JOCELYN R. NEAL
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Email: jneal@email.unc.edu

"Tennessee Whiskey" and the Politics of Harmony

ABSTRACT In 2015, country singer Chris Stapleton, lauded for his allegiance to hard country music, stepped on stage at the Country Music Association annual awards show in Nashville, Tennessee, and knocked out a stunning performance of "Tennessee Whiskey." The moment was heralded by critics and fans alike as a celebrated return to roots-oriented, traditional, hard country music. But Stapleton's cover version rewrote the song over a historically significant soul groove. In so doing, he presented a musical-political statement about the past and present of country music that challenged its acknowledged racial politics. The analyses presented here, centered on Stapleton and Sturgill Simpson, weave these threads together into a sonic explanation of country music's contradictory senses of genre identity, musical style, and racial politics. They propose a new historical perspective on the confluence of country and soul in the early 1960s, most memorably realized in the two *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* albums that Ray Charles released in 1962. What emerges in conclusion is a subversive narrative that reinvents modern hard country music through a lineage of R&B and soul. KEYWORDS country music, race, soul, Chris Stapleton, Sturgill Simpson, Ray Charles, Beyoncé, Lil Nas X

On 4 November 2015, country singer Chris Stapleton, lauded for his allegiance to hard country music, stepped on stage at the Country Music Association annual awards show in Nashville, Tennessee, and knocked out a stunning performance of "Tennessee Whiskey."[1] Stapleton presented a cover version of that classic country song, which had been recorded by both David Allan Coe and George Jones more than three decades earlier.[2] The moment was heralded by critics and fans alike as a triumph for Stapleton and a celebrated return to roots-oriented, traditional, hard country music.[3] Fans touted Stapleton as a welcome

1. By Dean Dillon and Linda Hargrove; Stapleton's solo version of the song appeared on his 2015 album *Traveller* (Mercury/Nashville 3757743).

2. David Allan Coe included the song on his album *Tennessee Whiskey* (CBS Records 37451, 1981), and George Jones included it on *Shine On* (Epic 38406, 1983). Both released the track as a single; Jones's was the bigger hit (reaching number two on *Billboard's* country chart).

3. The reception of *Traveller*, released 5 May 2015, included reviews citing its "old" references, specifically to the outlaw era of the late 1970s in country music. See, for instance, *Rolling Stone's* list of 50 best albums from 2015: ". . . Songs full of weary life lessons and whiskey-induced heartbreak. It's old-school country. . . . *Traveller* may feel old—well, that's the point." (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/50-best-albums-of-2015-146153/chris-stapleton-traveller-5-222924/>). Nathan Empsall reviewed the CMA performance on his *Hard Times No More* critic-blog, "Wednesday night, country rocker Chris Stapleton took the Country Music Association Awards by storm with a clean sweep for the independent and underground country movement . . ." with phrasing and praise that was matched in many other reviews (<https://hardtimesnomore.com/2015/11/06/the-blues-album-travis-tritt-wishes-he-made-a-review-of-chris-stapletons-traveller/>). *Billboard's* review of *Traveller* used the headline "triumphant debut"

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antidote to wide-spread contemporaneous pop-crossover trends that had been panned as formulaic bro-country.[4] Stapleton took home a trio of major awards that night: new artist, album, and male vocalist of the year. But Stapleton's cover version altered one of the fundamental musical traits of country music that had been present in the earlier versions of the song: he stripped the song of its original chord progression whose tonal harmonic language had long been one of country music's most distinguishing characteristics. Simply put, Stapleton threw out all of the song's V chords. In so doing, he wrote a musical-political statement about the past and present of country music, one that challenged the racial politics of country music and hinted that its future was foreshadowed by its often-disregarded past.

Changing harmonic language within a particular genre of music is hardly newsworthy, as the styles and trends in just about any genre have included prominent chord progressions that evolve or are radically revised over time. But, of particular note in this instance, the chord progression Stapleton deployed—at the very moment when he was heralded as country traditionalist reborn—drew explicit connections to soul music. The racial politics of country music have always been complicated, and never more so than at the time of Stapleton's rise to fame.[5] Within the context of country music circa 2015, Stapleton's performance, and others in the same general mode, simultaneously presented two ostensibly contradictory narratives. On the one hand, the performance enacted a renewal of traditions and roots in country music that reinforced the distinctive otherness of the genre from all other popular music traditions and disavowed pop-crossover music. On the other hand, the performance subtly rewrote country music's sonic heritage through a legacy of soul music and other predominantly black performance traditions.

The analyses presented here weave these threads together into a sonically grounded explanation of country music's contradictory sense of genre identity and racial politics in the present day. Close readings of Stapleton's performance along with performances by country

(by Caitlin White, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/review/6561354/chris-stapleton-traveller-solo-debut-album-review>). Traci Taylor's review of *Traveller*, published 30 September 2016 on 981thehawk.com, refers to both is acclaim and success on awards shows and his retro sound: "One listen to *Tennessee Whiskey* and you'll be transported back to a simpler time. A time when songs told stories and the emotion in the singer's voice was so real that you could feel it in your bones." (<https://981thehawk.com/chris-stapleton-takes-on-bro-country-with-traveller-album/>).

4. Bro-country was a term first introduced by music critic Jody Rosen in 2013 to categorize the hypermasculine, pop-crossover country songs that centered on themes of dirt roads, trucks, fishing holes in rock-infused musical settings. Critics further deployed the term to criticize what they considered formulaic songwriting practices; notably, duo Maddie & Tae challenged the hegemony and belittling treatment of women in bro-country with their recording of "Girl in a Country Song" in 2014. Ian Crouch's write-up of the CMA Awards show, "Has Chris Stapleton Cracked the Country Code?," published in *The New Yorker* on 5 November 2015, summarized the prevailing discourse about Stapleton as an antidote to the bro-country stars: "[This performance] turned out to be the national coming-out party for Stapleton . . . who has been hailed, since his album 'Traveller' was released in May, as the scruffy real-thing messiah by the kinds of country traditionalists who perpetually lament the phony slickness and hybridization of the modern genre." (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/has-chris-stapleton-cracked-the-country-code>).

5. Diane Pecknold writes, "[Perhaps] we would read country's racial (and class) politics, and this particular moment in its history, most accurately as a palimpsest in which the surface script of binary races and cultures can only partially obscure the contested and complex nature of racial formation," in the introduction to *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 13. Pecknold's introduction includes a review of relevant academic literature and is an excellent starting point for readers unfamiliar with this literature.

singer-songwriter Sturgill Simpson fill out a picture of a changing musical landscape and a genre rewriting its own history. The analyses furthermore propose a new historical perspective regarding the confluence of country and soul in the early 1960s, most memorably realized in the two *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music* albums that Ray Charles released in 1962.[6] With that historical perspective in place, Stapleton's and Simpson's performances—along with those of many others—become part of a subversive narrative that reinvents hard country music on a foundation of R&B and soul.

STEALING THE SHOW

Even before the first notes of "Tennessee Whiskey" sounded, Chris Stapleton's CMA performance had broken with country tradition. The producers for a CMA awards broadcast are, first and foremost, putting on a televised special, and one of their main goals is to increase the audience size and cultural impact of the show. One tried-and-true technique they have adopted is incorporating musical stars from the pop world. In 2014, for instance, both Meghan Trainor and Ariana Grande sang on the show. And while devoted country fans often decry these performances as selling out country music (selling its soul, as they often say, in many cases unaware they are invoking a musical play on words), these performers draw audiences who otherwise might not tune in for a country show. Using that trend to his own advantage, when Stapleton received an invitation to perform on the show, he asked his personal friend and former NSYNC lead singer Justin Timberlake to join him for a duet performance, both of "Tennessee Whiskey" and of Timberlake's latest single, "Drink You Away." The producers agreed, and gave the two an eight-minute time-slot, a veritable eternity on a show that often asks award nominees to shorten their performances to just a single verse and chorus of their song.[7] Given Stapleton's generally low name-recognition among fans at the time, the producers' offer was even more surprising.

