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Listening for Yes: Consent in the Contemporary Country Love Song

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Listening for Yes: Consent in the Contemporary Country Love Song

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Thesis submitted
to the College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in
Musicology

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Abstract

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Phoebe E. Hughes

This document investigates contemporary country music of the late 2000s to 2010s, looking specifically at how consent is represented in the songs of solo male artists from this time period. Constructing the framework of “Consent Songs,” this document provides three different categories of Consent Song: Hypothetical, Real-Life, and Breakup. Employing perspectives from popular music studies, as well as gender and sexuality studies, this document looks at representations of masculinity, sexuality, and various methods of authenticity in contemporary country music. In so doing, the lack of consent being represented in this body of music becomes apparent.

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Introduction:

This document focuses on how consent is represented in contemporary country music through gendered stereotypes and the presumption of monogamous heteronormativity in recordings by solo male contemporary country artists. Audiences for contemporary country music, and country music more generally, constitute a diverse population, yet male artists dominate the industry.¹ As a consequence, this project focuses on solo, male contemporary country artists. Songs that focus on consensual heterosexual romantic relationship play upon the audience-performer relationship, creating unsustainable stereotypes and presumptions of heteronormativity within the audience-performer relationship. Songs that assume heterosexual, monogamous consensual relationships as normative offer an interesting contrast to songs promoting hook-up culture.

Songs about hooking up and romance often coexist on the same album or in multiple releases by a single artist. The close coexistence of these song themes reveals a problematic dynamic within contemporary country music with respect to the representation of consent.

¹ Country Music Association, “Research and Insights,” accessed March 19, 2018, <http://www.cmaworld.com/research/>; According to the Country Music Association’s “Research and Insights” infographics, there are 107 million consumers of country music over the age of twelve, with almost even distribution across generations, peaking in the Millennial and Generation X categories. Although the data from the CMA is potentially biased, generational and geographic corroborating scholarship exists in work done on country music’s geographic appeal and the influence of Billboard charts as they reflect artist gender distribution (see Jada Watson, “Toward a Data-Driven Analysis of Gender Representation in Billboard Country Song Chart, 1985-Present,” presented at International Country Music Conference, Belmont University, June 2017; Jada Watson, “‘Girl on the Billboard;’ Changing *Billboard* Methodologies and Ecological Diversity in Hot Country Songs”, presented at International Association of Popular Music Studies—United States Branch, Vanderbilt University, March 2018.

Country music is often thought of as a more conservative genre, one that might consider hook-up culture as “bad” or “a-moral,” yet songs about hooking up have constituted a substantial body of chart-topping hits since the early 2000s. Since the 2010s, these hook-up songs have shared space on the charts and on albums with songs that promote monogamy and assume heteronormativity in consensual relationships. These values are often presented through overly romanticized and unrealistic narrative tropes that use vague or nonexistent gender pronouns. Working from the definition of “consent song” employed in this document, lyrical and musical analysis will engage with how this music promotes idealized romance and assumed consensual heteronormative narratives.

Generally defined, a Consent Song presents a relationship at any stage as monogamous and consensual—both parties involved have agreed to whatever is or has transpired within the song. Discussed extensively in the first chapter of this document, Consent Songs can be divided into three broad categories: Hypothetical, Break-up, and Real-Life. Hypothetical Consent Songs present a narrative or story where the authenticity of characters can be questioned through lyric ambiguity. Real-Life songs present clearer connections to the artist’s life through lyric references or visual references in music videos. Another sort of Real-Life song could just be a song that is in present-tense and does not have timeline or narrative leaps like a Hypothetical song. Breakup consent songs could be either a hypothetical situation or a true story. Typically, they involve the artist narrating a personal experience that happened in the past. Common themes include jealousy or wanting rekindle an old flame.

This document engages with and continues the trajectory of studies in gender and sexuality in country music. This research extends the discussion to contemporary country music, investigating the broader implications of this specific shift regarding consenting heteronormative

relationships in contemporary country music. Here, too, this document works to bridge the gap between popular music studies and country music studies. Popular music studies has a long history working within contemporary music and society, with frameworks essential to this investigation of contemporary country music.² In this particular historical moment, it is worthwhile, then, to consider the ways that country music helps us understand broader national (and now international) conversations about sexual consent, harassment, and abuse.

I. Literature Review: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Music Studies

Popular music studies has long been concerned with gender and sexuality, developing in the last quarter of the twentieth century and continuing well into the present day. This literature considers both the music itself and its wider societal implications. This study builds upon that scholarship to better understand the broader societal implications of country music. For the purpose of clarity, the literature review will be divided into three sections. First, I examine the broad body of popular music studies, focusing especially on the ways that it has utilized feminist theory. Second, I will explore the ways that popular music studies has addressed issues of identity formation. Finally, I will look at the ways in which intersectional approaches are used in popular music studies.

