

ENGL 1101

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The Ever-Changing Culture of Country Music

Bruce Feiler, a native Southerner from Savannah, Georgia, is adamant about the significance of country music in the United States. He believes that the culture of country music has changed from its original foundation of "drinkin', cheatin' and truck drivin'" to a more conservative base that concentrates on the values of the powerful middle-class suburbanites (Feiler 430). By examining the culture of the stereotyped genre, Feiler observes the similarities and discrepancies between it and the general culture of the United States. He helps prove that not only has the culture of country music established values to which the American people can relate, but that mainstream America has adopted much of the culture that it once found so backward.

Because of country music's humble beginnings in the farmland of the South, it has seen an unfair amount of criticism by non-listeners since its creation in the 1890s. The style began "out of an eclectic array of sources including Irish and Scottish string music, Mississippi blues and Christian hymns" (Feiler 424). Through country music, blacks and whites united in a rural, working-class bond that helped to push the music into the "1920s as one format for the newly emerging radio and phonograph markets" (Marks). Before that time, the creators of country hid their culture away in "the mountains of Appalachia, the fields of the South and the deserts of the cowboy West" (Feiler 422). As a result, the popular culture of the United States labeled the country music scene as an unacceptable outcast. Feiler quotes Lon Helton, country editor of the publication *Radio and Records*, as saying, "You had to convince people that country music didn't cause cancer. People in that [younger] age group always had a very negative connotation of country" (427).

When country music hit the radio waves in the 1920s, the culture of the genre began to see dramatic changes. In the 1930s, Gene Autry helped to bring the West to country by "becoming the first singing cowboy to win the hearts of the wide-open terrain from atop his loyal horse, Champion" (Zubiante). Then, in the 1940s, the stereotypical culture of country music developed. The blues influenced the lyrics of classic hillbilly songs by focusing "on alcohol, marital breakups, sin, and death" (Marks). Although the lyrical focus of the songs remained the same until the 1980s, the culture of country still changed as it moved closer to the tastes of the mainstream. Feiler describes this change by saying, "The 'Nashville Sound,' blending orchestrated pop with country-fied themes, provided a foundation for a new roster of crossover artists" (424). While the themes of country lingered for many decades, many older fans rebelled against the new sound that catered to the mainstream. They tried to revert to the sounds of "fiddles, banjos, pedal steel guitars, or mandolins" that helped to first create the sound of country (Marks). However, the need to appeal to a larger audience overcame these efforts, and, in the 1990s, even the themes of the music began to drift--instead of two-timing and truck driving, lyrics began to reflect the moral values of the American majority.

Through the sounds of the music and the look of the performers, country music has attracted the attention of mainstream listeners in the last decade. However, Feiler claims that the true appeal to the new country is the value system that it portrays to the growing middle-class. The country music of today describes stories of "getting older, raising children and learning to survive in that new American frontier, suburbia" (Feiler 423). These new themes have also come to play in the political issues that are most important to Americans today. While country music used to concentrate on "controversial themes like immigration, capital punishment, labor unions, and racism" (Marks), it now focuses on the social issues of "domestic turmoil-- alcoholism, child abuse [and] spousal abuse" (Feiler 429). The increasingly accepted idea, then, is that Americans like country music because they can relate to it and to its performers. Rather than coming from Hollywood families, country music stars generally come from average families and from average towns. Leading country star Garth Brooks, for example, is "a middle-class native of Tulsa, Oklahoma, recently ranked the most demographically 'typical' city in America" (Feiler 426). Listeners feel comfortable with country music because it reflects their lives, their hopes, and their trials. This connection has helped push country music into the spotlight of the mainstream, and statistics show that its popularity will continue to grow. The music that was once restricted to the small towns and farms of the Southern United States is now the most popular radio format in the country, boasting 2,642 radio stations and "reaching 20 million more people a week than its closest competitor, adult contemporary" (Feiler 423).

As the make-up of American society has changed, so too has the culture of country music--for its performers and its listeners alike. Country music has followed the trends of the people as they have moved from the small towns of the Deep South, to the downtown areas of major cities, and back out to the increasingly populated suburbs of today. Although various groups within the United States have stereotyped and ignored the country music culture, it has proven its longevity by bouncing back from those obstacles to produce one of the most popular types of music in the modern age. It has overcome the threat of pop music's focus on "sex, drugs, and other forms of license" by offering morality in "tales of love, heartache, family ties and middle-aged renewal" (Feiler 426). So, whether the music has conformed to values of the people or the people have realized the need for country values in their lives, the result is the same: the country music culture has paralleled the changing culture of America, and that bond will now be difficult to break.

Works Cited

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