Stapleton had been working as a professional musician in Nashville since 2001, yet he remained virtually unknown to the bulk of the 2015 country audience.[8] Stapleton's initial success had come through his songwriting, followed by performance stints with both bluegrass band *The Steeldrivers* and southern rockers *The Jompson Brothers*, two musical

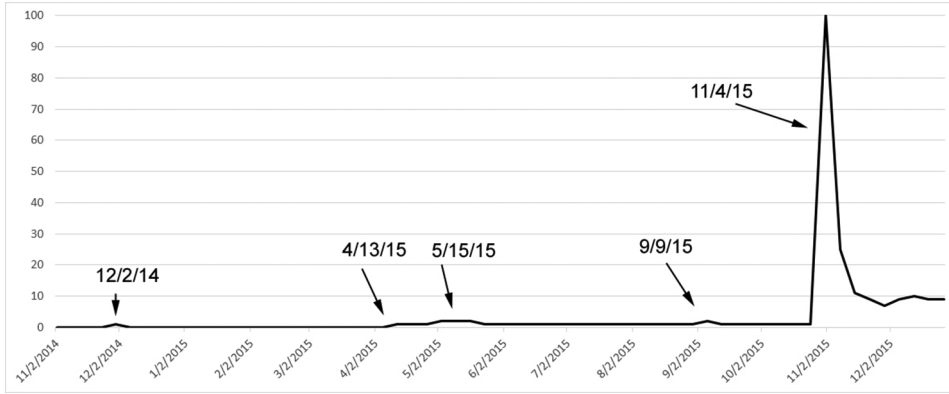
6. ABC-Paramount 410, 1962 and ABC-Paramount 435, 1962.

7. The story of this performance was widely reported in the popular press; see, for instance, Taysha Murtaugh, "A Brief History of Chris Stapleton and Justin Timberlake's Musical Relationship," published on the *Country Living* website 6 June 2018 <https://www.countryliving.com/life/entertainment/a21086648/chris-stapleton-justin-timberlake-songs-duet/>.

8. SavingCountryMusic.com's review of the CMA performance included the updated headline that sales of *Traveller* had spiked "6,400%" after the show, commentary on the critically acclaimed but relatively unknown artist and album prior to the show. Ian Crouch reported that as of the CMA performance, Stapleton had not had a single radio hit as a solo artist; see "Has Chris Stapleton Cracked the Country Code?" Reviews of the CMA performance that used the phrase "virtually unknown" to describe Stapleton prior to that night included *Rolling Stone*, *The Guardian*, *SavingCountryMusic.com*, *OneCountry.com*, and *CountryRebel.com*, to name just a few. <https://countryrebel.com/blogs/videos/76539715-chris-stapleton-dishes-on-friendship-with-justin-timberlake/>, <https://www.onecountry.com/popular/chris-stapleton-and-justin-timberlakes-stunning-cma-awards-duet-will-b/>, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country-lists/chris-stapleton-five-songs-i-wish-id-written-34933/hank-williams-jr-old-habits-23567/>, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/nov/05/chris-stapleton-steals-cma-awards-justin-timberlake>, <https://www.savingcountrymusic.com/after-cma-wins-chris-stapletons-traveller-sales-spike-4000-goes-1-all-genre/>.

traditions that owe a debt to the blues. Although music industry insiders and fellow musicians knew his work, he was far from a household name among the general public. The minute his CMA nominations were announced, Google search monitors recorded a spike in searches as mystified fans tried to figure out who he was (ex. 1). By the time the show rolled around, critics and devoted fans were commenting on his contradictory status as an outsider living in the center of Nashville, or as a newcomer devoted to hard country music who had paradoxically been working in the industry for many years.

Once on stage, Stapleton's imposing physique, long hair and beard, and turquoise-and-feathers hat band upended the still-lingering bro-country cookie-cutter trends of the previous few years. Fans quickly fell in with the critics' assessment that Stapleton was an antidote to pop-crossover country, a purveyor of tradition, and an independent-minded singer-songwriter with something meaningful to say. Any irony of Stapleton—whose short bio presented him as a traditionalist in country music—standing alongside boy-band-turned-pop star Justin Timberlake was lost in the enthusiastic fan commentary.[9]



EXAMPLE 1. Data from trends.google.com on web searches, worldwide, all categories, for the term "Chris Stapleton," from 1 November 2014 through 1 January 2016. The x-axis shows time; the y-axis shows search interest relative to the highest point on the chart; a value of 100 indicates peak popularity for that time-span. The specific events of Chris Stapleton's public career that register on this chart are: 2 December 2014, Chris Stapleton sings with Lady Antebellum at the CMT Artist of the Year event; 13 April 2015, Stapleton is featured on VEVO DSCVR "new artists to listen to;" 5 May 2015, Stapleton releases *Traveller*; 9 September 2015, CMA announces 2015 Nominations; 4 November 2015, Stapleton performs on the CMA awards show.

9. The performance also reinforced the masculine presentation mode of contemporary country through the anonymity of Morgane Stapleton, whose vocals as one-third of the Timberlake-Stapleton-Stapleton harmony trio wowed the listeners that night but whose name was never mentioned on stage or in many of the press reports the followed. The morning after the show, the *New York Times* review reflected the response of the broader public, not just the country music insiders, both commenting that Morgane Stapleton was the "unsung hero" of the album and, by extension, the performance, and describing Chris Stapleton with terms such as "resonant grit," "tough brooding," "outlaw," on country music's "fringes," and explicitly contrasting him with "exceedingly polished people." Jon Caramanica, "At CMA Awards, Triumph for Chris Stapleton and Country Music's Fringes," 5 November 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/06/arts/music/cma-awards-review.html>.

The song Stapleton and Timberlake sang was co-written by country songwriters Dean Dillon, known for penning more than a dozen George Strait hits, and Linda Hargrove, who had written songs for Lynn Anderson and Olivia Newton-John, among others. In 1981, country outlaw singer David Allan Coe recorded "Tennessee Whiskey"; two years later, legend George Jones took it to number two on the *Billboard* country chart. Jones's recording sat squarely in the musical language of classic country, layered with harmonica, subtle backing vocals, and a chord progression that—for 1983—matched the established harmonic language in the country genre (ex. 2): three chords, lots of V-I cadences, and a predictable modulation before the final chorus.

