

## 8 | Country Music: Australianising an American Tradition?

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In a 2008 appearance on the *Late Show* with David Letterman, actor Nicole Kidman found herself having to explain Australian country music. Although she was there to promote the Baz Luhrmann directed historical epic *Australia*, Letterman seemed more interested in discussing the career of Kidman's husband, the New Zealand born, Australian raised Keith Urban.<sup>1</sup> By 2008, Urban was one of Australia's most recognisable country music stars and biggest musical export. Letterman was surprised that Australians had even heard much country music, let alone been inspired to play it. Urban had 'an interesting background for a star in what I think of as more of an American genre!' he guffawed. 'Is American country music popular in Australia?' to which Kidman answered emphatically, 'No!' As Kidman unpacked the career of her husband, however, it became apparent that there was, in fact, a country-music culture in Australia. For instance, Kidman told Letterman that Urban has won the Tamworth Star Maker contest. Finally, Kidman clarified with exasperation: 'I know I said there was no country music in Australia . . . there is. It's just not American country music . . . Please let's talk about the film!'<sup>2</sup>

Yes, there is country music in Australia, and it is rich and varied. But running alongside this cultural richness has been a peculiarly Australian anxiety about what country music is, how authentic it is and how it differs from the American version. The Tamworth Country Music Festival and accompanying Golden Guitar Awards is the biggest event on the music calendar, and while the festival is full of a huge variety of music, it is often also the focus of debates about American styles diluting the 'true blue' Australian styles. In fact, purists often do not consider Keith Urban to be 'true' country.<sup>3</sup> This has been exacerbated by American incredulity, or at least perceived incredulity, about the local Australian product. Despite that anxiety, however, country music in Australia is full of fascinating styles, delightful eccentricities, and powerful stories. At this point, some hundred years since the first recordings were made, country music in Australia has outgrown its Appalachian roots and has turned into a tree of large boughs and surprising flowerings.

Country music frequently positions itself as one of the quintessential American musical forms: working class, plain-speaking, concerned with family values, interconnected with mythic ideas of Manifest Destiny, bursting with the rich sounds of a particularly American multiculturalism, and clothed in the big hats, rhinestones and cowboy boots of big country and big business. On the other hand, country music has often positioned itself as Australia's national music, and for similar, if not identical, reasons, working class, closely connected to the bush and the 'bush myth', influenced by British Isles folk music and balladry, plain-speaking, inclusive and dressed up in the utes, boots and roots of Australia's big country.<sup>4</sup> The fact that country music in Australia is derived from a quintessentially American tradition, yet has become, for many, authentically Australian, is one of the fascinating tensions at the heart of this music. For many fans and performers, this tension can be the source of much pleasure, enabling country music to simultaneously express local historical identities as well as fantastical glamorous cosmopolitan ones. For example, Gomeroi elder Uncle Roger Knox's music is deeply imbued with the language of American honky-tonk, yet he sings of being 'back in the dreamtime'.<sup>5</sup>

Country music is one of Australia's longest-lasting popular music forms. It arrived in Australia via American recordings in the late 1920s and, by the mid 1930s, recordings of local singers began appearing, such as those by its first star, Tex Morton. These recordings, known until the 1950s as hillbilly music, were immediately popular, outselling local and international artists in other genres such as swing. Hillbilly was an exciting new culture straight out of America and appealed to young people around the country, while being frowned upon by cultural elites. Although recording technologies, fashion and singing styles have changed since then, its rhetorical concerns and musical structures have remained remarkably stable. Country music has been a consistently popular style of music. For instance, one of the biggest-selling artists in Australian musical history remains the iconic Slim Dusty, with many of his songs being written by his wife and collaborator, Joy McKean.

Country music, despite common assumptions that it is dying out or that it is a rural-historical curio, is growing in popularity. In 2019, it had a market share of 15 per cent, double that of 1997.<sup>6</sup> This has been reflected in the growing incidence of festivals, touring circuits and radio programming. Alongside this growth, there has been a diversification of the genre, which has developed new sounds and audiences within tertiary-educated inner-city communities that traditionally have not been country's audience. Indigenous people, having long played country music, have increasingly

come to mainstream prominence in recent years. Country music in its deployment of memory and depiction of pre-modern idylls has always been a response to modernity, and it still offers much in a rapidly modernising world.

