

From Hank Williams to Garth Brooks: What makes a song “country”?

By Jennifer Amaya

An authentic country sound can be, and most likely is, a combination of several styles of music. From its folk-like beginning in the 1920s, to its pop-like status today, “country,” in its whole sense, has been loaded (or, as David Brackett would say, “overcoded”)¹ with features of traditional ballads, blues, gospel, barndance, hymns, honkytonk, folk, swing, hillbilly, bluegrass, western, cajun, and rock-n-roll music (to name a few). With such a wide variety of accepted stylistic features, defining the country style as a whole requires looking at the similarities of the *elements* within all of its sub-styles. What makes a song “country,” then, is not as much about its one authentic style as it is about the handling of its elements (mostly the instrumental texture and the way the instruments are played) and its delivery (vocal technique and artist image). Finally, while any piece of music can *sound* “country,” not every piece of music can *be* country. To *be* country, ultimately, the lyrics must speak “country.”

Hank Williams Sr. (born “Hiram Hank Williams” on September 17, 1923) is considered one of country music’s most authentic and successful singer-songwriters to date. When he was inducted into the country music hall of fame, his plaque read:

Performing artist, songwriter...Hank Williams will live on in the memories of Americans. The simple, beautiful melodies and straightforward, plaintive stories in his lyrics, of life as he knew it, will never die. His songs appealed not only to the country music field, but brought him great acclaim in the ‘pop’ music world as well.²

But, while Hank Williams Sr. today is one of the main icons of country music, his popularity was not always so. His first experience in a recording studio left the impression that he sounded too much like his idol, Roy Acuff, and not enough like

¹ Brackett, David, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

² Byworth, Tony, *The History of Country & Western Music* (New York: Bison Books Corp, 1984), 47.

himself. It was only when Williams tested his Honky Tonk chops, during his second recording session, that his star was born and his legend began.³ Some say Williams is a cross between hillbilly and honky-tonk⁴, some say he is the “leading exponent of the honky-tonk style,”⁵ while others say that he is responsible for rockabilly. Regardless of where he fits in in the country music world, Hank Williams is country.

Garth Brooks (born “Troyal Garth Brooks” on February 7, 1962), is an award-winning country music singer-songwriter who has also had one of the most successful careers in popular music history.⁶ Similar to Williams’ first recording session, Brooks’ first trip to Nashville in 1985 was a failure. It wasn’t until his second Nashville attempt, when he moved to Nashville in 1987, that Brooks was able to get the break he was hoping for. He signed with Capitol Records in 1988, released his first album in 1989, and rose to stardom. His music has gone from traditionalist country (influenced by George Strait, a country artist who happens to have been influenced by Hank Williams), to “blue-collar anthems” (like his signature *Friends in Low Places*), to “operatic rock.”⁷ Comparative to Williams, regardless of where he fits in in the country music world, Garth Brooks is country.

There are similar elements in the songs of Garth Brooks and Hank Williams that support their country roots. Comparing Brooks’ *Two of a Kind, Workin’ On a Full House* to Williams’ *Hey Good Lookin’* is one good way to define some of the characteristics of country music. The tunes are quite different in sub-style and subject matter, yet are coded with similar elements that make them fit into the big country style. The first and most obvious similarity is the use of an apostrophe which replaces the letter “g,” on the ending of the words “working” and “looking” in the songs’ titles. Changing the “i-n-g” sound from a phonetic “eeng” to “in” is one typical characteristic of the country, or southern, accent that consumes the vocal sound of country music. Having the

³ Tony Byworth, *The History of Country & Western Music* (New York: Bison Books Corp, 1984), 46-47.

⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hank_Williams, 4/24/06.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garth_Brooks, 4/24/06.

⁷ Ibid.

apostrophe in place of the “g” in both of these titles is not simply a coincidence, as it is quite common practice in country music.⁸ And the apostrophe trick is not limited to titles of tunes, but is often found in the lyric body as well. Take Brooks’ *Two of a Kind*, *Workin’ On a Full House*, for example:⁹

Yeah, she’s my lady luck, hey I’m her wild card man.
Together we’re **buildin’** up a real hot hand.
We live out in the country. Hey, she’s my little queen of the south.
Yeah, we’re two of a kind, **workin’** on a full house.