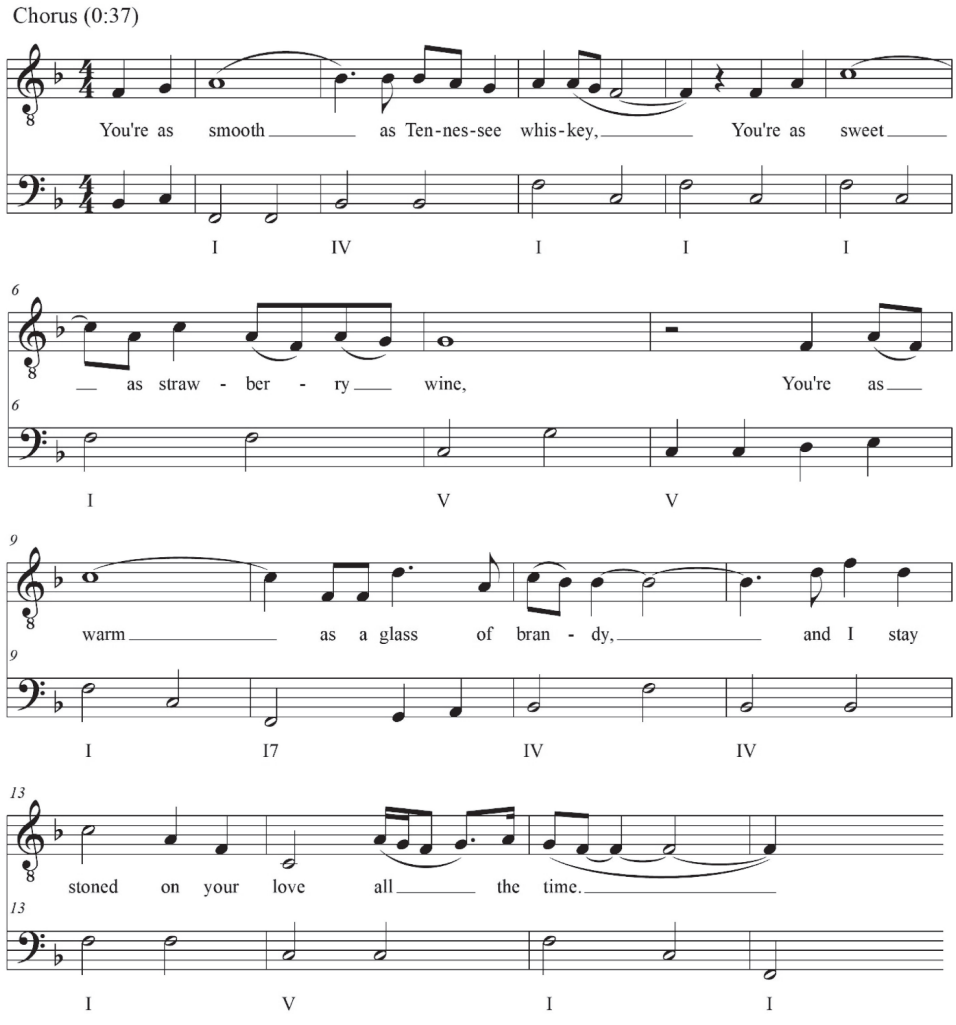
Stapleton's cover version kept the lyrics, but beyond that, little was recognizable from the original. He recast the song in a slow compound meter, modified the melody and completely revamped the chord progression. The whole song was accompanied by an oscillating two-chord pattern, over which the vocalists cut loose with runs, fills, bends, and syncopations (ex. 3).[10] With a horn section, the sounds of a Hammond organ, and an electric bass sitting in front of the mix, the performance was thoroughly and unquestionably soul in its stylings. Timberlake already had laid some claim to being a blue-eyed soul singer with his previous work on *Justified* (2002), but it was Stapleton's commanding vocal gymnastics that sealed the association. The next day, newspaper headlines from *USA Today* to *The Guardian* declared "Justin Timberlake and Chris Stapleton Stole the CMA Awards" and "Chris Stapleton Steals CMA Awards Show on Career-Making Night."[11]

Shortly after the performance, fans and detractors alike took to the internet to point out that the song's foundation, indeed both the chord progression and the groove, were nearly identical to those of soul legend Etta James's Muscle Shoals recording "I'd Rather Go Blind" (1968), picking up on a thread that had begun a few months earlier when Stapleton's album came out.[12] Stapleton puzzlingly made no mention of James in the few

10. The transcriptions included in this article raise a familiar set of challenges as they move between a musical performance tradition and musical style that is typically learned aurally or with genre-specific types of chord charts and lead sheets, and an academically grounded analysis in a discursive tradition that relies on more written notation. I have made analytic decisions regarding meter, pitch bends, ornamentation, and the register in which to notate different instruments that I hope will allow the reader to make the connections with the sounding performance as directly as possible, rather than what would be the most useful lead-sheet or sheet music from which to create a new performance, but with some accommodations for conventions of chart notation. Harmonic analysis is presented in different contexts in Roman Numerals and in Nashville Number System (Arabic numeral) notation, following charting conventions for hypermeter and the layout of phrases on the page.

11. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2015/11/04/justin-timberlake-chris-stapleton-cma-awards/75189476/> and <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/nov/05/chris-stapleton-steals-cma-awards-justin-timberlake>.

12. James's single (Cadet 5578, 1968) was recorded at the FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Stapleton's official Facebook page includes a post from fan Christi Carter on 12 May 2015: "I have just one question . . . is it me, or does Tennessee Whiskey sound an awful lot like Etta James I'd Rather Go Blind?" Stapleton does not reply, but the public comments on the post accuse him of musical theft without attribution. <https://www.facebook.com/chrisstapletonofficial/posts/i-love-love-love-your-music-and-your-new-cd-but-i-have-just-one-question-is-it-m/910159559046084/> Posts on lipstickalley.com and many other sites after the CMAs follow in the same tone <https://www.lipstickalley.com/threads/chris-stapleton-steals-from-etta-james-gives-no-credit.949128/>.



Chord chart:

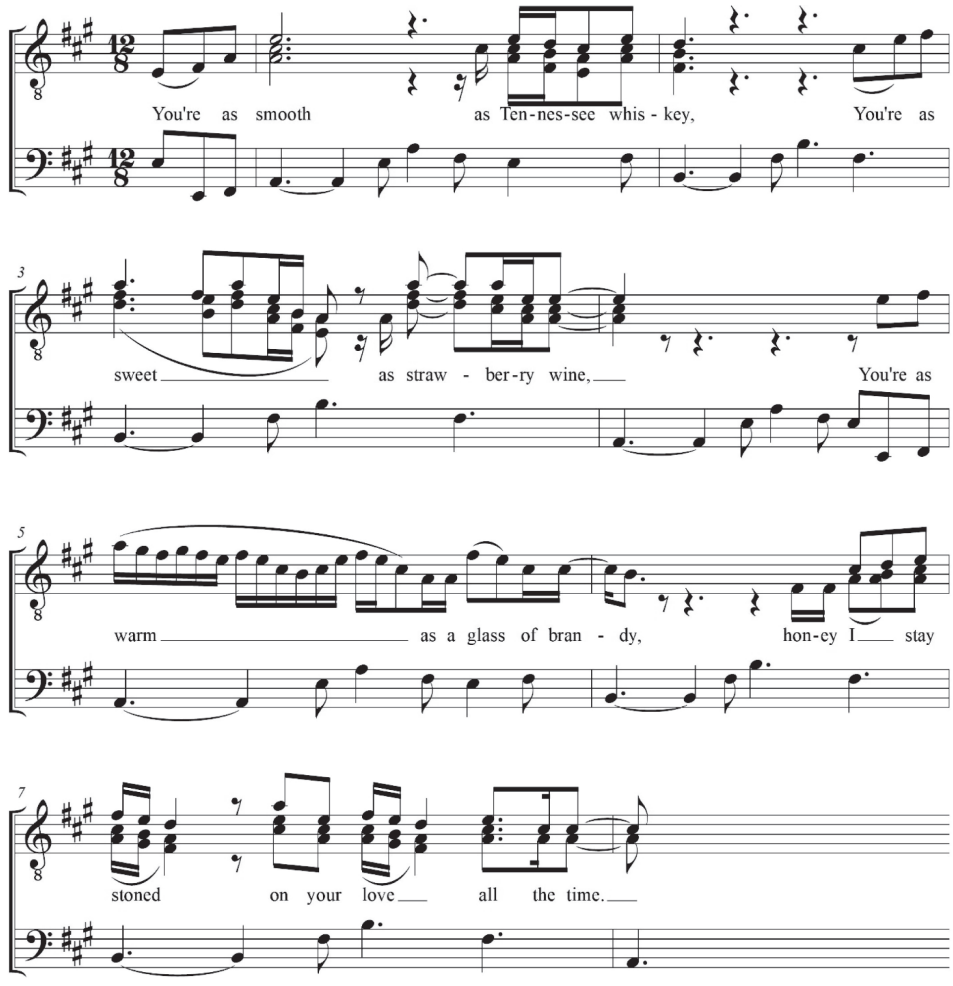
1	4	1	1
1	1	5	5
1	1^7	4	4
1	5	1	1

EXAMPLE 2. Chorus, at 0:37, in George Jones, "Tennessee Whiskey," Shine On (Epic 38406, 1983), showing vocals, bass, and harmonic progression. The bass part is notated an octave above its sounding pitch.

conversations he had with the press, but the musical homage became an indelible part of the song's reception.