Defining what country music *is* is a slippery and often politically fraught business. However, it would be useful at this point to establish some broad characteristics. Country music in Australia has taken many of its cues from hillbilly styles that emerged from America in the early twentieth century. Those styles were themselves a blend of African American blues and jazz, Anglo-Celtic folk, string bands (white and Black), gospel and religious music, cowboy music, and Latin American and some Eastern European styles, such as the boom-cha polka beat. Much of the African American flavour of country music was lost on its journey across the Pacific. However, its Anglo-Celtic flavour was reinforced by absorbing already localised bush ballad and vaudeville traditions. Consequently, Australian country music is straighter and less syncopated than its American counterpart, with an even greater focus on narrative directness and plain-speaking storytelling, rather than expressivity. Since the 1960s, there has been an attempt to label a distinctive form of Australian country music as 'bush ballads', which claims writers Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson as its progenitors, as much as Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family.<sup>7</sup>

Country music uses an elemental musical architecture that employs relatively standardized harmonic movement to house the stories of the songs and draw attention to the sound of the voice. Critics have sometimes labelled country music as simple, but such clichés do not acknowledge how the complexity of country music is often to be found in storytelling skills, specific musicianship and the relationship between performer and audience. Further, country music's harmonic simplicity renders it a ready-made format for people without formal musical education. Like punk and hip hop, country music has been a style that has given voice to marginalised communities – rural, working class, Aboriginal – and to women. For many songwriters, country music has provided a space to talk about complex political and social issues central to life in Australia.

## Black Country

One of the most profound ways in which country music has been *Australianised*, if indeed that term is even appropriate here, has been through its deployment by Indigenous people. Indigenous musicians and

songwriters have used country's robust forms to speak of issues important to their individual and community identities and have often cut through to wider and whiter audiences, although this has been easier for Indigenous artists who are men. Indigenous songwriters have written about almost every conceivable aspect of the Indigenous experience within settler-colonialism – land rights, connection to Country, removal from Country, institutional discrimination, the Stolen Generations, strength in community, resistance and survival – and have used country music's rhetorical concerns with loss and lament to particular advantage.<sup>8</sup> This history provides an alternative viewpoint to conventional ideas about who can play country music, what country music should be about and what kind of politics country music expresses.<sup>9</sup> In Australia, country music has been used to voice Black stories and advocate a progressive political agenda.

Country music is not an exclusively white artform in America either. The roots of country are highly diverse; it has had notable African American performers such as Charley Pride, Rhiannon Giddens and most recently Beyoncé, and Native American artists such as Buddy Red Bow and Apache Spirit, and has a large following within Native American communities (for similar reasons to Indigenous communities in Australia).<sup>10</sup> In Australia, the presence of Indigenous performers and their contribution to national debate has been pervasive and profound, especially in recent years. This is due to several factors, not least the way in which Indigenous issues have been central to political debate in Australia since the 1990s. Interestingly, while prominent American artists in the mid twentieth century, such as Hank Williams, claimed Indigenous heritage or, like Johnny Cash, allowed false rumours of their Indigeneity to circulate, in Australia pioneering artists from that period, such as Chad Morgan, have only recently 'come out' as Indigenous.<sup>11</sup>

Indigenous people were highly active in vernacular musical forms from the prehistory of hillbilly music, playing waltzes, polkas and schottisches in string bands for social dances. Hero Black was a well-known piano-acordion player and composer who performed on river boats on the Murray and Darling Rivers in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Indigenous musicians swiftly took up hillbilly music. For instance, Billy Bargo often appeared at Tex Morton concerts in the 1930s. Bargo was not just a singer but also a rough rider, sharpshooter and whip cracker. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Bargo would also fill in for Morton when he was 'indisposed'.<sup>13</sup> No recordings exist of Bargo, unlike Morton, whose recording output was voluminous: a double standard the result of structural racism.

Inspired by hillbilly music on the radio and jukeboxes, touring acts such as Slim Dusty and community transmission, Indigenous people began using hillbilly song forms to write their stories from the mid twentieth century. Many of these songwriters were recorded by folklorists and anthropologists and never commercially released. Gamilaraay man Eric Craigie wrote vivid descriptions of life on government-run missions and townships around Moree such as 'Middle Camp'.<sup>14</sup> One songwriter whose recordings were eventually released in 1964 was Gunu man Dougie Young.<sup>15</sup> His songs vividly depict life on Barkandji country in Wilcannia in the 1950s and 1960s, when Indigenous people still lived under the Aborigines' Protection Act, which severely limited their rights to travel, work, socialise, and marry. Young's songs are concerned with the fact that going into pubs was illegal for Indigenous people, the subsequent black-market trade in alcohol, the 'clay pan dances' held outside of town and the punishment if they were caught: 'ten pounds or twenty days', to quote Young's lyrics.<sup>16</sup> Young's songs satirise well-known tropes of country music, such as songs about alcohol, and are written with an impish sense of humour and delivered in a nonchalant conversational style, indicating the way humour was used as a form of resistance and community-building by Indigenous people.<sup>17</sup> Some of Young's songs also depict the way that the pastoral industry relied on Indigenous labour and, as such, provide a racially charged perspective on another great subset of country music: cowboy songs.<sup>18</sup> In 'The Land Where the Crow Flies Backwards', Young rebuffs ideas of racial hierarchies still in circulation in the 1960s, stating that he is just as good a stockman, or cowboy, as a white man:

