
You're My Country Music

When I first started my band Karen & the Sorrows back in 2011, I spent a lot of time thinking about what it means to love a culture that doesn't love you back. As a white person, I fit the country fan stereotype that Nashville centers and celebrates. As a queer Jew with radical politics who grew up in a wealthy family in New York City? Not so much. But that didn't stop country music from sinking into my bones. My father ran a company called Heartland Music that sold country compilation albums on TV, and I was entranced by his stories about shooting commercials with stars like The Oak Ridge Boys, George Jones, Tammy Wynette, and Don Williams. Their songs became the soundtrack of my childhood.

Still, I'd never dreamed of making country music myself. I was singing in a punk band when, after suffering a particularly shattered heart, the twangy sounds of my past finally caught up with me. Suddenly, all I wanted to hear was the pedal steel guitar, and every song I wrote came out country. At first I tried to fight it—what place could there be for someone like me in this music? But it was no use. I'd gone country, and, whether or not Alan Jackson approved, there was no going back.

So I started researching, and soon I found there was a long tradition of country queers, from early trailblazing musicians like Lavender Country and Doug Stevens & the Outband to the International Gay Rodeo Association to Big Apple Ranch, New York's own LGBT country-western dance party. And yet, all the live country music spaces I was playing in New York and on the road weren't queer, and the queer music spaces weren't country. More than that, I missed the ethic of the queercore scene I'd come up in, of being a part of shows where our politics mattered, where making people feel welcome was as important as the music.¹ I decided to take my cue from punk's golden rule: if there's something you need that doesn't exist, do it yourself. In April of 2011, I co-organized my first queer country festival, and I've been putting on shows and helping to build community for queer country musicians across the US ever since.²

1. Queercore is a movement that began in the mid-1980s centered on music, zines, film, and other art. Its radical queer politics and sexuality were an in-your-face challenge to both homophobia in the punk scene and conservative and assimilationist tendencies in gay and lesbian communities. See *Queercore: How to Punk a Revolution*, dir. Yony Leyser (Altered Innocence/Fanatic, 2017) and the introduction to Curran Nault, *Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

2. I organized the first Gay Ole Opry festivals in Brooklyn in the spring and fall of 2011 with Riot Grrrl Ink, and then again in 2012, and in Philadelphia in 2011 and 2012. The Queer Country Monthly began in the summer of 2011, switched to quarterly in late 2015, and is still ongoing and often features musicians on tour from across the country.

With this new role, though, came more questions. Is it even possible to create a space for country music where everyone feels welcome? A home for all of us who love country even if it doesn't love us back? How do we reckon with country's place in conservative politics and upholding the status quo? With its nostalgia for an imagined America that erases the violence and oppression of both our past and present? With all the complex ways it constructs whiteness and helps keep white supremacy in place?³

I think part of our responsibility as musicians and as fans is to tell a different story about country music—one the industry has tried to erase, but that has also always been there, at least in the margins. This story starts with country's roots in "more than three centuries of vibrant cross-racial exchange and adaptation," roots that are "profoundly and inextricably multiracial."⁴ It centers all the ways that, despite the industry's pervasive racism, people of color have been making country music all along, from the genre's earliest days through today.⁵ It lifts up songs that question patriarchy and heteronormativity and demand that outsiders' stories be heard.⁶ It highlights the kind of country music that speaks truth to power, that stands up for all those who have been treated

After playing the Queer Country Quarterly while on tour, Eli Conley took the idea back to the Bay Area and started Queer Country West in 2015, which is also ongoing. A Gay Ole Opry tour together with fellow queer country band Paisley Fields in 2016 helped us connect with musicians across the southeast. In 2017, I put on Another Country, a daylong festival centering people of color and queer and trans musicians thinking about how we define country music. For more info and upcoming shows, see www.gayoleopry.com.

3. Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 13; Mark Allan Jackson, "Introduction: Richard Nixon, Johnny Cash, and the Political Soul of Country Music," in Mark Allan Jackson, ed., *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018); Geoff Mann, "Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia," in Charles A. Gallagher and France Winddance Twine, eds., *Rethorizing Race and Whiteness in the 21st Century: Changes and Challenges* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012); and Diane Pecknold, "Introduction: Country Music and Racial Formation," in Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). And for one reason that creating anti-racist spaces for country music matters so much, see Marcus K. Dowling, "When Being Black and Loving Country Music's Got You Down: My Love of the Genre Has Been Stolen," *Noisey*, 20 October 2017. https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/a37wae/when-being-black-and-loving-country-musics-got-you-down

4. Patrick Huber, "Black Hillbillies: African American Musicians on Old-Time Records, 1924–1932," in Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 22. Another good overview is Rhiannon Giddens, "Community and Connection," International Bluegrass Music Association World of Bluegrass Business Conference Keynote Address, 26 September 2017. Also see John W. Troutman, *Kikā Kila: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016): "What is missing from popular, and in many cases, scholarly understanding of southern music, however, is its cultural messiness. . . . The South [for many blues and country scholars] is essentially a land of only two cultural ancestries, with black music coming from Africa and white music coming from ancient English or Scottish ballad traditions. The dozens of vibrant southern American Indian communities are excluded from this strictly black-and-white mosaic, as are people rooted more intimately in the Caribbean world, or migrants from Nova Scotia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, or, of course, Hawaiian troubadours," 57–58.