THE SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE OF A V CHORD

For most of country music's recorded history, the genre has embraced a musical language steeped in tonal functional harmony: songs rely on I-V-I chord progressions to move along



Chord chart:

1	2m	2m	1
1	2m	2m	1

EXAMPLE 3. Chorus, 33 seconds into the vocal performance, in Chris Stapleton and Justin Timberlake, "Tennessee Whiskey, live at the 2015 CMA awards, transcription and chart. The bass line is notated an octave above sounding pitch. The transcription was done from several bootleg YouTube recordings of the performance, including https://youtu.be/Nhtkt82cvyY.

in time; dominant-tonic resolutions in which V chords moved to I chords provided the primary means of articulating harmonic closure.[13] No summary of a century's worth of

13. Not all V chords carry dominant function, either in country music or in other musical traditions that rely on tonal functional harmony. For instance, V chords can function as passing harmonies based on voice-leading, and also as back-relating dominants, both functions that are well documented in undergraduate music theory textbooks pertaining to other styles. Regarding cadence structures, country music also highlights a particularly common variant in which a V-I cadence features an interpolated IV chord, such that the close of a harmonic progression is V-IV-I. Examples of this abound, including "Still," by Bill Anderson. In instances such as "Still's" final cadence, the

music can account for the nuances, complexities, and exceptions within individual songs, styles, and sub-genres, but tonal harmonic language was a firmly established characteristic of the mainstream country genre, particularly as distinct from other pop music genres. Historically, notable exceptions included the well-documented blues chord progressions, modal bluegrass tunes, and a few borrowings from disco and beyond. And yet until new developments emerged in country songwriting around 2005–2012, the generalized tonal-functional underpinnings of country music were one of the salient features that distinguished it from other genres. But in the years leading up to 2010, mainstream country songwriting untethered itself from a reliance on tonal function, or, in other words, from the generalized expectation that most V chords go to I chords.[14]

In place of those tonal-functional progressions, many country songwriters shifted to the chord loops that had already become ubiquitous in pop music: I-V-vi-IV, for instance, where the overall chord progression was not focused on a teleological motion toward a final arrival point but rather on the cyclical nature of the pattern itself. The use of these repeating chord patterns or loops that move toward or through the minor vi chord and avoid V-I became a widely accepted harmonic language within country music. For instance, in one brief sample from late 2018, fully seven out of the top ten country songs on *Billboard* used some permutation of that one progression. Other popular country songs featured a two-chord oscillation for most or all of the track, such as Florida Georgia Line's "Sun Daze." And, notably, quite a few country hits avoided a V chord in any context, including, for instance, Randy Houser's track "Like a Cowboy," Luke Bryan's "Strip It Down," and Sam Hunt's "Small Town," amplifying a trend that had been growing for a few years.

Although harmonic analysis may seem many layers removed from the average fan's experience of the music, these changes were so substantive and widespread that they garnered commentary in the popular press. Statistician and amateur music theorist Dean Olivet, for instance, published just such an article, titled "Where Have All the V Chords Gone? The Decline of 'Functional' Harmony in Pop."[15] And *Boston Globe* columnist Marc Hirsch provoked a heated response when he dubbed one of the most-used looping progressions that avoided any V-I patterns the "sensitive female chord progression."[16]

underlying progression is structurally V-I. The interpolated IV chord is derived from a 4-3 suspension on the final tonic chord. Within country music, the scale-degree 4 of what would conventionally be a 4-3 suspension in other genres is, itself, sometimes harmonized, so the resulting chord progression appears as V-IV-I. In these situations, the underlying tonal function is confirmed by the location of the melodic cadence in relation to the chord progression, which clarifies the subordinate (embellishing) role of the IV chord.

14. Music theorists, including Walt Everett and Nicole Biamonte, have documented these changes in numerous academic articles about rock music that explain different chord syntax whereby dominant function is carried by chords that are not, in fact, V chords, including prominently IV and bVII, among others. See, for instance, "Triadic Modal and Pentatonic Patterns in Rock Music," *Music Theory Spectrum* 32/2 (2010): 95–110. <https://doi.org/10.1525/mts.2010.32.2.95>.

15. <https://flypaper.soundfly.com/write/where-have-all-the-v-chords-gone-the-decline-of-functional-harmony-in-pop/>.

16. Hirsch's use of the term appeared in the 31 December 2008 article "Striking a Chord," <http://archive.boston.com/ae/music/articles/2008/12/31/striking_a_chord/>. Evidence of the heated response to this term, including question-and-answer sessions at academic conferences and online discussion forums over the subsequent years, can be found, for instance, in the archived discussion of the Society for Music Theory, <http://lists.societymusictheory.org/htdig.cgi/smt-talk-societymusictheory.org/2014-April/005473.html>.

Songwriters also explicitly addressed the trend. Songwriter Rivers Rutherford, who has written several number one country hits, pointed out in a 2015 interview that the V-I chord progression had become too "buttoned-up," which he then elaborated as too structured and rigid, and something to be avoided when writing a country song; others have reported similar opinions.[17] In summation, fans, critics, and songwriters alike noticed that country music left behind its buttoned-up past for newer harmonic pastures.

A comprehensive analysis of harmonic language in contemporary, mainstream country songwriter far exceeds the domain of this essay, but the relevant context here is that V chords and their harmonic function within the genre had deviated from a long-accepted norm during the decade prior to Stapleton's performance. And within the context of the country genre, harmonic language carries symbolic significance worthy of consideration.

Unlike the songwriters who were writing new songs, Stapleton started with a well-known song, one that in its George Jones guise relied entirely on the conventional V-I harmonic language. He then stripped away those elements, altering its most basic foundations of melody, harmony, and meter. Against a backdrop of country music's 2015 soundscape, Stapleton's use of an oscillating two-chord pattern that assiduously avoided any V chords actually sounded current, even progressive, in keeping with contemporaneous trends, rather than retro. And such an understanding contrasted sharply with the idea that Stapleton was lifting a sound, style, groove, and chord progression from some fifty years in the past.

SAVING COUNTRY MUSIC

Stapleton was not the only artist to deploy the musical formula of soul chord progressions presented as the new sound of country. Around the same time, Sturgill Simpson was garnering nearly as much attention as Stapleton as a singer-songwriter who had thumbed his nose at the establishment and had won over the Americana and lingering Alt Country audiences. Simpson's open tributes to Merle Haggard and other country stars from past generations, combined with his willingness to make polarizing statements in interviews and punctuate them with colorful epithets, endeared him to a fan base deeply disenfranchised by the pop-crossover trends in the mainstream Nashville country industry.[18] In 2013, the popular

17. Mason Taylor Allen, "The Musical Features of 2015's Top-Ranked Country Songs," (Undergraduate honors thesis: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016), 26–27. Allen's interview with Rutherford is documented in the thesis, along with corroborating comments from songwriter Marc Beeson. The thesis is available via the Carolina Digital Repository at the University of North Carolina, <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/>.

18. In a 29 August 2016 Facebook post that he subsequently deleted, Simpson referred to contemporary country music as "the formulaic cannon fodder bullshit [the industry has] been pumping down rural America's throat for the last 30 years," and characterized the industry as featuring "high school pageantry, meat parade award show bullshit." The post was documented by *The Nashville Scene*'s writer D. Patrick Rodgers, <https://www.nashvillescene.com/music/nashville-cream/article/20832102/sturgill-simpson-on-acms-merle-haggard-spirit-award-meat-parade-award-show-bullshit> as well as Joseph Hudak for *Rolling Stone* <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/sturgill-simpson-blasts-acm-over-merle-haggard-award-250025/> and many other news outlets. Simpson's public persona had been established several years early, as evidenced in this 15 July 2014 interview with Duncan Cooper for *The Fader*: "The kids today, I hear this all the time: 'Man, I fucking hate country music, but I love what you're doing.' That says to me they've never heard country music, and if they did, they'd love it," in "Another Country: A Free-Wheeling Hour with Sturgill Simpson" <https://www.thefader.com/2014/07/15/another-country-a-freewheeling-hour-with-sturgill-simpson>. *Kansas City Star* critic Lisa Gutierrez labeled Simpson an "Anti-Bro," in her 30 August

country music review website SavingCountryMusic.com, whose very name declares their position on pop-influenced country, opened their review of Simpson's first studio album, *High Top Mountain,* by labeling him a "country music savior."[19] Michael Franklin's review of the same album for *Outlaw Magazine* raved about Simpson in biblical language:

> Unless [this radio station has] a recording of Jesus reading Nietzsche, nothing they play from now on will even come close . . . I saw the Promised Land. I have been to the Mountaintop. I have seen the future of country music and its name is Sturgill Simpson. Verily, verily I say unto you, *High Top Mountain* is high art. It is most decidedly not the ear vomit that pours out of today's terrestrial "country" radio. It's in *vivid* contrast to the dense fog of dog peter gnats currently swarming Nashville.[20]

Franklin's effusive if provocative praise—as well as his condemnation of contemporary country—was in line with the broader response from critics writing for alt-focused fan bases. Simpson's second studio album, *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music,* earned unfettered critical acclaim, and after a *Rolling Stone Country* headline from 2014 blared, "Is Sturgill Simpson Country Music's Savior?," the moniker stuck.[21] By 2015, he was widely recognized as a rising, albeit rebellious, star.