*Yeah, I'm tall dark and lean, every place I've been, the white man calls me Jack  
It's no crime, I'm not ashamed, I was born with my skin so black  
When it comes to riding rough horses, I mix it with the best  
In the land where the crow flies backwards and the pelican builds his nest.*<sup>19</sup>

The first star of Indigenous country music, Yorta Yorta and Yuin man Jimmy Little, also wrote pointed songs that exposed racial double standards. An early release from 1958, 'The Coloured Lad', describes the many rejections from employers based on the colour of his skin. However, it was Little's cover version of the gospel song 'Royal Telephone' (to Jesus) that catapulted him to widespread fame. The song showcased his honeyed voice while his television appearances capitalised on his movie star looks. It also saw him move away from country music. However, gospel music was very much intertwined with his style as a staple part of the religious education mandated on the mission stations, where many Indigenous people in this

period grew up. Many Indigenous performers also recorded Christian gospel albums, however other musicians have combined country styles with Indigenous languages and beliefs. Pitjantjatjara man, Frank Yamma, for instance, sings in several languages.<sup>20</sup>

Indigenous country musicians achieved broader and more sustained success in the 1970s and 1980s, as a result of self-determination, changing government policies, funding opportunities and societal attitudes. Acts such as the Country Outcasts, led by the Wiradjuri and Gamilaraay husband-and-wife team of Harry and Wilga Williams, and the Euraba Band with Roger Knox made significant inroads into touring, recording and institutional recognition. This was reflected in industry developments, such as the establishment of Central Australian Media Association (CAAMA) in 1982, an Indigenous-run label and broadcaster, and events such as the annual Aboriginal and Country Music Festival in Canberra. While Indigenous performers faced, and still face, discrimination on many levels, these trailblazing efforts and broader cultural changes helped pave the way for artists in the twenty-first century. Gumbaynggirr/Bundjalung musician Troy Cassar-Daley is one of the genre's most recognisable performers and, in 2022, won his fortieth Golden Guitar Award, the most won by any performer. The year before, Cassar-Daley performed 'Shadows on the Hill', about a massacre of Indigenous people in the nineteenth century on Bundjalung Country, with the Yorta Yorta hip hop MC Briggs, demonstrating country's more overtly political side and its musical flexibility.<sup>21</sup>

Until recently, only very few Indigenous artists crossed over to mainstream success, and these were almost all men. Indigenous songwriters and performers such as Arrernte woman Auriel Andrews, Wilga Williams (Gamilaraay) and Wonghi woman Josie Boyle never found the same success as did Jimmy Little, for instance. In recent years, Aboriginal women who have found commercial success have tended not to be 'hard core' country artists, but rather cross genres. For instance Warnindilyakwa woman Emily Wurramara combines indie folk, R&B and country, and in 2021 did a strikingly original version of Bob Randall's 1970s song about the Stolen Generations, the hillbilly lament 'Brown Skin Baby'.<sup>22</sup> Gumbaynggirr/Yamatji woman Emma Donovan draws in elements of rock and soul to mix with her country roots. This demonstrates not just that it is harder for Indigenous women artists to 'break through' but also the way in which genres are gendered with a more purist, 'authentic' approach to country being aligned with masculinity, while stylistic flexibility has been something acceptably feminine (themes we will return to later in this chapter).

Indigenous country music is also strikingly intergenerational. Many of the artists mentioned in this section are part of extended families of music-makers. Emma Donovan started out singing with The Donovans, made up of her mother, uncles and grandparents. Frank Yamma began playing lead guitar for his father Isaac's band. Roger Knox's regular live band is made up of his son Buddy and his grandsons, and Cassar-Daley's daughter Jem is an emerging country artist. While this phenomenon deserves more study, it seems reflective of the centrality of music-making to Indigenous communities and the fact that music, even popular music, in these communities is often learnt from elders, as much as from recordings or through formal music education.

