

The Rise of Color and Diversity in Country Music

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Abstract

In recent years, the lack of female artists in the country genre of music has been an important and prominent topic of discussion among not only music industry members but also fans. As a result, examinations and initiatives aimed at diversity within the market have heavily focused on gender. In addition to the increase in record labels signing, developing, and releasing more female acts, the industry has also seen a significant increase in the number of African American country artists hitting the charts. African American artists are finding a foothold in country music and building successful careers in a market that has been dominated traditionally by Caucasian artists. This paper explores the historical context of gender and ethnic diversity within Nashville's country music genre and the evolution of the market to the current era where there are efforts to release more female artists, and walls are being broken down allowing new African American artists to find commercial success and sustainable careers.

Keywords: diversity, country music, country artists of color, female artists, African American artists, equity, equality

The Rise of Color and Diversity in Country Music

Over the past few years, there has been an abundance of discussion and articles written about the lack of female artists in the country genre of music. As a result, examinations and initiatives aimed at diversity within the market have been heavily focused on gender. In addition to a rise in record labels signing, developing, and releasing more female artists, there has also been a significant increase in the number of country artists of color. Black artists are finding a foothold and building successful careers in the market that has been historically dominated by white artists. This paper explores the historical context of ethnic and gender diversity within Nashville's country music genre, the barriers

that women and black country artists have faced, and the evolution of the market to the current era where there are efforts to increase the number of female artists in the market, and walls are being broken down allowing African American artists to find commercial success and sustainable careers.

Female Country Artists

Historical Perspective

The country music industry has a long history of strong female artists representing the genre on radio and awards shows. Artists such as Tammy Wynette, Reba McEntire, Carrie Underwood, Loretta Lynn, Taylor Swift, and Miranda Lambert have been praised and honored for their achievements and contributions to country music. While it is true that there have been female superstars in the genre, the number of male artists has far outweighed the number of females. This disparity became even more evident in recent years. From 2000 to 2018 the percentage of women represented on country radio dropped from 33.3 percent to just 11.3 percent, which was a decline of 66 percent (Moss 2019). In 2019, NBC's *The Today Show* featured a story on the disparity in its *Sunday Spotlight* segment. The story was an attempt to dispel the myth that women, the primary consumers of country music, do not want to listen to other women on the radio and that they prefer to listen to males (Hudak 2019). Before the story, the lack of women in country music was common knowledge to those in the industry but was not a major topic of discussion.

Current Perspective

After the story on *The Today Show*, the issue became public and helped to create an outcry, within, and outside the industry, for equality and equity towards females on radio and streaming playlists. Record labels seem to have taken notice and have been signing more females in recent years. Republic Records is having success with artist Lily Rose, whose song *Villain* reached #1 on the iTunes all-genre chart in 2020. Big Loud Records signed newcomer

Ashland Craft, who is making strides, and Monument Records is focused on developing the new female sister duo Tigirlily. Independent artist Tenille Arts, previously known for her live performance on ABC's *The Bachelor*, has also recently reached #3 on country radio and was certified platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) with her hit song *Somebody Like That* (Goldstein 2021). In response to the growing call for more females in country music, and finding out that 84 percent of listeners want females to have equal representation, Country Music Television (CMT) has instituted a 50/50 play for female artists across CMT and its web platforms (Goldstein 2021).

From 2018 to 2019, the percentage of females on country radio rose by 1.2 percentage points from 8.9 to 10.1 percent (Watson 2020). While strides are being made toward elevating females in the country genre, there is still more progress to be made for equity and equality. A little over 10 percent is far from CMT's goal of 50/50 representation. A 2023 study published in *Billboard* showed that major country stations preferred not to play songs by females back-to-back, while this is not an issue with songs by male artists (Nicholson 2023). If one listened to a station for twenty-four hours, one would likely hear three back-to-back songs by women and 245 back-to-back songs by men (Nicholson 2023). In conclusion to the discussion on female artists in country music, the recent awareness of the disparity is a solid first step in the inclusion of more female country artists, but the initiatives and efforts to increase female numbers within the genre have not yet begun to take hold.

Country Artists of Color

Historical Perspective

During the recent outcry for equality for women in the country music format, a less discussed and debated topic emerged: the successes and opportunities for artists of color within the genre. While a significant number of superstar artists through most of the decades since the inception of country music have historically been women, the same cannot be said of black country singers. There have been very few successful black country artists through the years despite the fact that country music might not even exist if black music had not served as a source and inspiration in the beginnings of the genre (Cantwell 2019).

DeFord Bailey, known as the harmonica wizard, was the first notable artist of color in the country genre (Jones 1990). Despite the fact that fans flocked to Grand Ole Opry shows to see Bailey, he regularly experienced racism while on the road in the form of not being allowed in hotels and restaurants (Snethen 2009). Charley Pride was the first black artist to achieve monumental success and a long career in the genre of country music. In his early career, due

to the racism still present in the United States during the 1960s, Pride's record label felt it needed to hide the fact that he was black and sent his debut single to radio without a photo (Boone 2020). Pride soon found support from white country artists of the era who stood up to those who refused to play his music. This support reflected what Hodges (2022) described as the camaraderie that the Nashville country industry traditionally displays. Faron Young threatened to pull his own music from radio if they would not add Pride's single, and Willie Nelson famously kissed Pride on stage to show his support (Boone 2020).