In his many live concerts, Simpson cultivated a set list that entertained his fans and reinforced the idea that he was invested in the deep traditions of country music. At the same time, however, his set list continued to display his wider musical tastes. One of the staples of his live shows was "You Don't Miss Your Water," which had been a soul hit on Stax Records for songwriter William Bell in 1961 and, four years later, an even bigger success for Otis Redding. The song detoured into the country scene in 1968 when Gram Parsons and Roger McGuinn both recorded versions with themselves singing lead as part of the Byrds' *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* sessions.[22] And in that incarnation, the song earned its alt-country street cred—the alt-country movement from the mid-1990s onward held Parsons in the highest esteem.

2016 review, identifying him as connecting to a fan-base disenfranchised by the trends in the mainstream radio-friendly country of the era (<https://www.kansascity.com/entertainment/music-news-reviews/article98803382.html>).

19. Published 25 June 2013, <https://www.savingcountrymusic.com/sturgill-simpson-goes-godzillabilly-in-railroad-of-sin-video-premier/>.

20. Michael Franklin, "Sturgill Simpson Album Review: *High Top Mountain*," *Outlaw Magazine, 27* June 2013 <*http://www.outlawmagazine.com/sturgill-simpson-album-review-high-top-mountain-2/*>. Emphasis in the original.

21. Joseph Hudak article published 3 June 2014, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/is-sturgill-simpson-country-musics-savior-not-if-he-can-help-it-55612/>. Note that the subtitle for the article, "Not If He Can Help It," refers explicitly to Simpson's disavowal of the label. Most interviews that followed made reference to the "savior" moniker. See, for instance, publications as disparate as *Garden and Gun*, in which Matt Hendrickson wrote that Simpson was "wincing at being tabbed the savior of country last year," ("Sturgill Simpson: Country Philosopher," <https://gardenandgun.com/articles/sturgill-simpson-country-philosopher/>) and *The Guardian*, in which Michael Hann wrote, "As for the bit about being the saviour of country music, that came from people fed up of Nashville's 'bro country' and pop country sounds" ("Sturgill Simpson: 'People Think I Pour LSD on My Cheerios'", <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/aug/31/sturgill-simpson-country-music-reluctant-saviour-metamodern-sounds-interview>).

22. "You Don't Miss Your Water" (Stax S-116, 1961 single); *Otis Blue / Otis Redding Sings Soul* (Volt 412, 1965); *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* (Columbia 9670, 1968); *The Byrds* (box set) (Columbia CK46773, 1990). McGuinn's lead vocals appear on *Sweetheart*; Parsons's version on the box set.

The presence of "You Don't Miss Your Water" in Simpson's live shows offers multiple interpretations. Along with mostly his own compositions, Simpson's 2015–2017 set lists typically featured some outlaw country cover (Willie Nelson, for instance), along with a bluegrass cover (such as either an Osborne Brothers or a Stanley Brothers tune), plus "You Don't Miss Your Water." On the one hand, the presence of that particular song invoked the Byrds' seminal alt-country album from 1968, one with a complicated but nonetheless unquestionable relationship with country music.[23] The chord progression that Simpson used matched the variation that the Byrds used for their recording, suggesting that theirs may have been a primary source for Simpson (ex. 4).[24] But on the other hand, the tune Simpson covered was the only soul track and—in fact—the only track by an African American artist that the Byrds included on their album, and when writing about Simpson's cover of it, journalists identified the tune as an Otis Redding or William Bell cover rather than a Byrds cover.[25] Furthermore, Simpson's version was as steeped in the language and feel of soul as Bell's Stax single had been. Even while carrying a very public torch as a hard-country artist, Simpson was feeding his fans early 1960s soul music.

Sturgill Simpson (2017)				The Byrds (1968)				William Bell (1961)			
(Key of G)				(Key of G)				(Key of F)			
Vocal cue:											
In the beginning…											
6m	6m	1	1	6m	6m	1	1^7	1	1	17	17
4	4	1	1	4	4^7	1	1	4	4	1 4	1 4/5
6m	6m	4	4	6m	6m	4 b7	4^7	1	1	6m	4
1	4	1	1	1	4^7	1 4^7	1	1	4	4	1 4/5

EXAMPLE 4. Chord chart for first verse, "You Don't Miss Your Water;" Sturgill Simpson, live performance, 14 October 2017 in Sugarland, Texas; The Byrds, *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* album version; William Bell, Stax single. Chord charts are notated assuming 6/8 meter, showing one chord per bar except where underlined chords indicate two chords per bar.

23. The reception history of *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* includes the oft-recounted story of the Byrds being booed off the stage of the Grand Ole Opry, but the album has also retrospectively been woven into country music history, and is considered by many musicians to be part of the inspiration for the alt-country scene. See, for instance, Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 225–26, 235.

24. It is worth noting in passing that Bell's version uses occasional soul dominants, yet the Byrds and Simpson pull even those dominant harmonies out of their performances, arguably investing their versions with even more elements of soul musical style.

25. Marissa R. Moss, "See Sturgill Simpson Cover Otis Redding's 'You Don't Miss Your Water'," *Rolling Stone*, 15 September 2015, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/see-sturgill-simpson-cover-otis-reddings-you-dont-miss-your-water-114589/>.

Simpson's critical success with *Metamodern Sounds* led to a recording contract with Atlantic Records, and in 2016, he released his much-anticipated third studio album, *A Sailor's Guide to Earth*. With the backing of a major label, Simpson hired The Dap Kings, who had been the backing band for soul singer Sharon Jones, to play on five of the cuts. He explained:

> I guess it being the first time I ever recorded on a major label, I had to be reminded of the toolbox that was now available. I said to [mixer and engineer "Ferg" Fergeson,] "Man, it would be cool if we could get someone like the Dap-Kings," and he just said, "Well, you know Sturgill, you can do that. That's what Atlantic Records is for." So I called my A&R guy and said, "I want to get the Dap-Kings." A couple hours later he had some stuff lined up.[26]

The basic narrative is a common one in the alt-country world: upstart musicians get signed to a major label, and with the resulting boost in resources, change their sound. In Simpson's case, his sound took on the guise of soul. When he appeared on the 2017 Grammy Awards singing "All Around You," a self-penned track from *A Sailor's Guide,* his acoustic guitar was the only lingering sonic connection to the retro country world that continued to toast his success so enthusiastically. And in a now-familiar narrative, his soul-drenched music laced with horns, over a slow shuffle groove, was received by many as the new embodiment of country: that night Simpson took home the Grammy award for best country album.[27]

THE SOUL OF COUNTRY

Country music has had a lengthy and complex relationship with its sister genres R&B and related musical traditions associated with black identity. The crux of the relationship is that black musical styles, influences, and sometimes even performers have had a marked impact on country music, sometimes even taking up residence within the genre, but the cultural presentation and reception of the genre has refracted a predominantly white identity throughout much of its history and in most cultural spaces. From that perspective, the presence of soul music within performances that were heralded as a reclamation of country's authenticity are not that surprising, but neither is the tacit willingness of the music community to ignore the intrinsic contradictions between musical style and the rhetoric of genre that permit continuously reinscribing country's whiteness.