## Sound

As outlined earlier, country music in Australia was less informed by African American styles and more by Anglo-Irish folk and vaudeville.<sup>23</sup> The result was that early hillbilly recordings sound straighter and more mannered than their looser, swingier American progenitors. One of the key figures in early hillbilly music was the American 'Blue Yodeller' Jimmie Rodgers. Rodgers' records from the late 1920s and early 1930s did big business in Australia, especially before the Great Depression curtailed Australian buying habits.<sup>24</sup> Rodgers was a large influence on Tex Morton, Australia's Yodelling Boundary Rider, and Morton recorded several songs popularised by Rodgers.

However, while Rodgers' singing style was deeply informed by the blues and minstrelsy, Morton's was more firmly grounded in European singing traditions.<sup>25</sup> Rodgers' yodelling was a lonesome sounding 'blue' yodel with small movements between head and chest voice that sounded like they emerged naturally from the rest of his singing. Morton's yodelling on the other hand was a widely flamboyant sound in the Swiss/Austrian style, a virtuosic display of trilling, whooping and oo-dely-aying that had its roots in music-hall performances of exotic stereotypes. This was due to the different musical cultures of America and Australia, and Morton's natural talent for yodelling. However, it was also due to the economics of country music recording practices.

For the first decade of country music recording, from the mid 1930s until just after World War II, there was one record label in Australia producing and releasing local product: Regal Zonophone, an imprint of the British owned EMI. EMI regarded hillbilly music as something that

could be swiftly and cheaply recorded, cashing in on the latest craze before it disappeared. Unlike the other main form of popular music of the time, swing, which required large ensembles and orchestras to record, hillbilly was seen as cheap due to its minimalism and apparent simplicity. These attitudes were due to the economic conservatism of the recording industry, cultural hierarchies and the restrictions of the Great Depression. Stories abound of a single hillbilly singer in the 1930s and 1940s going into EMI's studios in Homebush, Sydney, cutting several sides in a few hours, self-accompanied on guitar, and then being rushed out the door.<sup>26</sup>

These economic and cultural considerations had a profound impact on the development of the sound of hillbilly music in Australia. In America, the size and diversity of the market meant that a huge variety of country music was recorded, often ensemble-based and rich in musical experimentation and expression: western swing, bluegrass, zydeco and honky-tonk. In Australia, however, recording artists in its first few decades were almost exclusively solo singers or duos in the cowboy/cowgirl mode.

Overall, this has meant that in Australia, there has been more focus on lyrics and melody than on other musical ingredients. While band recordings have become the most common form since the 1960s, they tend to be lean, linear and minimal with a focus on narrative rather than expressivity and emotion. One of the interesting by-products of the reliance on the solo performer was the longevity of the yodel. Given that performers had to be self-accompanied on acoustic guitars, the possibilities for instrumental breaks and solos were limited. Consequently, early Australian hillbilly singers included a yodel on every one of their records – a chance to show off their virtuosity and skill, and to provide a contrasting musical break from the narrative. Graeme Smith explains that in America only some performers yodelled, and it was well and truly out of fashion by the 1940s. However, in Australia, it continued well after World War II.<sup>27</sup> It also produced fascinating parodies, subversions and variations. Comic hillbilly performer Chad Morgan launched into his depiction of a deluded small-town Romeo 'The Sheik from Scrubby Creek' with a dog-howl yodel, while, in Bob Randall's 'Brown Skin Baby', the yodel becomes a melancholy lament for stolen children: 'Ya, oo, ow, oow, ee'.<sup>28</sup>

## Femininity and Masculinity

Many of Australia's greatest yodellers have been women, often performing in duos. The music of the hillbilly duo the Schneider Sisters, Rita and



Mary, featured close harmony singing, a rambunctious rhythmic attitude and an invented instrument of washboards, horns, bells and cymbals called the 'Schneiderphone'. This instrument gave name to their song 'Washboard Rock 'n' Roll', which is often regarded as the first rock 'n' roll song recorded in Australia.<sup>29</sup> Mary Schneider went on to have a unique career 'Yodelling the Classics', including a memorable yodelled version of the William Tell Overture.<sup>30</sup> The McKean Sisters, Joy and Heather, shot to national prominence in the 1940s with songs that charmingly described the delights of rural life for young people in northern New South Wales, a place where 'the frangipannis grow' and where 'gymkhana day' is a cause for great excitement.<sup>31</sup> The musical arrangements reflect this joy, with the McKean Sisters' closely-woven harmonised yodels acting as a shout of glee. Joy McKean would go on to become one of Australian country music's key songwriters, writing some of her husband Slim Dusty's most beloved songs, including 'Lights on the Hill', about a fatal truck accident, which won a Golden Guitar Award at the inaugural ceremony in 1973.