She wakes me every **mornin’** with a smile and a kiss.
Her strong country **lovin’** is hard to resist.
She’s my easy **lovin’** woman, I’m her hard-**workin’** man, no doubt.
Yeah, we’re two of a kind, **workin’** on a full house.

Yeah, a pick-up truck is her limousine,
And her favorite dress is her faded blue jeans.
She loves me tender when the **goin’** gets tough.
Sometimes we fight just so we can make up.

Lord, I need that little woman like the crops need rain.
She’s my honeycomb, and I’m her sugar cane.
We really fit together if you know what I’m **talkin’** about.
Yeah, we’re two of a kind, **workin’** on a full house.

This time I found a keeper, I made up my mind.
Lord, the perfect combination is her heart and mine.
The sky’s the limit, no hill is too steep.
We’re **playin’** for fun, but we’re **playin’** for keeps.

So draw the curtain, honey, turn the lights down low.
We’ll find some country music on the radio.
I’m yours and you’re mine, hey, that’s what it’s all about.
Yeah we’re two of a kind, **workin’** on a full house.
Lordy mama, we’ll be two of a kind, **workin’** on a full house.

As shown, every verse and bridge in the Garth Brooks’ tune makes use of the apostrophe trick. Hank Williams’ lyrics are not much different:¹⁰

⁸ Other instances of this occurrence include (but are certainly not limited to): Collin Raye’s *Nothin’ A Little Love Won’t Cure* and *That’s My Story (And I’m Stickin’ To It)*; Garth Brooks’ *Fishin’ In The Dark*, *Callin’ Baton Rouge*, *Tearin’ It Up (And Burnin’ It Down)*, and *Ain’t Goin’ Down (‘Til the Sun Comes Up)*; Hank Williams’ *Howlin’ At The Moon*, *Ramblin’ Man*, *Window Shoppin’*, *Your Cheatin’ Heart*, and *Weary Blues from Waitin’*; Rascal Flatts’ *Prayin’ for Daylight* and *I’m Movin’ On*; and Bob Dylan’s *Blowin’ In The Wind*.

⁹ Lyrics have been taken from the sheet music handed out in class. It would be properly sited, however I do not have the publisher information.

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Hey, hey good **lookin'**
What-cha got **cookin'**
How's about **cookin' somethin'** up with me.

Hey, sweet baby,
Don't you think maybe
We could find us a brand-new recipe.

I've got a hot rod Ford and a two dollar bill
And I know a spot right over the hill.
There's soda pop and the **dancin's** free,
So if you wanna have fun, come along with me.

Hey, good **lookin'**
What-cha got **cookin'**
How's about **cookin' somethin'** up with me.

I'm free and ready
So we can go steady
How's about **savin'** all your time for me.

No more **lookin'**,
I know I've been **tooken**,
How's about **keepin'** steady company.

I'm gonna throw my date book over the fence
And find me one for five or ten cents.
I'll keep it 'til it's covered with age
'Cause I'm **writin'** your name down on every page.

Hey, good **lookin'**
What-cha got **cookin'**
How's about **cookin' somethin'** up with me.

The apostrophe trick is almost entirely a country music phenomenon, although it probably stems from having some of its roots in the blues, where it is also seen quite often. It can be found in a few popular tunes like *California Dreamin'*, Alicia Keys' *Fallin'*, and the jazz standard *Little Darlin'*, but it is not commonplace, nor does it have such a strong presence in the actual lyrics of those tunes.

