

## Commentary: In defense of country music



A deeper understanding of the meaning and origins of country music, following an enlightening chat with UC Davis Cinema and Digital Media Professor Jesse Drew

By ANGIE CUMMINGS — arts@theaggie.org

There is no need to fret, this is not a defense of the flag-waving, American conservative patriot brand of country music that takes up far too much of the limelight. It is merely an investigation into what went wrong, and how country music strayed so far from its beautifully radical roots. According to UC Davis' self-proclaimed country music spokesperson, UC Davis Cinema and Digital Media Professor Jesse Drew, it is not even close to accurate to claim this brand of music as true country.

With approximately 10,000 contemporary country songs revolving solely around pick-up trucks, beer and pretty girls being pretty, it's hard to imagine it's the same genre that brought us songs about economic justice, prisoners' rights and even the questioning of women's role in society.

Today's country music industry brilliantly co-opted the rural, working-class sounds and ideas of disdain for authority found in early country and folk music and aligned it with conservatism, thus stripping the left-leaning themes from traditional country music of any actual meaning. Today we are looking into the truth behind real country, its roots and the people who built it up (who are too often forgotten).

What we know as traditional country did begin as folk music back in the 19th and early 20th century, which were often stories and lessons of hard work and family values in addition to Christian gospels. Rooted in the all-American hope for better days and the promise of prosperity, country music was meant to be songs for everyday people, by those same people. Perhaps the most prominent name when it comes to this truthful kind of country is Johnny Cash — almost everyone has heard at least one of his songs, even if it wasn't of their own volition.

With hits like "Ring of Fire," "I Walk the Line" and his iconic duet with his wife (and equally fiery country star) June Carter Cash, "Jackson," Cash can be admired even solely for his powerful sound, and some often forget his controversial lyrics and political opinions. Once you listen to Cash's discography, you learn a few things about him. He had an incredible reverence for the working class of America, resented the military-industrial complex (before that term was even created) and his actions only work to back up his words. In the height of his career, he performed for prisoners in Folsom State Prison, and not only treated them like human beings but empathized with the horrible conditions they were put through — something for which he received widespread criticism. In 1972, he went so far as to perform in front of President Richard Nixon and overtly critique the Vietnam War as well as stand up for the rights of Native Americans.

Cash's extraordinarily left-leaning themes throughout his songs have often gone unnoticed, and audiences across the political spectrum have been enjoying his hits and deep, soulful twang for decades. Unfortunately, there were some country powerhouses that didn't get so much leeway, one being the women of country music who dared to sing about their experiences. Cash's own wife, Carter Cash, is one of these women who went through extreme ridicule throughout her career for simply living her life. She was in the spotlight from an early age, as a part of her family's band, "The Carters." After going through multiple divorces, audiences shunned her and questioned her faith as a "good Christian woman." Still, she remained an iconic voice in country music, known for her twang when she sang and her sharp wit offstage.


No good discussion of country music can go without a mention of Dolly Parton. Not only is she behind the traditionally feminist song (and film) "9 to 5" about women's lives in the workforce in the 1970s, but she is perhaps one of the most talented and influential musicians in the last few decades regardless of genre or gender. In addition to Parton and Carter Cash, many successful women in music have roots in this American folk tradition. One of note is Loretta Lynn and her extremely controversial song, "The Pill" from 1975, which is exactly what you may expect — an ode to her birth control pill letting her take back autonomy in her marriage and life. This song was ridiculed and subsequently banned from many radio stations, and yet Lynn kept on singing her truth and the realities of being a woman, rather than keeping to the status quo.

As so often happens, this deeply American tradition ended up excluding those who actually created it. The sounds we associate so closely with country music were created by enslaved Black people in the South — perhaps most notably, the banjo (aka the country-est country instrument), which was invented and carried on through generations by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and the southern U.S. Another iconic country sound that many might not even know of is the lap steel guitar, which helps artists create that twang essential to country music. This instrument came to the continental U.S. from Hawaii right after it was annexed, and when southern Americans heard the smooth melodic noise coming from the innovative way of playing the guitar, they quickly incorporated it into what Drew called the "heart of country music."

Country music is quintessentially American, not just in the sound and ideas behind it, but in the way it was created — it continues the American tradition of appropriating the talents and ideas of oppressed groups and marketing it towards a new (whiter) audience. Acknowledging the true roots and intent of American country music is the first step in taking back a truly radical and impassioned art form from the clutches of "God, guns and flags," as Drew said.

Written by: Angie Cummings — arts@theaggie.org

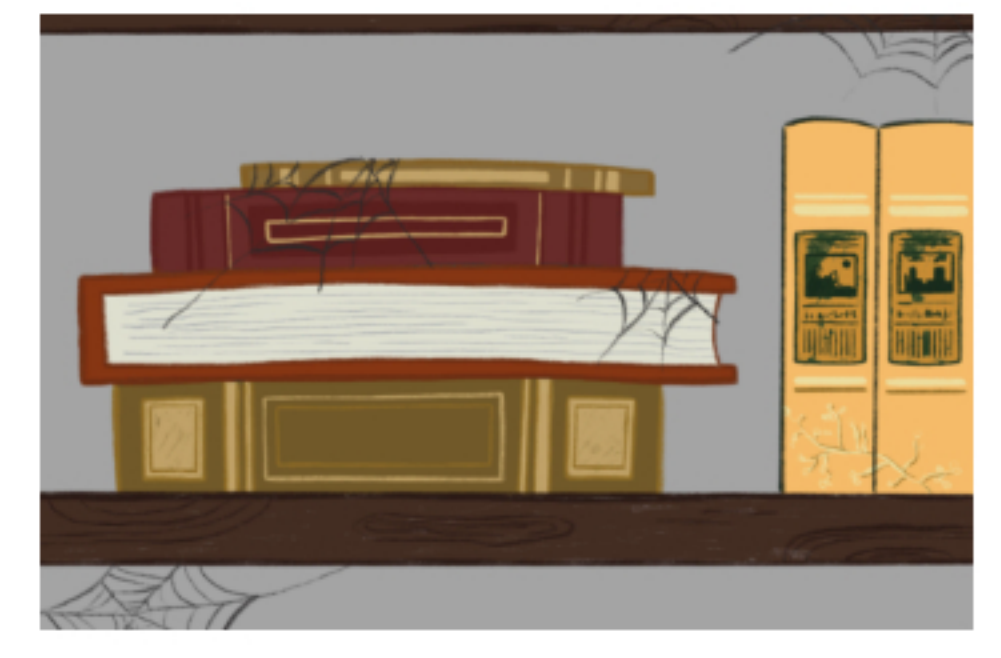
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