(White) women have been a vital part of country music songwriting and performance in Australia since the very earliest days. Their contribution to the genre has been more visible than in other forms of popular music, especially rock music. Despite country music's reputation for being socially conservative, women have written songs that address social concerns and gendered double standards. In fact, country music's focus on the family and domestic sphere, an area traditionally gendered as feminine, has historically made country a legitimate genre for women to work in, unlike rock, pub rock and punk, where the focus on free living, experimentation and sexual freedom has meant that women performers have found it much harder to break through.<sup>32</sup> Not only were many of the early women hillbilly performers duos, but they were often sister duos like the McKean Sisters and the Schneider Sisters, giving them a family structure that suggested respectability.

After Regal Zonophone's huge success with its first local artist, Tex Morton, it began looking for other local hillbillies to sign up. Many of these were yodelling cowgirls, such as June Holms and 'Australia's Yodelling Sweetheart' Shirley Thoms. These artists wrote and performed songs that spoke directly to the experience of being a young woman in 1940s Australia, full of joy and optimism about the future but also aware of societal limitations.<sup>33</sup> Thoms' 'Where the Golden Wattle Blooms' is an affectionate and intimate portrayal of the Australian landscape and its flora, in particular the country around the Barron River near Cairns. It is a patriotic celebration of the 'freedom' of Australia compared to the

authoritarian restrictions of other countries, presumably a reference to the countries Australia was fighting at the time: Germany, Italy and Japan.<sup>34</sup>

In 1941, when she was just sixteen, Thoms wrote, recorded and released 'A Cowgirl's Life for Me', which was a feminist anthem, although it wasn't called that at the time. Here, the case is explicitly made that a cowgirl's life is incompatible with romantic love:

*There's many a cowboy who's asked me to wed,  
but I give a laugh and a shake of the head  
I'd not give my freedom whatever they say  
to tie myself down to the housework all day.*<sup>35</sup>

Her yodel here is both a celebration of the freedom that cowgirl work brings and a kiss-off to the potential suitor. This song was written and released during World War II, a time in which many women were experiencing newfound social and labour freedoms. The bitter irony was that Thoms herself abandoned her career in 1958, a date that coincided with her marriage and motherhood, as was the case for so many women performers of this era.<sup>36</sup>

Women songwriters and performers have continued to have a profound influence in country music. In 2002, Kasey Chambers had an elusive crossover hit with 'Not Pretty Enough' that proved hugely popular with country audiences and wider pop/rock fans. This song directly addressed the pressures for women to conform to stereotyped ideas of beauty. While Chambers was writing about her own reaction to life in the media spotlight, the song resonated with women from a broad range of social experiences.<sup>37</sup> The first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen many notable women performers and songwriters sustain and modernise this feminist tradition, although they have sometimes resisted the 'feminist' label, lest they alienate a sometimes socially conservative fan base.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, a local version of sentimental masculinity has had a particular potency in Australia. While men country music singers have always balanced the maudlin with the freewheeling, in Australia, it is the former that has been dominant. Jimmie Rodgers' most well-known songs celebrated his 'rough and rowdy ways'. However, Tex Morton's most popular songs were sentimental tear-jerkers about dead parents and long-lost valley homes. His 'You Only Have One Mother', with B-side 'The Black Sheep', was by far his most popular release, selling 23,000 copies between 1937 and 1942.<sup>39</sup> Sentimentality has been a somewhat constant quality into the twenty-first century. Often the sentimental subject matter contrasts with the ultra-masculinist imagery of the utes, boots and hats seen, for

instance, more recently in the persona and songs of Lee Kernaghan. America's recent phenomenon of 'Bro Country' is similar, although that has a more modern take on masculinity.<sup>40</sup> The pervasiveness of sentimentality is further evidence of the hold that Victorian-era parlour songs and music-hall performance cultures had over Australian hillbilly music compared to blues/jazz forms. However, it also exemplifies how an Australian masculine identity and mateship has often been represented as 'sentimental', 'lachrymose' and 'awash with self-pity'.<sup>41</sup>

### Modernity and Rurality/The City and the Bush

Country music, both in Australia and America, was the product of a period of vast modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation. In both countries, the period between the wars saw large migration from country to city and an increasingly de-ruralised and industrialised labour force.<sup>42</sup> In America, factory workers and their families in the Carolina Piedmont region began using vernacular forms to sing about their long-lost rural homes.<sup>43</sup> In Australia, early singers like Tex Morton, from his Sydney base, sung about sweet little homes in the valley. Hillbilly music was often based around a nostalgia for a lost rural paradise, rather than being rooted in it. For audiences, these songs spoke to a longing for a pre-modern, authentic existence; a longing that was itself a product of modernity.<sup>44</sup> One of the central reasons that hillbilly music caught on in Australia was not that its prairies were similar to America, but that its cities were.