Before beginning the discussion of this literature, it is important to note the general chronological trends of scholarship in this particular field of intellectual inquiry. The brunt of work in gender and popular music began during the 1980s and aligned with a transition in feminist theorizing, moving from the “second-wave” feminism of the 1960s to the “third-wave”

² Travis D. Stimeling, “Introduction: Situating Country Music Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 1-12.

that flourished in the 1980s and 1990s.³ It is this bridge between second-wave and third-wave feminism that characterized gender studies work within the “New Musicology” movement of the 1990s. A few volumes that utilize feminist theory include Marcia Citron’s *Gender and the Musical Canon* and Susan McClary’s *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*.⁴ McClary, in particular, focused on popular music in her reading of Madonna in *Feminine Endings*.⁵

This literature review will focus on more general trends in scholarship on gender and sexuality in popular music studies, treating country music as a sub-genre of popular music similar to the way rap, rock, pop, dance, electronic, and other genres are treated. Differences between country music studies and popular music studies boil down to the perception of country music. There is a complicated but misguided understanding that country music has fundamentally different intentions and audiences than other popular music genres.⁶ Yet, to say

³ Michelle V. Rowley, “The Idea of Ancestry: Of Feminist Genealogies and Many Other Things,” in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2013): 77-82.

⁴ Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁵ McClary, “Living to Tell: Madonna’s Resurrection of the Fleshly,” in *Feminine Endings: Music Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁶ Marginalization of country music studies within academic scholarship, especially in musicology, can be seen through the very origins of the field. Originating in folklore studies of American vernacular music from the late nineteenth century, country scholarship has fought an uphill battle for legitimacy since the publication of Bill Malone’s doctoral dissertation, “A History of Commercial Country Music in the United States,” in 1965. See: Bill C. Malone, “A History of Commercial Country Music in the United States, 1920-1964,” PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1965; Travis D. Stimeling, “Introduction: Situating Country Music Studies,” in *The Oxford*

that country music is not popular does little justice to the country music industry's immense power as a social force.⁷ In eliminating the artificial separation of country music and popular music studies in this document, the intention is to show that there are overlapping themes within popular and country music studies that can be addressed in tandem and with similar methodologies.

To understand how country music can be perceived as so separate from the mainstream of popular music, it is important to acknowledge scholarship that opens the discussion of perceived differences. Richard Peterson's often cited *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* lays out the basic idea that country music is predicated on a constructed authenticity. The music, artists, producers, and marketers rely on the music being "authentic" and relatable to consumer, the listener, and the concert goer's, everyday live.⁸ Country music scholarship often implies—and, at times, even suggests outright—that this authenticity is not inherently present in other types of popular music. Yet, Peterson's work challenges us to investigate authenticity as

Handbook of Country Music, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 1-12, and Erika Brady, "Country Music Studies and Folklore," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 13-30.

⁷ Country Music Association, "The Rise of Country Music: A Detailed Look at Today's Country Music Audience, 2017, CMA Research," accessed March 19, 2018, <http://www.cmaworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Public-Web-Consumer-Deck-2017.pdf>.

⁸ Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

only one more “performed” aspect of music that is informed by race, class, sexuality, gender, commercialism, media markets, community, and other social factors.⁹

Expanding upon Peterson’s work, Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor’s edited collection *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* looks at a wide range of popular music styles from the 1950s onward.¹⁰ Emphasizing the difference between performances that are “fake” versus “authentic,” Barker and Taylor give the example of a KISS performance, citing the stage makeup the band wears as a “fake” element, contrasting with several different categories of “authentic” music. Differentiating between “representational authenticity,” “cultural authenticity,” and “personal authenticity,” Barker and Yuval arrive at the conclusion that there is some element of every performance that is “faked” because “no one goes out on stage and sings about exactly what they did and felt that day.”¹¹ Combined with Peterson’s descriptions of how authenticity is fabricated in country music, *Faking It* informs how this document understands the

⁹ Many essays included in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music* investigate these different issues, expanding on already existing scholarship. See: Leigh H. Edwards, “Country Music and Class,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 307-236; Olivia Carter Mather, “Race in Country Music Scholarship,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 327-354; Pamela Fox *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); Pamela Fox, “Sexuality in Country Music,” *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 375-354; Kristine M. McCusker, “Gendered Stages: Country Music, Authenticity, and the Performance of Gender,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 358-373.

¹⁰ Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, eds. *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

¹¹ Barker and Taylor, *Faking It*, x.

authenticity constructed for contemporary country music and the Consent Songs discussed herein.

Use of Feminist Theory

Critical feminist theory and gender studies is no stranger to popular music studies. Susan McClary, Lori Burns, and Mélisse Lafrance are but a few scholars who have worked with feminist theory and music.¹² This foundational work with feminist theory in music study comes both from within the discipline of musicology and from without, allowing for different angles of investigation to understand gender in music and the music industry. In particular, this scholarship opens space for intersectional approaches to music and pop music studies to further develop. This document is one such beneficiary, using elements of this scholarship to articulate the role of gender in Consent Songs.