Following closely behind the apostrophe trick in the lyrics is the use of common, simple wording. It's no secret that country lyrics are not grammatically correct or "proper." It's common to see such words as "ain't,"¹¹ "gonna,"¹² and "gotta,"¹³ in both the titles and lyrics. In Williams' *Hey Good Lookin'* the line appears, "I'm **gonna** throw my date book over the fence," for example. There are many other instances of common and not-so-proper uses of words in country lyrics, but much too many to list. In just the two song lyrics listed above, the loaded (or is it "coded"?) lyrics include the following words that have not yet been mentioned: *Lady, Country, South, Truck, Jeans, Tender, Lord, Crops, Honeycomb, Sugarcane, Mama, What-cha, Ford, and Fence*. These are just plain words that, alone, can make lyrics country.

Another way that country singers make their lyrics "country," is by adding inflections and melismas as they sing them. A perfect example of this is the word *Radio* in the Garth Brooks tune. Alone, the word "radio" can probably be found in hundreds of tunes from all different genres; however, the way that Garth Brooks sings it, it will never be found anywhere other than in country music. His pronunciation is something to the affect of: "Ray-ee-ay-dee-oh." The word is not loaded at all, but the way he sings it, it's like the loaded weapon has been discharged. It doesn't get more country than that.

The "radio" example is an extreme version of the almost non-stop scooping and improvising that country music singers do. Country music vocals are, simply, a transcriber's worst nightmare.¹⁴ They, more than any other music's vocals, stray from the basic written sheet music version. And unlike jazz and blues, where the vocal improvisations and inflections tend to land on chord tones or within the musical mode of the piece, country improvisations and inflections do not -- they make use of quarter tones, portamento, and more spoken-like inflections that are nearly impossible to notate. Most

¹¹ Examples include (but are not limited to): Carrie Underwood's *I Ain't In Checotah Anymore*; Garth Brooks' *Why Ain't I Running* and *Ain't Goin' Down ('Til The Sun Comes Up)*.

¹² Examples include (but are not limited to): Garth Brooks' *How You Ever Gonna Know* and *She's Gonna Make It*.

¹³ Example: Garth Brooks' *Do What You Gotta Do*.

¹⁴ The author can attest to this, as she is a transcriber by trade, and has concentrated on various pop, rock, country, and jazz vocals for the past five years.

of this improvisational style probably comes from country music's roots in yodeling, wailing, and pig-calling, which has made its way into every sub-style of the music. George D. Hay, speaking about Bill Monroe, an accomplished country bluegrass singer, says, "There is that authentic wail in his high-pitched voice that one hears in the evening in the country when Mother nature sighs and retires for the night."¹⁵ Hank Williams employs that same high-pitched voice and, even though his *Hey Good Lookin'* vocals appear to be more tame than Garth Brooks' vocals on *Two of a Kind...*, upon careful listening, one can hear that Williams scoops nearly every syllable he sings. An accurate transcription, thus, is nearly impossible. That is country music.

Besides the use of loaded words in the lyrics and the improvisational treatment of words in the lyrics, the basic southern accent must be present in country music. There's a twang to the vocals that does not exist in any other genre of music. Country singers have a tendency to keep their mouths more closed and their vocals less open and pure. This, of course, is related to word choice as well. There's a big difference, for example, in the position of the mouth when asking (or singing) "what do you," in comparison to "whatcha."

Moving away from the vocals and lyrics, the other main aspect of country music that makes it "country" is the instrumentation. From the beginning, the instrumentation has not changed. Country music, as it evolved in the rural South, was based on the fiddle, and later joined by the guitar.¹⁶ From Hank Williams' time to the present day, country music continues to embrace the fiddle and the guitar as their two main instruments. Both instruments are found and featured in both of the pieces under discussion. It is interesting that country music seems to have been the only style of popular music that was not at all affected by the MIDI movement of the 1980s. It's not entirely uncommon to find a MIDI keyboard in a country band, but it's rare if one is featured or even heard enough to be obvious. Other instruments that join the guitar and fiddle are drums, banjo, harmonica, piano, and occasionally the accordion.