Anxiety around modernity and a desire to escape were feelings exacerbated by seismic historical events of the time. The first hillbilly recordings in Australia coincided with the tail end of the Great Depression, and a significant minority of early hillbilly recordings dealt directly with this experience. Morton, in particular, had a slew of songs concerned with jumping trains, heading up to Queensland to look for work and the various escapades had along the way.<sup>45</sup> These songs spoke to the economic discontents of modernity and suggested a carefree escape from them. Similarly, hillbilly music's expertise in expressing feelings of loss found a receptive audience on the frontline and the home front during World War II. Hillbilly music sold well during the war, and many artists found employment performing for troops in this period.

It was not until after the war that country music began to ground itself more firmly in the country. Many performers who had their start in the 1940s and 1950s came from the northern hinterland and coastal

region of New South Wales. This region was predominantly dairy farming country, work which demands being inside cow sheds at milking time. Many hillbilly performers from this period talk about how a radio always hung on the milking shed wall tuned into country music.<sup>46</sup> The songs, both American and Australian in setting, spoke to a rural life, but also romanticised it, which was a powerful combination for the young and the yearning.

One such youth from Nulla Nulla, near Kempsey, was Gordon Kirkpatrick, who became so enamoured with the romance of hillbilly songs that he developed a stage name before he had even recorded a song: Slim Dusty. Combining the Anglo-Irish folk music of his family and neighbours with the hot new hillbilly sound, Dusty penned 'When the Rain Tumbles Down in July' in 1946. This song is a line in the sand, signifying an important step in the development of country songwriting and, indeed, Australian songwriting in general. Instead of the more romanticised images of wandering cowboys and cowgirls, there is a sense of rootedness and connection to place. The song is about a flood and is replete with images that can only come from living on the land:

*The squatters with sad eyes are watching  
It's been years since they've seen it so high  
The cattle moved up out of flood reach  
As the rain tumbles down in July.*<sup>47</sup>

Country music since the 1940s has often described rural labour and the landscape. Natural disasters, and human responses to them, have also featured routinely in country lyrics, suggesting that the national settler-colonial image of Australia as being a place where pioneers and farmers have had to battle a harsh climate is well established in country music. Indeed, country lyrics are a major expression of this.<sup>48</sup> At the time of writing this chapter, eastern Australia is experiencing unprecedented floods and, recently, catastrophic fires. Both events have been made more frequent and more extreme by human-created climate change. Country music, while it deals with the personal cost of such events, very rarely engages directly with the politics of climate change. Country artists have preferred to simply report on events and their human cost without the polemics of rock/pop artists like Midnight Oil or even American country artists like Johnny Cash. This is reflective of both an Australian predilection for plain speaking rather than political rhetoric and the often-careful engagements performers have with more conservative audiences.<sup>49</sup>

## Class and Respectability

The push-and-pull between the country and the city has been a constant of country music in Australia. Intertwined with this has been a negotiation of class and status. From the moment it was born as a genre, hillbilly music was othered and marked as different from other forms of popular music: trashy, disrespectful, musically basic and even morally degenerate. Even its name 'hillbilly' was coined as a pejorative term, although it was quickly adopted by musicians and audiences as an ironic badge of pride.<sup>50</sup> As blues, jazz and R&B were othered along racial lines, hillbilly was othered along class lines. In Australia, this was compounded by the fact that it was American and thus, by definition, foreign and commercialised. Middlebrow media reporting and reviews of hillbilly music in the 1930s and 1940s regularly parodied the genre's 'yee-hah' Appalachian flavour: for example, the swing magazine *Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News* announced in their review, 'Hyer is good ole Tex Morton, our own hill billy boy from the wilds of them thar Blue Mountains.'<sup>51</sup> Most of these reviews were light-hearted enough, yet the jokes betrayed deeply entrenched attitudes about cultural and class hierarchies.

These hierarchies were keenly felt by many in the burgeoning country music community who hoped to make their genre of music more respectable. By the 1950s, hillbilly music had an established sense of community and industry. It had several record labels, dedicated radio programming, and its first publications *Spurs* – founded by Slim Dusty and Joy McKean – and *Country and Western Spotlight*. These publications launched a concerted campaign to change the genre's name. 'Hillbilly', they argued, 'never sounded anything but cheap and common and degrading' while 'country and western' sounded 'dignified and respectable'.<sup>52</sup> While there was no official name change, by the end of the 1950s, the genre was referred to as 'country and western' and, by the 1970s, just 'country'. This name change also occurred in America at around the same time.

