

Women of Country Music: Visual Polish and Progression vs. Progress

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Contemporary popular music is often categorized and stereotyped by critics in unflattering ways. Country music is no exception and is subjected to some of the harshest criticisms. Often referred to as 'three chords and the truth,' its themes reflecting life, love and simple living have been described by those in other genres—both artists and audiences—as overly simplistic and shallow. The women of country music have especially been put through the wringer. Time and the advent of music video have not been kind to women in this genre, although there is a cultural assertion that music videos have freed women from many traditional roles in music. A few feminist scholars have written on the subject, including opinions both supporting and critiquing the viewpoint that music video has liberated women. Janelle Wilson of the University of Minnesota contends that country music provides more ways for women to express themselves than do rock and pop music, while Professor Julie Andsager and Kimberly Roe (communications and media) acknowledge that there have not been significant strides made in breaking out of traditional stereotypes. The argument I present here goes further and asserts that the country music video genre does not advance women in healthy, meaningful ways. In fact, my research shows that it has actually contributed to reinforcing degrading, limiting, and harmful images of women.

A quick look at a few typical examples reveals an interesting pattern in the sexualization and homogenization of both the appearance and the music of various female artists. I reviewed three contemporary, country female artists and their careers spanning the past 12 years (1997-2009). Sara Evans, LeAnn Rimes and Carrie Underwood provide clear illustrations as they have all been chart-topping, top-selling artists. Live versions of songs performed by these female country artists early in their careers display little make-up, natural hairstyles and "normal" clothes. By normal clothes I am referring to attire that is relatively easy to identify as everyday wear. Using today's standards, they could be defined as stylishly but modestly dressed. In the 2000 studio airing of "Born to Fly," Evans wears three-toned jeans paired with a buttoned, collared shirt. She is centered in the camera frame, standing tall and projecting lyrics that articulate female power:

How do you wait for heaven [meaning marriage]
And who has that much time?
And how do you keep both feet on the ground
When you know you were born to fly?

In sharp contrast, the official video of the same song represents a total disconnect from the lyrics. In their 1999 study "Country Music Video in Country's Year of the Woman," Andsager and Roe note that, "...song lyrics rarely provide the basis for video imagery" (71). In this aspect, male and female artists are comparable. In this example, however, the disconnect is startling. Evans appears both childlike and as vixen. Aside from being considerably more slender and polished, she alternates between being dressed like a sexualized Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, and a pin-up girl. Appearing helpless, she spends most of her screen time being helped by men, on her back, with 'just had sex' hair, her hands either up in the air or in her hair and, in general, seducing the viewer. This pretty much defines Evans video career from here on out. Despite empowering lyrics, the official country

music image is sexualized and infantilized.

In the same year, the video "I Could Not Ask for More" makes no pretense of being anything other than a presentation of soft porn. Most of the shots are directed at Evans' crotch while she smiles and sings about her man being the only thing of any importance in her life. This is a far cry from the female powered message in "Born to Fly." A substantial portion of the video is also shot with her on all fours, furthering the disconnect between lyrics and visuals while reinforcing and perpetuating a very limiting role of her as a sex symbol. Just one year prior to this, Janelle Wilson's essay "Women in Country Music Videos" proclaimed, "...explicit sexuality, and exploitation that tend to be associated with rock music videos are not readily apparent in country music videos" (291). Obviously, this is not always the case. Monique Wittig's essay "One Is Not Born A Woman" comes to mind when she refers to Simone de Beauvoir's notion of "false consciousness which consists of selecting among the features of the myth... those which look good and using them as a definition for women" (Wittig, FTR 246). To the producers of music video, the features that define women by how sexually attractive and available they are to men are ones that serves to maintain a status quo, limiting the possibility of female artists being taken seriously. This is one more (of many) cultural practices that contribute to women not being taken seriously in various other areas of life such as education and employment. According to the National Committee on Pay Equity, women make 77 cents to every dollar made by their male counterparts. This speaks concretely to the power of the reinforcing those "mythical features." That the women in the videos are complicit in their own objectification speaks to how deeply and fully ingrained these concepts are in all of us. It also demonstrates what a woman has to sell to be successful in the industry.

Wilson comes to a different conclusion about the role and presence of women in country music videos by noticing "their more recent efforts have worked toward challenging the old honky-tonk girl or country bumpkin images that permeate the collective unconscious" (301). While this is a fair assumption, it does not follow to a logical conclusion in that the progression from country bumpkin to soft porn star negatively influences the cause or status of women.