5. See most of the essays in Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden in the Mix* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). Also Stephen A. King and P. Renee Foster, "Leave Country Music to White Folk?: Narratives from Contemporary African-American Country Artists on Race and Music," in Mark Allan Jackson, ed., *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018).

6. See Part II of Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers and Country Music*. Also Mark Allan Jackson, "Stand Up to Your Man: The Working-Class Feminism of Loretta Lynn" in Jackson, ed., *The Honky Tonk on the Left*. Also "The day my mama socked it to the Harper Valley P.T.A."

unjustly, and that does it with a middle finger and a smile.⁷ And it celebrates the fans that the industry ignores, the country music lovers who know all the words to all the songs even if we don't come to the shows—because it's clear to us that those shows are a space where only white, straight, cis people are welcome.

I know the odds are against us here, but I believe the power of country music is on our side. What makes country music country, above all, is its core commandment: tell the truth about your life. So even if our lives don't count as country to some—or don't count at all, really—there's no denying that the music itself has been hungering for our three chords and the truth all along.⁸

I don't sit down to write a queer country song. Honestly, I don't even sit down to write a country song—they just come out that way. But I do sit down and do my best to write a song that tells the truth about my life. To mean what I sing.⁹ And since being queer is part of who I am, that inevitably ends up in the music, too. The lyrics shared here are a few examples of this.

I'm not sure I even realized how queer “Can't Miss What You Never Had” was when I wrote it, but everyone else did, and, as you can probably guess from the title, it's about all the different kinds of heartbreak that come from being on the outside looking in, and longing for something you were never meant to have.

On the other hand, “Take Me For a Ride” was a little more intentionally queer. The music for the song came first, and I'd been struggling to figure out the lyrics. Then I heard queer comedian Ali Clayton hilariously complaining about how Little Big Town's “Girl Crush” wasn't actually about a girl crush at all. “What the hell, country music?” she wailed. “Why can't we just write one song—one song!—about eatin' pussy in a pickup truck?” And suddenly, I knew exactly what I had to do.

7. Nadine Hubbs's essay “‘Them's My Kind of People': Cross-Marginal Solidarity in Country Music of the Long Seventies,” in Mark Allan Jackson, ed., *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), is a good overview of this point.

8. Though neither their marketing nor their rhetoric reflects this, even the CMA acknowledges in its statistics that the 42 percent of the American population listening to country music includes 25 percent of all Hispanic people and 20 percent of all African Americans. Country Music Association, “Today's Country Music Market,” 2015. <http://www.cmaworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/CMA-Country-Music-Market-820150.pdf>. For an example of what I mean about the CMA's racist thinking about marketing, see Martin Hodgson's interview with past CMA head Tammy Genovese in “The Hidden Faces of Country,” *The Guardian*, 16 July 2006. No one in country music marketing is tracking the number of queer and trans country fans, but the existence of organizations like the International Association of Gay/Lesbian Country Western Dance Clubs and International Gay Rodeo Association are good clues that there are a lot of us out there.

As Priscilla Renea explains, “The essence of country music is talking about your experiences. . . . There's so many instances of black people getting pulled over and getting shot, so if I'm going to be honest about what it's like to be a black female country singer, I have to talk about it.” Michel Martin and Dustin Desoto, “Priscilla Renea Refuses To Be Quiet about Racism In Country Music,” *All Things Considered*, NPR, 23 June 2018: <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/23/622316454/priscilla-renea-refuses-to-be-quiet-about-racism-in-country-music>.

9. “Country music is a genre that deals with serious pain and sorrow, sometimes with gallows humor, but often looking it square in the face. There's a certain degree of trust that has to be there for that to work. You don't have to play 200 shows a year for 10 years in Texas to be a great singer. You don't have to work in a coal mine to know struggle. You don't have to be poor to get your heart broken. But do you mean it? Because that's the only test you have to pass. It's an easy one to pass. All you have to do is be sincere. You can use a stage name, start wearing different clothes, have a toupee, get plastic surgery, create an entire alter-ego for yourself, but you'd better mean it.” Tyler Mahan Coe, “Wynonna,” *Cocaine and Rhinestones*, 9 January, 2018: <https://cocaineandrhinestones.com/wynonna>.