The presence of black music and black musicians in the earliest days of country recordings has been well documented by scholars, and ranged from Fiddlin' John Carson's recordings of minstrel songs to the blues shout-outs in Jimmie Rodgers's performances.[28] Scholar Bill C. Malone has credited, in part, the emergence of country music in the 1920s to the

26. Lisa Zhito, "Sturgill Simpson's Unlikely Nirvana Cover in a Country World," published on the grammy.com website 15 May 2017, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/sturgill-simpsons-unlikely-nirvana-cover-country-world>.

27. The 59th Grammy Awards were broadcast on 12 February 2017.

28. See discussion of Fiddlin' John Carson in Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 85–86, 88–91; and discussion of Jimmie Rodgers in Jocelyn R. Neal, *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 203. See also Olivia Carter Mather, "Race in Country Music Scholarship," *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 327–54.

mixing of vernacular styles across racial lines in the American South; Tracy Laird has pointed out the importance of similar musical mixing in the crucible that was Shreveport, Louisiana, in the 1940s.[29] Moving through more recent chronology, Charles Hughes, among others, has documented the potent exchanges of musical substance between blues, soul, and country in the triangle of Memphis, Nashville, and Muscle Shoals in the 1960s, and both Nadine Hubbs and Diane Pecknold have documented more recent challenges to the casually assumed black/white musical binary that pervades discussions of genre.[30] But one aspect of this story in particular that deserves further discussion is the way that the country fan base itself is, in part, responsible for inscribing whiteness on the music.

In this particular instance, I am not talking about the demographics of country fans themselves. Researchers have both documented and contested statistics about how many African American country fans exist, how many Latin/o/a/x fans exist, and how those segments of the fan population are growing.[31] Yet in the context of the recordings and artists addressed here, the more relevant discussion may be how a large, core audience for country music accommodates and even prefers music that is infused with the sounds of hip hop and soul, but conceives of its music as distinctly separate from those traditions and in an imagined lineage all its own. The key point here is the "imagined lineage" to which fans ascribe, as the cross-genre influences throughout country music's history as documented in the extant academic literature cited previously and beyond, are not at issue.

One aspect of this phenomenon is the increasing frequency with which I hear one particular response when I ask people about their music listening habits. In interviews, college students and local community members who describe themselves as music fans, categorize themselves with the following statement: "I listen to country, but I'm not a country fan." They are quick to admit liking individual artists, songs, and even country-format radio stations that are tagged as country by the various mechanisms by which the music industry assigns genre labels. They purchase tickets to summer concert series featuring country artists. But they disavow the identity label of "country fan." When asked further about this topic, many of them have explained that being a "country fan" comes with adoption of an ideology and identity that exceeds merely liking particular artists and songs, and it is the ideology and identity, rather than the music, that they eschew.

29. Malone's thesis regarding the origins of country music is expounded on throughout his writings, including Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music U.S.A., 2nd rev. ed.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); it is most succinctly summarized in ""The Southern Thesis: Revisited and Reaffirmed," *Journal of American Folklore,* 127/504 (spring 2014): 226–29; Tracy Laird, *Louisiana Hayride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9, 73, 136.

30. Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix;* Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), esp. 68–72.

31. The Country Music Association, for instance, published a report on country listeners that cited a 55% five-year growth rate for African American audience, and a 15% five-year growth rate for Hispanic listeners (<https://www.cmaworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/CMA_2019CMC_Aud101web-1.pdf>, February 2019), yet their choice to report growth rate over five years rather than, say, audience percentages, allows them to cast relatively small segments of the audience in very positive numbers.

From the opposite perspective, I frequently converse with people who identify as country fans through and through, but whose music consumption patterns stretch genre boundaries. For instance, bars and nightclubs that are ostensibly country by all possible signifiers (the name of the establishment, décor, wardrobe of the staff, reputation among local patrons, etc.) frequently feature DJs whose playlist incorporates plenty of house music, pop, and certain pockets of classic rock and southern rock along with country. These playlists often surprise outsiders to the country scene, who expect closer correspondence between the club's identity and musical genre. This is not simply an instance of people having diverse musical tastes: it is well established that modern music fans listen across many genres, and according to radio listener surveys, almost no listeners report liking only one genre of music.[32] Rather, this is an illustration of how the act of *being* a country fan involves a soundscape that draws from a very particular collection of different, and specifically non-country, genres.

Within the contemporary fan base, there is no universal correspondence between liking country music, whatever that may be and however one might individually choose to identify it, and self-identifying as a "country fan" per se. Such a disconnect helps explain the anomalies that appear in music marketing: how self-proclaimed fans of country music who espouse allegiances to the more traditional, roots, and anti-commercial sounds can find solidarity in celebrating a singer whose music runs far afield from those very styles of country.

HERMENEUTICS OF HARMONY

With regard to the musical arrangements, and specifically the harmonic language of the recordings in question, one might fairly ask if a single missing chord, or the lack of a V-I cadence, can carry much weight at all when it comes to cultural interpretations of race and genre. Does the V chord really matter that much?

The answer, I suggest, is yes, even at the level of reference, symbol, and association. One of the most essential markers of the blues musical tradition is its use of a IV-I chord progression to generate closure, and the conspicuous absence of a V-I progression. Furthermore, within the conventional twelve-bar blues progression, the falling motion in the final phrase of each verse moves from V to IV, a pattern that purveyors of art music and most western European folk music traditions label a retrogression. From that perspective, the removal of the structural V-I cadence from a harmonic language, as the blues did more than a century ago, along with the retrogression from V to IV were a harmonic subversion of convention.

As a result, the absence of a dominant-function V-chord where musical contexts otherwise suggest one might occur invokes associations with blues and—by extension—soul music. In other words, when Chris Stapleton rewrote "Tennessee Whiskey," it was not only the use of a soul singer's chord progression in general, but more specifically the particular progression from "I'd Rather Go Blind," which was so structurally different from the harmonic language of the David Allan Coe or George Jones original, that mattered in the song's

32. Spotify's published study of listener habits explored how much fans deviate from their "home" genre <https://insights.spotify.com/us/2015/04/02/loyalest-music-fans-by-genre/>; Edison Media Research's "The National Country Music P1 Study 2007," presented at the Country Music Seminar in Nashville, Tennessee; similarly reported data on how much country fans liked other genres.

reception. And, significantly, this was not the first time that a country hit had been recomposed in this particular soul-based harmonic language.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF "YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE"

The title of Sturgill Simpson's 2014 album, *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*, was an unveiled reference to *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, the million-selling, seminal conflation of country and soul in two volumes, released in 1962 by the legendary Ray Charles.[33] The basic story of these two albums is well-known to most music fans. By 1962, Ray Charles had proven that he had far-ranging musical interests, and his recordings to date invoked many different genres while demonstrating mastery of jazz and the R&B styles of the time. The idea to record an album of country songs was his, and he had to work hard to persuade his record label, ABC-Paramount, to agree. His producer, Sid Feller, researched song selections and brought Charles country hits that showed evidence they could reach a pop audience. Once he finalized his selections, Charles wrapped half of the chosen songs in big band swing arrangements, and the other half in a hybrid of strings, piano, and soul grooves that were equal part Nashville Sound studio work and Southern soul formulas. The record label executives reportedly remained befuddled by the project, and made no plans to release any singles from the album. Those plans changed after white artist Tab Hunter released sound-alike recordings that started to sell at astonishing numbers. At that juncture, ABC rushed Ray Charles's versions into production. The album garnered attention across the music industry, giving Charles the leverage to record a second volume. By the time the dust settled, ABC had sold a million records, and the ultimate stylistic paradox had wedged itself firmly into musical history.[34]

More than a half century after *Modern Sounds* was released, popular memory has written it squarely into country music history in ways that it did not appear to be in its own time. Journalists and fans alike have succumbed to the urge to tout its commercial success as a *country* album; one of many such accounts claimed, "The miracle was that four singles from the lush, string-laden pop album crossed over into the country charts . . ."[35] While Ray Charles did land on the country charts some two decades later with completely different recordings of completely different songs, the 1962 *Modern Sounds* singles never actually appeared on the country charts, nor has any evidence emerged that they receive country airplay, contrary to this enthusiastic journalist's claims.