¹⁵ Tony Byworth, *The History of Country & Western Music* (New York: Bison Books Corp, 1984), 17.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The instruments alone, however, do not define the country music sound. Most of the time it's *how* the instruments are played that really makes them characteristic of country. The guitar can be acoustic, clean electric, or nowadays can have an effect applied to it, but it's always played with a little wah-wah, and the notes are scooped, similar to the vocals. The guitar fills in gaps between vocal statements, and is almost always featured with a solo, whether extended or just playing a small tag in between verse and chorus. The fiddle, if present, is always featured, and is played as a fiddle is expected to be played, with no hint of it's ability to be played like a classical violin. (It screams out with the melody and employs several scratchy double-stops here and there, just as an example.) The drums are usually in the background, and the vocals up front. Both Brooks' and Williams' tunes (and most other country tunes) are arranged similarly in instrumentation and presentation.

One final element to discuss (although there are so many more that could be included here) is the country artist's image. A cowboy hat and boots have become standard for any male country music artist (although some of them do omit the hat from time to time). Both Garth Brooks and Hank Williams have embraced the basics of the male country singer image. Where Hank would wear a western suit, Garth would wear a colorful rodeo-style button-up long-sleeved shirt with jeans; but, either way, they both still appear to be "country," and that's important because as an artist it is nearly impossible to sell a country song if you do not look the part. As Tony Byworth states in his book, *The History of Country & Western Music*, "The western aspect of country music is far more obvious these days...witnessed by the boots and stetsons adopted as essential clothing by many of the music's contemporary entertainers."¹⁷ Even Cowboy Troy, a country rapper, wears a cowboy hat and boots. If you're not convinced of it's importance to the country image, ask any layman what their idea of a country star is, and they'll probably respond with something like "he looks like a cowboy."¹⁸

¹⁷ Tony Byworth, *The History of Country & Western Music* (New York: Bison Books Corp, 1984), 35.

¹⁸ This response was genuinely expressed by the author's roommate, who is not a musician, nor a country

A further discussion about the life and image of the country star should probably include his place of residence, his upbringing, his affinity toward animals (especially horses), his attitude toward women, and his spirituality. There is an attitude of sincerity in country music that does not exist in many other musical genres. Hank Williams described this “sincerity” as “...what makes our kind of music successful.”¹⁹ One would have to wonder if growing up in the South, for example, makes singing about the South more sincere. (“South” was, by the way, one of the loaded terms discussed earlier.) As another example, if the artist grew up on a farm and worked in the fields, it could, possibly, make his delivery of the loaded term “crops” more sincere. Also, if the artist raised farm animals and had horses, he certainly could deliver stories about horses with more sincerity than those who have not. (“Horse” and “Cowboy” were not loaded words listed above, but they most certainly should be on the list.)

A good example of the sincerity attached to the words “Horse” and “Cowboy” is in Garth Brooks’ most recent tune, *That Girl Is A Cowboy*. The song was written when Garth’s horse died, and a lady friend of his stayed up all night in a field, protecting the animal’s body until Garth returned home to give the horse a proper burial. That type of treatment toward a horse is only something that a true horseman can understand and feel, and something that you can only express sincerely if you’ve *lived* that experience.

Attitudes toward women are often expressed, as they are in Hank Williams’ *Hey, Good Lookin’* and in Garth Brooks’ *Two of a Kind*.... These types of songs continue to be written in the country style today, where women are placed on pedestals by male country singers. Regardless of the sexist connotations in the lyrics, they’re delivered with sincerity and they do not offend. In fact, one of Hank Williams’ rules of songwriting is to avoid writing a song “which might offend a certain class of people.” (Proof that it does not offend is in the popularity of these tunes amongst women.) In general, with more study, one would find that a majority of country music lyrics are written about the sincere relationship between man and woman, or husband and wife.

music fan.

¹⁹ Brackett, David, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 56.

It can be concluded that what makes a song “country” is a combination of several factors, from lyrics, to instrumentation, to delivery and artist image. Even though traditional country tunes have tended to contain a combination of elements from several sub-styles of country music, “Country [music] is still unique; it still pays homage to its roots and rides onward toward the future and new musical frontiers.”²⁰

²⁰ Tony Byworth, *The History of Country & Western Music* (New York: Bison Books Corp, 1984).