“Star” is a love song about the terror that comes with knowing your beloved is always in danger in the world just because of who they are. It’s also about how we light the way for each other with that love, even and especially in the most dangerous, terrifying times.

“You’re My Country Music” is also a love song, but this one is to country music itself. Part of what I love most about country is that the point isn’t to say something new or flashy (though of course *being* flashy, along with a few extra hundred rhinestones, is always part of it, and I love that too). The point is to mark the deepest moments of human connection, our truest hopes and heartbreaks, and turn them into a sound that gives us joy and strength. This is why I don’t want us to cede country music to the conservatives, to the ways it serves white supremacy and the status quo. Why I believe it’s worth fighting for. At its best, country music transforms our suffering and, through that transformation, bonds us to each other. It takes our everyday lives, our everyday struggles, and lifts them up, reminding us of the beauty there even as the rest of the world tries to stamp that beauty out. There is power in this. Resilience. Resistance, even. Let’s use it.

CAN’T MISS WHAT YOU NEVER HAD

(*The Narrow Place*, 2017)

There’s the way things are
And the way that they could be
I got pretty good
At living in between

All those people on the TV screen
Playing out my favorite dream
Made it seem like something we could touch
A home, a family
Our own little magnolia tree
But it was just something we watched

And you say
Can’t miss what you never had
Can’t miss what you never had
But I do

I was living on fumes
But now I miss the smell
That oil can shimmer of hope that says
You never can tell

Now you’re running as fast as you can
Away from this never-never land
Where no pixie dust ever made us fly

But I’m still on my window sill
Watching the night sky
Wishing I were wishing you’d arrive

And you say
Can't miss what you never had
Can't miss what you never had
But I do

All these what-ifs and wonderings
All my hoping that something
Could make this wish true

Can't miss what you never had
Can't miss what you never had
But I do

TAKE ME FOR A RIDE

(The Narrow Place, 2017)

We can't say we've just begun
No, this ain't our first time
We can't blame it on we're young
I see those laugh lines

Why don't you drive by tonight
Come take me for a ride

Let those clock hands spin round, round
Let that big sun fall down, down
Let me take you on the town
Don't care what those folks say

I don't even have one doubt
Wanna kiss that pretty mouth
And then keep on kissin' south
'Cause you're still the girl I dream about

All these years and I'm not bored
Oh no, baby
'Cause oh my lord, here comes my girl
In a flatbed Ford

Why don't you drive by tonight
Come take me for a ride

Let those clock hands spin round, round
Let that big sun fall down, down
Let me take you on the town
Don't care what those folks say

I don't even have one doubt
Wanna kiss that pretty mouth
And then keep on kissin' south

'Cause you're still the girl I dream about

Ride, ride, ride
C'mon, cowgirl
Ride, ride, ride
If we don't then who will?
Ride, ride, ride

Let those clock hands spin round, round
Let that big sun fall down, down
Let me take you on the town
Don't care what those folks say

I don't even have one doubt
Wanna kiss that pretty mouth
And then keep on kissin' south
'Cause you're still the girl I dream about

STAR

(The Names of Things, 2014)

You could wait your whole life for what's safe
Board the windows up and walk away
Or let the cards be played
Again

And if the dark is a given, so is the light
I see them both there in your eyes tonight
But there is just one sky
One end

If I wander off too far
I'll still know just where you are
The city lights are bright
But they can't hide your star

If my ship gets washed away
I won't even be afraid
The ocean's black but I can
Map it by your star

What if this world doesn't want us here?
Uses all its might to make us disappear?
My love rings just as strong
And clear

If I wander off too far
I'll still know just where you are
The city lights are bright
But they can't hide your star

If my ship gets washed away
I won't even be afraid
The ocean's black but I can
Map it by your star

YOU'RE MY COUNTRY MUSIC

(*Guaranteed Broken Heart*, 2019)

Back in school they taught me to tell it slant
Say something new, don't bore us all with cheap romance
But then my bed was actually cold
And my heart actually broke
And I learned there was more than what's new

You're my
Rock, my spark, my candle in the darkness
Half my heart, my shining star, my only wish

And every tired old cliché that I dismissed
All it took was one damn kiss
It just took you
To make it true

I keep on learning every day
About what's real behind every cliché
There's nothin' they haven't seen
So just hold on to your dreams
And mean what you sing

You're my
Rock, my spark, my candle in the darkness
Half my heart, my shining star, my only wish
And every tired old cliché that I dismissed
All it took was one damn kiss
It just took you
To make it true

What I lost
You lost too
What I found
I see in you

You're my
Rock, my spark, my candle in the darkness
Half my heart, my shining star, my only wish

And every tired old cliché that I dismissed
All it took was one damn kiss
It just took you
To make it true ■