Cleve Francis was another black artist who tried to break through the perceived color barrier of the genre in the early 1990s. Francis did not achieve the same level of success as Pride or Bailey, but he did bring into focus that 24 percent of black adults listened to country music (Yahr 2022) and encouraged labels to pursue the black demographic as well as inspired young African American artists to pursue country music. In 1995, Francis spearheaded the creation of the Black Country Music Association (BCMA) (Bernstein 2020). The mission of the organization was to educate the public on the history of black artists in the genre and provide a resource for current black artists to support each other. In addition to Bailey, Pride, and Francis, other early African American country artists included Big Al Downing, who left the genre after Warner Brothers' refusal to put out an album, and Linda Martell, who left the genre after describing the racism she felt in being signed to a record label called Plantation Records (Harrington 1998; Morenz 2020). The historical context of black artists within the country genre and how those artists influenced and inspired the current generation provides a good foundation for examining what is happening in the country genre today.

Current Perspective

Due to trails that were blazed by artists of the past and a shift in the demographic of country music listeners, current artists of color are increasingly finding footholds in today's country market (Jones 2022). One of the most successful black country artists in today's market is Darius Rucker, who founded Hootie & the Blowfish and went on to release country albums as a solo artist and watched his first three country singles climb to number one ("Darius Rucker" 2018). Rucker is a member of the Grand Ole Opry and won a Grammy Award for "Best Country Solo Performance" for his song, "Wagon Wheel," which was certified eight times platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) (Wick 2021).

Following in Rucker's footsteps are artists like Blanco Brown, whose viral hit, "The Git Up," was certified 11 times platinum across three countries and claimed the number-one spot on the *Billboard Hot Country Songs*

chart for twelve weeks (“Blanco Brown” n.d.). Jimmie Allen was nominated for Best New Artist at the 64th Annual Grammy Awards and appeared as a special guest on Carrie Underwood’s *The Denim & Rhinestones Tour* on all 43 United States arena dates (“Jimmie Allen: About” n.d.). Lil Nas X won Grammy Awards for Best Pop Duo/Group Performance and Best Music Video for his viral hit “Old Town Road”, which smashed country charts in his remix with Billy Ray Cyrus (“Lil Nas X: Biography” 2022).

Other artists, including Mickey Guyton and Kane Brown, have used their platforms to speak out about the lack of inclusion for black artists in country music even while experiencing success in the genre. Brown was the first artist to have simultaneous number one songs on all five main *Billboard* country charts (Alexander 2021). Guyton was nominated for New Female Vocalist at the Academy of Country Music Awards and performed during CMT’s *Next Women of Country* (Alexander 2021).

Conclusion

While the country music industry has begun to recognize that the genre has an important place for African American artists and female artists, much progress stands to be made in order to level the playing field for women and black artists. We have seen industry partners like CMT take steps to level such playing field in its 50/50 initiative; however, other partners like digital service providers can and should do more. Up-and-coming female artists can look to powerhouses like Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert to see what success looks like in the genre. Similarly, rising African American artists have models like Kane Brown and Darius Rucker. As an industry, we must consciously continue making strides toward creating an environment that supports all types of artists in the celebrated country music genre.

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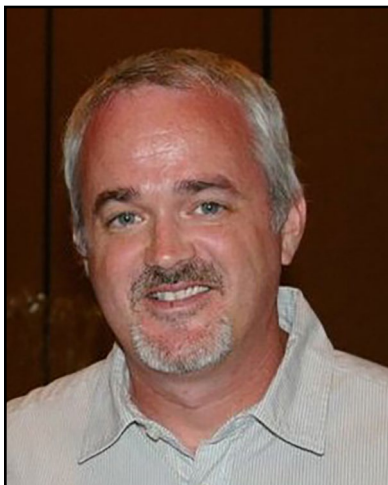
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In his thirty-year career in the music business, **Dan Hodges** has worked for BMG Music Publishing, Rick Hall's FAME Music, and Murrah Music. As a songplugger, Hodges successfully placed songs on albums generating over 10 million units in sales in his career, including the hits "Where Would You Be" by Martina McBride, "I'm A Survivor" by Reba McEntire (TV theme for REBA), Billy Currington's ASCAP 2008 Country Song of the Year "Good Directions", and songs recorded by many other major label acts. In addition to being a publisher, Dr. Hodges co-produced the XM Radio top 5 hit "Mandolin Rain" for Josh Kelley and discovered and signed to their first publishing deals country hitmakers



Josh Kear (multi-grammy winner and 2013 ASCAP Songwriter of the year) and Chris Tompkins (multi-grammy winner and writer of numerous #1 Country Songs), among other successful Nashville writers.

From 2008-2022, Hodges operated his own music row-based publishing company, Dan Hodges Music, LLC.

The company has enjoyed two #1's and had songs recorded by many Nashville country artists including Rascal Flatts, Martina McBride, Keith Urban, Brad Paisley, Chris Young, Reba McEntire, Lee Brice, and Kelsea Ballerini (her #1 "dibs"), to name a few. DHM also opened a virtual branch of the company in Australia in 2015, where the company enjoyed six #1 country songs and over thirty major label cuts in the Aussie country music scene. Dan has been a regular attendee of the international music publisher conference, MIDEM, which has led to subpublishing relationships all over the world and DHM songs being placed on major label acts in multiple countries including Italy, France, Sweden, Ireland, South Africa, U.K., and Germany.

Hodges earned his Doctor of Business Administration/International Business degree from Liberty University and taught as an adjunct and lecturer at Belmont University from 2016-2022. His recent research includes publications in the *College Music Symposium*, Liberty University's Digital Commons and presentations at MEIEA's 2022 and 2023 Summits. In the Fall of 2022, Hodges assumed the role of Associate Professor at the University of Colorado Denver.

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