorus delights in the pleasures that led to a current love: “This much I know is true / That God blessed the broken road / That led me straight to you.” RMR gives the song a trap twist: “And every sleepless night / Led me to where

I am / Bitches that broke my heart / They became hoes I scam / Show me a better way / Promise I'll quit this game / This much I know, it's true / I came up and so could you / And fuck the boys in blue." Its accompanying video features RMR flipping of the camera in Louis Vuitton Kevlar and waving firearms about. While the story is too new to know its reception, the track was removed from Apple Music and Youtube for apparent copyright violation. This early reception, coupled with a swell of interest from listeners, suggest the merging of country and hip-hop are still challenged. (The same week, Kane Brown and Jimmie Allen would be in the top five most played country tracks, while Justin Bieber would be atop the country charts.) But to echo Regina Bradley, when Andre 3000 said "the South got something to say," as she says, "he didn't say it with an expiration."

Nonetheless, we can this swell of music along with the Yee Haw Agenda suggest that popular culture is beginning to embrace the complexities that make up the history of the South, of hip-hop, and country music. But the examples that sit before us also reflect the many challenges rooted in the animating fantasies that prevent us from seeing these complexities. Somewhere down the blessed, broken old town road there is a Southernplayalisticadillacfunky sound that stretches the elasticity of genres, contaminating our horizons of expectation visually and sonically, a sound that we must continue to seek.



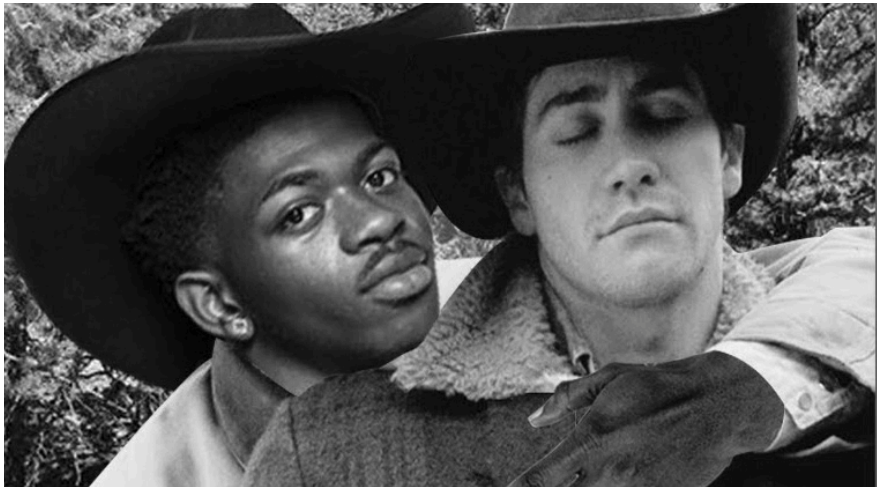
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