33. Recorded in New York City and in Hollywood, released on ABC-Paramount 410 and 435, both in 1962.

34. Among the many excellent scholarly assessments of this album are Diane Pecknold, "Making Country Modern: The Legacy of Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music," *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 82–99; Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), esp. 133; and David Cantwell, "Ray Charles and Country's Color Barrier," *Rolling Stone Country*, published 22 February 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/ray-charles-modern-sounds-country-music-798729/>.

35. William Michael Smith made this erroneous claim in "Lonesome, On'ry, and Mean," published 1 December 2009 by the *Houston Press* <https://www.houstonpress.com/music/lonesome-onry-and-mean-between-darius-rucker-and-charley-pride-there-was-otis-williams-6517359>. I am grateful to Chelsea Burns for alerting me to this particular article.

Format radio, the business model whereby a particular station would adopt a single listening format—generally closely linked to a single genre—as a means of targeting audience segments, was in its early days in the 1960s.[36] Nonetheless, by 1962 there were several large markets with established country-format stations, and archives hold many of those stations' surveys that report on the songs that topped their individual playlists.[37] Searches throughout those extant surveys for 1962 and 1963 reveal that Ray Charles's singles from *Modern Sounds* were extremely popular on top-40 format stations, where they appeared regularly in playlists adjacent to pop stars. But the extant surveys of country-format stations offer up no listings for Charles's singles. Given the non-scientific nature of reporting and survey practices at the time, one might not find this lacuna persuasive on its own. But combined with the Country Music Association's own assessment of Charles's recordings as "evidence of country's influence on pop rather than as a landmark in the development of country music," and country radio's reported "disinterest in the single[s]," a fascinating cultural picture emerges in which Charles labeled his recording "country," country radio ignored it, country fans purchased it, yet there is no conclusive evidence that the country fans thought of it as "country music."[38]

As novel as it may seem for an African American singer to record two volumes of country covers in the midst of the Civil Rights era, Charles was neither the first black entertainer to record country songs nor the first musician to recast country songs in pop styles. By 1962, Charles had already tried out his ideas with a recording of Hank Williams's "I'm Movin' On," and both Solomon Burke and Lenny Welch had done something quite similar.[39] In terms of stars from outside country making country albums, the seeds for that practice were planted when publishers Fred Rose and, later, Wesley Rose figured out how to get their country songwriters' best output shipped to New York for recordings by pop stars, notably such early examples as Tony Bennett's recording of Hank Williams's "Cold, Cold Heart" in 1951. By 1962 when Charles joined the fray, pop stars including Connie Francis, Patti Page, and Jaye P. Morgan had already recorded country albums. They were followed by a veritable parade of stars headed to Nashville (literally or metaphorically), including Rosemary Clooney, Nat "King" Cole, Kay Starr, and Dean "Tex" Martin (two albums), among many others.[40] But, as Pecknold and others have pointed out, Charles's project was different because, first, he insisted on applying the label "country" to the project in spite of the fact that both his race and the musical style of the album transgressed accepted applications of that genre label at that

36. Diane Pecknold's account of the fledgling *Country Music Association*'s concerted efforts to increase the number of country-format stations during the first half of the 1960s is documented in "Chapter 4: Masses to Classes: The Country Music Association and the Development of Country Format Radio, 1958-1972," *The Selling Sound* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 133–167.

37. The Airheads Radio Survey Archive is one such repository to which many collectors have contributed http://las-solanas.com/arsa/index.php.

38. Pecknold reports on country radio's disinterest in *Hidden in the Mix*, 89, and the Country Music Association's assessment of the recordings, 88.

39. David Cantwell recounts these artists' efforts in his "Ray Charles" article.

40. Jocelyn R. Neal, "Pop Stars Make Country Albums," in *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History,* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 186–88, 201.

time, and, second, the recordings reached an unexpectedly high level of popularity with the mainstream public.[41]

The resulting paradox was that the album claimed to be country, and the songs were known as country songs, but the recordings were soul and swing by musical style, and the reception—according to extant evidence—was entirely on the R&B side of the spectrum. Yet biographers, music historians, and critics alike continue to vacillate between calling the recordings soul covers of country songs on the one hand, and country recordings that stretched the boundaries of the genre on the other—one spread in the trade publication *Music Reporter* identified "I Can't Stop Loving You" as appearing on the R&B charts only, but then contradicted its own claims on the facing page by trumpeting the album as topping their "big C&W albums" chart.[42] And although plenty of historians have attempted to describe the musical sound of the string-arrangements as matching the Nashville Sound that Chet Atkins and Owen Bradley were using with country stars such as Jim Reeves at the time, the vocal stylings of the Raelettes and the overall treatment of the songs by Charles's rhythm section never settled into a sonic match for the country music at the time. Musically, the style of the recordings would unmistakably differ from what was accepted as country.

Arguably the biggest hit from the whole recording project was the lead track from Volume II, Charles's recording of Jimmie Davis's "You Are My Sunshine," a song that entered the country canon in 1939 in a string band version. In the most delicious of musical ironies, Jimmie Davis's 1940 recording was itself done with a pop orchestra backing him. The introduction features trumpet and clarinet, and the jaunty swing rhythms and piano accompaniment belie its later fame as a country song. A year after Davis's record, Gene Autry tucked the song more firmly into the country genre by recording it with twin fiddles and steel guitar. In both versions, and in the popular form of the song that would make its way into folk traditions and children's repertories over the next eight decades, the harmonic language was rooted in the three-chord patterns and structural V-I cadences of tonal music (ex. 5).

When Ray Charles recorded "You Are My Sunshine," he set it in a completely new musical arrangement that, notably, eliminated the V chords. He slowed the song down from its usual stylings, completely reworked the melody into a tune with no musical resemblance to the original, then set the vocal sections to a two-chord oscillating pattern of IV-I. Raelette

1	1	1	1
4	4	1	1
4	4	1	1
1	5	1	1

EXAMPLE 5. Chord progression for each verse and chorus of "You Are My Sunshine," by Jimmie Davis and Charles Mitchell, in the conventional folk version, which matches the recordings by both Jimmie Davis and Gene Autry.

41. Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 86.

42. *Music Reporter*, 5 May 1962, 26–27; discussed in Pecknold, *Hidden in the Mix*, 89.

Margie Hendrix and Charles trade verses with powerhouse vocal performances, while the arrangement flips briefly in the middle from sultry soul to a hard-driving swing for the instrumental break.[43] In terms of musical style, Charles recast the song as a predominantly soul recording, with the harmonic signifiers confirming that position.

To whatever extent "You Are My Sunshine" was already a well-known song, Charles's version took it to unprecedented heights of popularity. The song topped the R&B charts, and reached number seven on *Billboard's* pop charts.[44] And while the original was ostensibly a country song, the new version was not by most metrics: it received no substantive country radio airplay; Charles did not appear on the Grand Ole Opry; and musically it presented no allegiance to country performance tradition. But its reception was complicated by Charles's labeling it as country, and several decades later it became expedient for the country fan base to re-imagine the recording's reception as if it had been embraced *as* country at the time. As a case study, Charles's "You Are My Sunshine" suggests a potent lens through which to reinterpret the songs from Sturgill Simpson and Chris Stapleton, and country music circa 2015.

A "REVERSE" RAY CHARLES?

In 2016, music critic Andy Langer reviewed Sturgill Simpson's *A Sailor's Guide to Earth* for *Esquire* under the headline "Country Music's Savior Just Made an R&B Record," asking rhetorically if Simpson had just "pull[ed] a reverse Ray Charles."[45] The same question was being posed, albeit less directly, about Chris Stapleton. Ostensibly, if an African American soul singer had made a country record, then the reverse would be a white country singer making a soul record. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it was not at all clear that Ray Charles made a country record by any measurable sense of the term. Instead, in the case of "You Are My Sunshine," Charles took a song that sat somewhat tenuously in the country scene (having already spilled over a bit into pop) and reworked it into full-blown soul, then packaged it under the country label. That recipe was the same one that Chris Stapleton had followed with "Tennessee Whiskey," right down to the harmonic language that encoded style, genre, and race. And Sturgill Simpson's recording had not reversed that recipe.