LeAnn Rimes and Carrie Underwood, arriving on the scene at younger ages than Evans (13 and 22, respectively), experienced an additional insult to their careers. Both followed similar career paths as Evans' with regard to the extreme sexualization and the marketing of their persons (as opposed to their music) as an objectified product. The visuals in the progression of videos I discuss next exemplify this. Rimes and Underwood were further homogenized in ways that totally eliminated the very talent that made them famous in the first place – their unique voices. The trajectory this phenomenon takes is referred to by Andsager and Roe as symbolic annihilation:

Symbolic annihilation consists of absence, trivialization, and condemnation. In country music videos, as in other genres, absence would be evidenced by a strong disparity between men's and women's videos in terms of frequency of play. Trivialization and condemnation would be apparent through sexist portrayals of women's roles, overt emphasis on women's bodies and youth, and scanty or alluring clothing that would increase the potential for objectifying women. (71)

Rimes' 2002 video "Life Goes On" exemplifies both trivialization

and condemnation in a number of ways. Scantly clad is an understatement in this video and brings into sharp focus two points previously mentioned. First is the comparison between the attire she wore for a Disney concert in 1997, a gold velour sweatsuit, to her nearly nude portrayal while yodeling in "Life Goes On." Second is the obvious disconnect between the lyrical message and the visual message, as we saw in the Sara Evans example. The lyrics, "Oh life goes on, and it's only gonna make me strong," do not actually tell a linear story, which also represents a departure from the traditional story-telling model of country music to the more mass-produced, sound-byte lyric style of pop music. Rimes may be singing about leaving her man behind but her body language, clothing and behavior before the camera all say, 'here I am – come and get me' in ways that are all but impossible to misinterpret. In addition, both Rimes and Underwood are known for their sheer vocal power, talent and stylings, such as unique intonation and phrasing. However, in two examples, Rimes' "Life Goes On" and Underwood's "Cowboy Cassanova," the vocals have been so compressed—"squashing" the vocals in a way that removes all the most powerful highlights to "even out" the sound—and over-synthesized that it is impossible to distinguish them from the thin, flat, mechanized vocals of any other generic pop singer.

Homogenizing female voices in this fashion is a powerful tool and the symbolism is obvious in the following ways: If women's voices can't be distinguished from one another, how can we hear them at all? If the message in the song is sabotaged by visuals that reduce women to sex objects, who will listen, anyway? And what do young women and girls take away from such confusing and misleading portrayals? How can they be expected to enter the work force and demand equality in wages, working conditions and career advancements when both they and their potential employer—either male or female—have been brought up viewing women as something not to be taken seriously? When the disconnect between lyrics and visuals portrays women's actions contradicting their words, how can we expect 'no means no' to carry any weight? And what response is there to the critic who declares that this is reading too much into a 'simple' music video? Theorists Carole McCann and Seung-kyun Kim articulate in the Introduction of *The Feminist Theory Reader* why these questions are important:

In any case, a key claim of feminist theory is that power relations are implicit in the struggles by which sex differences are defined, constituted, identified with, and reproduced. The focus of feminist theories has been to gain greater understanding of these gender processes and an understanding of the operations of power within them. (15)

In other words, it is not only important to look at these issues in music, but in all areas of our culture. Nothing that costs so much time, energy and money to produce is 'simple' or accidental. All advertising and marketing efforts, including music videos, are intentional and promote an agenda that reinforces harmful and limiting female stereotypes. These stereotypes are problematic for all of us. They not only contribute to ideas about who/what women are and greatly limit definitions of them, but also contribute to how women are perceived by men, by themselves and each other and by the systems they operate in. Wage discrepancy, personal safety, representation in the legal system, career and educational opportunities are all examples of how these stereotypes play out in our society.

Music has always been a powerful, prevalent, pervasive and persuasive part of our culture and society. With the advent and develop-

ment of music video, it has become one more tool for suppressing and repressing the voices of women. In country music particularly, the transition to video has not proven to be an advancement in any way but rather has hurt female artists who otherwise would have a stronger, more empowered presence in the genre. Women's voices, and therefore their strong messages, are irreparably altered by polishing, "annihilating," away their authenticity. A quick Internet search for "strong images of women in country music" revealed pages and pages of headings along the lines of "hottest country females." As long as "strong" equals sex kitten at the cash register, country music video will continue to hold its place in our culture as one more powerful tool reinforcing the subjugation of women.

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