Nevertheless, anxieties and tensions around class and status have continued. Historically, country music audiences have been more likely to not have tertiary education than other popular music audiences. Also, audiences for other types of music usually put country music as their least-liked genre (although this may be changing, as the recent popularity of American artists Taylor Swift and Beyoncé's country stylings amongst young Australians demonstrates).<sup>53</sup> But, more importantly, it is the attitudes to country music that illustrate the importance of class and status. While

country music is certainly not considered 'morally degenerate' anymore, it is often stereotypically portrayed as musically simple, politically conservative and slavishly American. Such portrayals reveal middle-class and middlebrow anxieties about cultural value. In particular, they reveal a settler-colonial nation keen to point out a sense of national cultural identity distinct from those of larger imperial powers.

Ironically, in the twenty-first century, it is 'alt country', more recently known as 'Americana', that, in some ways, is the most respectable, or at least the most hip, of country music subcultures. This is a style that has defined itself in opposition to mainstream commercialised country music, whether that be Australian or American, taking its cues from pre-1970s musical forms. It is not afraid to wear its American influences on its sleeve. Deeply embedded in honky-tonk instrumentation and singing styles, while clothed in cowboy hats, rhinestones and fringed jackets, Americana styles have blossomed in inner-city venues over the last decade and found dedicated audiences with younger, inner-city, tertiary-educated professionals. Americanisms are often deployed knowingly, and in fact this scene might even be referred to as 'post-country'. At the Tamworth Country Music Festival in the 2020s, there are mainstream events featuring the stars of country, many of whom – such as Kasey Chambers, Troy Cassar-Daley and Lee Kernaghan – I have discussed here. However, there are also performances, centred around the Tamworth Hotel, by city-based Americana artists, such as Caitlin Harnett, Henry Wagons and Andy Golledge, which constitute a virtual Tamworth fringe festival.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

Anxieties around what is real, respectable or hip have characterised discussions around country music in Australia. In particular, to what degree Australian country music is American and to what degree it is local are questions that have vexed elements of the industry, media and audiences. Such anxieties point to bigger concerns around national identity in a settler-colonial nation, geographically in Asia, with cultural ties to Europe and an Indigenous history of more than 65,000 years.

In the meantime, musicians and songwriters have industriously been making music that speaks to Australian experiences of life in great variety. Songs have been written about the bush, the city, racism, colonial history, labour, family life, natural disasters and sexual double standards. In fact, despite its fear of being too American, Australian country music

songwriting has engaged fulsomely, richly and poetically with the experience of living in Australia. It was the first recorded popular music form to do so, and it has continued in this vein for almost a hundred years. Country music songwriters have both responded to and critiqued modernity and its various forms of progress, and we can expect this to continue into the future.