WHOSE LABELS?

The politics of musical style and genre have landed in the public spotlight in recent years as various artists have challenged the role of gatekeepers in defining a genre's musical boundaries. Given that fans already differentiate between the music they like to listen to and the genres through which they assign themselves identity labels, paradoxical cases abound. In short, if institutional gatekeepers such as critics, DJs, and especially executives in charge of music industry trade publications have the loudest say in what music is allowed to call itself country, then where is the freedom for artists to move, change, and evolve within a genre? On the other

43. The swing-styled instrumental break in the middle of the song makes use of two brief dominant chords, but is in a distinctly isolated segment of the song, removed from Charles's vocals.

44. The song topped *Billboard's* R&B chart on 15 December 1962, and reached number seven on the *Hot 100* chart on 29 December 1962.

45. 1 April 2016, 40; <https://classic.esquire.com/article/2016/4/1/country-musics-savior-just-made-an-rb-record>.

hand, if artists are granted free rein to take up residence in whatever genre they wish, will there be any sonic threads of continuity within a genre by which country, for instance, sounds "country," and if not, does that matter?

The biggest differences between Ray Charles's "You Are My Sunshine" and Chris Stapleton's "Tennessee Whiskey" are, first and most obviously, the passage of more than five decades between the recording projects, and second, racial identity. By the time Stapleton took the stage in Nashville, the story of Charles's album had undergone several iterations of historical revisions that wove R&B more centrally into the history of country music (if still not to the extent that it deserved). And as performers, Stapleton stood on the CMA stage as a white performer, and Charles as a black performer during the tense years before the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

The correspondence between musical style (the sounds, instrumentation, and harmonic language) and musical genre (the social categorization of music) is the probing question underpinning this entire inquiry, and it has come to a heated debate in recent years, first in the case of Beyoncé's recording of "Daddy Lessons," and second in the case of Lil Nas X's recording of "Old Town Road." When Beyoncé released "Daddy Lessons" on *Lemonade* (2016), her devoted fans and music critics alike wrote about the country elements and roots-sounds in that particular track—*The Guardian's* Mark Guarino quipped, "Small wonder Beyoncé is tipping her cowboy hat" in his review of the track.[46] As was widely reported in the press, Beyoncé submitted the recording to the Grammys for consideration in the country category, but an anonymous source reported that the Grammys rejected it from any consideration for a country award.[47] Beyoncé's astounding success as an entertainer, and the accolades showered on the album, meant that this one tiny setback in her music's potential broader public reception scarcely mattered at all to her overall profile as an artist. But the incident was yet another case where the musician's own perceptions of genre were rejected and firmly overruled by industry gatekeepers. When The Dixie Chicks added the song to their concert set list just a month after the album's release, and when The Dixie Chicks and Beyoncé together appeared on stage at the CMAs a year after Justin Timberlake and Chris Stapleton, the fans had ample opportunity to voice their own opinions. And there again, the outcome was familiar: most self-identified country fans loved the performance, but they categorized it as distinct from their conceptions of what they thought country music was.[48]

In a second test case, rapper Lil Nas X upended the musical world in the spring of 2019 with "Old Town Road." A full account of the song's traversal of popular music, its record-breaking 19 weeks as number one on the *Billboard* "Hot 100" chart, and its impact on the

46. "Beyoncé's 'Daddy Lessons' Is a Shrewd Wink to Country," 1 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jun/01/beyonce-daddy-lessons-country-music>.

47. Brian Josephs wrote about this incident for *Spin,* published 8 December 2016 under the headline "Grammy Country Committee Rejected Beyoncé's 'Daddy Lessons'," <https://www.spin.com/2016/12/grammy-country-committee-rejects-beyonce-daddy-lessons/>.

48. Jewly Height's eloquent NPR review of the duo on the CMAs included summation of fan responses (<https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2016/11/04/500562813/beyonc-and-the-dixie-chicks-offer-up-lessons-on-country-musics-past-and-future>); many of the fan comments that were posted on social media platforms were deleted in the days after the performance.

public discourse far exceeds the scope of this brief discussion. But the most relevant aspects of the story emerged when Lil Nas X tagged his record as country when he registered it with various digital streaming databases, including iTunes. Through the various metrics that monitor and count downloads and streams, the song appeared briefly on the *Billboard* country chart in March, until *Billboard* executives decided to remove it because it did not "embrace enough elements of today's country music."[49] Their comments stirred up public controversy, and a familiar debate raged in the public sphere. Paralleling The Dixie Chicks' duet with Beyoncé, within just a few days, a duet appearance by a white artist with country music credentials complicated the discourse: after connecting via Twitter, Billy Ray Cyrus joined Lil Nas X on a new version. Columbia Records seized the opportunity to capitalize on the now-viral hit by signing Lil Nas X and releasing the duet version between Lil Nas and Cyrus. And a familiar argument about who is allowed to claim country identity, and what country music has to sound like, occupied scores of journalists, talk-show hosts, and scholars alike. One such example was the Pittsburgh country station WDSY-FM, "Y 108," whose hosts posted a short blog after their on-air discussion. Drawing together the themes of this analysis, DJ Kristen Buccigrossi wrote, "Stoney and Cowboy LOVE this song and think we should play it all the time. I think it's a good song, BUT doesn't deserve it's [sic] place on country radio!" A self-proclaimed country fan, she liked it, but as a gatekeeper of genre, she did not perceive it as "country."[50] In each of these instances, the essential differentiation between genre identity and musical style remained a key point of tension.

When both Stapleton and Simpson stood on stage, their identity as country singers—and, more significantly, as country singers outside the mainstream who pushed back against country cross-over and held allegiance to tradition—was already established among their loyal fan bases. Wherever their musical impulses took them, that basic genre association was already inscribed on them as musicians. So when their horns, stop-time rhythms, brassy vocal harmonies, and unapologetically R&B vocal stylings raised questions about genre and temporarily fired up the critics to craft clever headlines, that commotion sent only a brief ripple through the larger country fan scene.

Within that context, their musical stylings tell a powerful, compelling, and wonderfully subversive musical story about country music's past. Simpson and Stapleton adopted musical signifiers of the blues, of black performance traditions, of soul vocal stylings, and—significantly—of soul chord progressions, and used them to transform country performances into soul performances that were ironically presented convincingly to their audience *as* country, not just any country, but hard country invested in tradition. Their performances followed the same musical formula Ray Charles had used on "You Are My Sunshine" in 1962, although his reception was judged less persuasively as country at the time, only later to be retrospectively embraced by the country narrative.

49. Elias Leight discussed the events in "Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' Was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed Its Mind," *Rolling Stone,* 26 March 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/>.

50. Kristen Buccigrossi, 10 April 2019, <https://y108.radio.com/blogs/kristen/old-town-road-billy-ray-cyrus-and-lil-nas-x-seriously-country-song>.

What would it have sounded like if Ray Charles had, instead, actually pulled a reverse Chris Stapleton? What if Charles, as a black artist, had taken an R&B hit and transformed it by submerging it in pedal steel and fiddle, a two-beat two-step groove, a basic I-IV-V-I chord progression, and high-tenor harmony, the direct inversion of what Stapleton did with George Jones's "Tennessee Whiskey?"

The politics of musical harmony and style remain elusive. Few listeners are routinely conscious of a favorite song's chord progression, for instance, and descriptions of musical style rely on a convergence of many different parameters compiled in generalized prototypes from which any individual song may deviate. Nonetheless, these analyses offer a few case studies that triangulate among the musical-stylistic associations of genre, the identities fans ascribe to artists, and the cultural reception of performances. What Stapleton and Simpson—and other songwriters in the country scene around 2016—did was make a powerful statement about country's past and present. Buoyed by their fans' reception of them as hard-country adherents to tradition, they reminded us yet again in musical form that country's historical lineage runs through soul and R&B in ways still under-acknowledged by its fans. Perhaps that was the same story Ray Charles tried to tell in 1962.

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