## Notes

1. B. Luhrmann, *Australia* (Los Angeles, 20th Century Fox, 2008), film.
2. 'The Late Show with David Letterman', YouTube video, 24 November 2008, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8Sh9U9De9I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8Sh9U9De9I), accessed 7 March 2022.
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4. G. Smith and J. Brett, 'Nation, Authenticity and Social Difference in Australian Popular Music: Folk, Country and Multicultural', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 22(58) (1998), 3–17. 'Ute' is short for 'utility vehicle', or pick-up truck.
5. R. Knox, 'Streets of Old Tamworth', *Stranger in My Country*, Bloodshot Records, 2013.
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8. See B. Carlson, 'Striking the Right Chord: Indigenous People and the Love of Country', *AlterNative*, 12(5) (2016), 498–512; C. Walker, *Buried Country* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2000).
9. D. Cusic, *Discovering Country Music* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008); C. K. Wolfe and J. Akenson (eds.), *Country Music Annual 2002* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002), 161–85; V. Sichel 'A World without Citizenship: On (the Absence of) Politics and Ideology in Country Music Lyrics, 1960–2000', *Popular Music and Society*, 28(3) (2005), 313–31.
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11. Samuels, 'Singing Indian Country', p. 142; C. Morgan, 'Ballad of Bill and Eva', 2010.
  12. A. Harris, S. Foster, T. Onus and N. Simpson, *Representing Australian Aboriginal Music and Dance 1930–1970* (Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 36.
  13. Walker, *Buried Country*, p. 30.
  14. J. Lloyd, 'Middle Camp', *The Songs Back Home: Mission Songs Project*, 2017.
  15. D. Young, *Songs of Dougie Young*, Wattle Records, 1965.
  16. D. Young, 'Wilcannia Song', *Dougie Young Composite Tape*, National Library of Australia, 1990. Bib ID 8148477.
  17. J. Beckett, 'I Don't Care Who Knows: The Songs of Dougie Young', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2 (1993), 34–8; T. Martin, 'Dougie Young and Political Resistance in Early Aboriginal Country Music', *Popular Music*, 38(3) (2019), 538–59.
  18. A. Curthoys, *Freedom Ride: A Freedom Rider Remembers* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), p. 15. See also A. McGrath, 'Born in the Cattle': *Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987).
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  20. For example, R. Knox, *The Gospel Album*, Enrec, Tamworth, 1986; F. Yamma, *Countryman*, Wantok Music, 2010.
  21. 'Shadows on the Hill' performance on *Going Country*, Episode 2, ABC Television, 2021.
  22. *Going Country*, Episode 1.
  23. G. Smith, 'Australian Country Music and the Hillbilly Yodel', *Popular Music*, 13(3) (1994), 279–311; G. Smith, *Singing Australian: A History of Folk and Country Music* (North Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2005). This is a feature that is not exclusive to country; see J. Stratton, 'Oz Rock and Ballad Tradition in Australian Popular Music' in J. Stratton (ed.), *Australian Rock: Essays on Popular Music* (Perth: Network Books, 2007).
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  26. A. Kerr, interview by John Minson, *History of Country Music in Australia* (originally broadcast Radio 2TM), 2 March 1980, [www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au/archkerr.html](http://www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au/archkerr.html), accessed 3 March 2022; Watson, *Country Music in Australia*, p. 19.
  27. G. Smith, 'Hillbilly Yodel'.
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29. Schneider Sisters, *Washboard Rock 'n' Roll*, Magnasound, 1956; D. Kilby and J. Kilby, 'Rare Collections: What Was the First Australian Rock 'n' Roll Record?', ABC Local, 20 June 2011, [www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/03/23/3171744.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/03/23/3171744.htm), accessed 4 May 2022.
30. M. Schneider, *Yodelling the Classics*, Checked Label, 2015.
31. McKean Sisters, 'Valley Where the Frangipanis Grow' and 'Gymkhana Yodel' on Various Artists, *Rhythm in the Saddle*, Screensound, Canberra, 2000.
32. C. Strong, 'All the Girls in Town: The Missing Women of Australian Rock, Cultural Memory and the Death of Chrissie Amphlett', *Perfect Beat*, 15(2) (2015), 149–66.
33. This body of songwriting still needs much more research, although S. Tucker's, 'Women Do Country Music: Australian Women's Country Music and Music Culture Scholarship' in E. MacKinlay, D. Collins and S. Owens (eds.), *Aesthetics and Experience in Music Performance* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), pp. 243–7, is a very good start.
34. Lyrically at least, Thoms' song was an update of patriotic World War I-era song 'Where The Golden Wattle Grows' (L.L.L. and Haydon, 1914–1918).
35. See S. Thoms, *Shirley Thoms: The Yodelling Cowgirl*, Larrikin Records, Sydney, 1996.
36. Watson, *Country Music in Australia*, p. 51
37. Fanny Lumsden interview in *Going Country*, Episode 2.
38. Famously, Dolly Parton, American performer and feminist icon, has repeatedly claimed she is not a feminist. Notwithstanding this, her influence on other women artists has been profound (see Kaylene Whiskey's cover art for this volume featuring Dolly Parton).
39. G23064, G23279, EMI Sales Cards, NFSA archives; M. Bellanta and T. Martin, 'Sins of the Son: Country Music and Masculine Sentimentality in 1930s and 1940s Australia', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 27(24) (2012), 355–72.
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41. S. Lawson, *How Simone de Beauvoir Died in Australia: Stories and Essays* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002), p. 164; K. Schaffer, *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 174. See also M. Bellanta, 'His Two Mates around Him Were Crying: Masculine Sentimentality in Late-Victorian Culture', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20(4) (2015), 471–90. For critical discussion in the American context and theoretical framing, see E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf Publisher, 1991).
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44. R. Handler, 'Authenticity', *Anthropology Today*, 2(1) (1986), 3; L. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).
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46. Watson, *Country Music in Australia*, p. 7.
47. S. Dusty, *When the Rain Tumbles Down in July*, Regal Zonophone, Sydney, 1946.
48. R. White, *Inventing Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981). R. Ward, *Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958).
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52. V. Adams, 'A Few Observations and Comments on a Vital Subject', *Spurs* (June 1956), p. 12.
53. Smith, *Singing Australian*, p. 84. See also T. Bennett, M. Emmison and J. Frow, *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
54. Musician Zane Banks used this descriptor in a conversation with me.

## Further Reading

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