In a 1998 dissertation, for instance, Torey L. King argues that popular music and its evolving forms work with feminist theory to help create and evolve public feminisms.¹³ Central to King's argument is that performers and the ways in which they use their bodies have "diversified and revitalized American feminism."¹⁴ Through this diversification, therefore, performers such as Madonna helped shape the evolution of third-wave feminism during 1980s, pushing the boundary between a postmodern discourse of scholarship and what was becoming a

¹² Lori Burns and Mélisse Lafrance, eds., *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹³ Torey L. King. "Who You Calling a Feminist?: Creating New Feminisms in Popular Music, 1986-1994," Ph.D. diss., Bowling Green State University, 1998.

¹⁴ King, "Who You Calling a Feminist?," *iii*.

rapidly more modern culture.¹⁵ This phenomenon created space for this modern discourse of feminism to envelop new popular music and performers as its own.

Visual representations of popular music's discourse with feminism are present in other media forms, including television programming. Kathryn Hill's article exploring the television program *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* popular music soundtrack articulates the way this program and others blended Second Wave, third-wave and Post-Feminism together through the different music they picked.¹⁶ Resonating with King's point about music and performers creating new feminisms, Hill shows that, when included as part of a broader mediated product, music can shape and blend feminist discourses. For example, Hill points to the use of the band No Doubt's music, with lead vocalist Gwen Stefani, as "Girl Power" music that embodies elements of post-feminism, contradicting third-wave feminism and Riot Grrrlz music as it worked to subvert "girlish" stereotyping. "Girl Power" music is characterized by women declaring they can wear what they want, say what they want, and do what they want, without concern for the political and social ramifications. A balance that often means embodying feminism *and* an overtly "girlish" persona. It worked toward the same goals with a framework predicated on country music authenticity, pushing just enough to stay within the framework of country music.¹⁷

¹⁵ McClary, "Living to Tell," 148-166.

¹⁶ Kathryn Hill, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer's Popular Music Soundtrack and Contemporary Feminism," *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 4 (2013): 725-744.

¹⁷ Scholarship that discusses the mediated feminism of country music in the 1990s and early 2000s includes: Beverly Keel, "Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl: The New Women's Movement in Country Music," in *A Boy Named Sue*, eds. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004): 155-177; Pamela Fox's chapter "Sexuality in Country Music" from *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music* ([New York: Oxford University Press, 2017]: 375-394) provides further insight into the studies of country music that used

These issues have been taken up in recent country music scholarship, as well, particularly in the work of Diane Pecknold and Kristine McCusker, among others. Pecknold and McCusker's 2004 collection *A Boy Named Sue* contains several chapters that use feminist theory to discuss women, but others that investigate the role of masculinity in country music. Published in 2004, *A Boy Named Sue* marks the beginning of understanding the necessitated dichotomy between genders in country music studies, while pointing to the need for further connection to be made with popular music studies. Joli Jensen's chapter on Patsy Cline, "Patsy Cline's Crossovers: Celebrity, Reputation, and Feminine Identity," reinforces concepts presented by McClary's work on Madonna, arguing that the music Cline released bordered on pop and expressed a harder sexuality than was acceptable for a female artist in the 1960s. This "crossover" music, she suggests, contributed to her marginalization as a country artist.¹⁸ The brunt of the chapter is dedicated to understanding the posthumous construction of "Patsy Cline," an icon that is complicated when we acknowledge the broader sociocultural context Cline lived in.¹⁹

Journalist Beverly Keel, in her chapter on "The New Women's Movement in Country Music," addresses what she calls the "Between" of "Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl."²⁰ Keel points to an evolution in how female country music stars have operated both publicly and within the

feminist lenses, pointing to Nadine Hubbs's *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014) as the most recent study on this topic with such critical detail.

¹⁸ Joli Jensen, "Patsy Cline's Crossovers: Celebrity, Reputation, and Feminine Identity," in *A Boy Named Sue*, eds. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 111.

¹⁹ Jensen, "Patsy Cline's Crossovers," 130-131.

²⁰ Keel, "Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl."

country music industry. With Faith Hill and the Dixie Chicks as examples, Keel describes the place of these artists as between explicit feminization and radical disassociation with specific gendered stereotyping of the Riot Grrrl movement. There is no effort to hid their sexuality, she argues, but that sexuality is also not shoved down the listener's throat.²¹ This in-between place that Keel describes allows for further entry of feminist theorizing into country music studies.

Looking at how gender affects musical creation and reception both by the public and from within the music industry, we can begin to understand how gender and sexuality function in the marketing and consumption of popular music. In particular, the distinction between human agent and static icon that both Jensen and Keel make is important to this study because the construction of particular identities can easily erase elements like race, gender, sexuality, and in Cline's case, class.²² This study will, therefore, work to problematize the iconography of the artists associated with contemporary country music in an effort to contextualize their work in a lived social context.

Identity and Popular Music

One of the themes present in music scholarship that uses critical feminist theory, particularly work done in the last fifteen or twenty years, was the intentionally intersectional approach to understanding and representing varying identities within and through music. Identity creation

²¹ Keel, "Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl," 176.

²² This issue has also been discussed by Warren R. Hofstra and Mike Foreman in their essay about Cline's hometown of Winchester, Virginia and its role in forming her intersectional identity. See: Warren R. Hofstra and Mike Foreman, "Legacy and Legend: The Cultural World of Patsy Cline's Winchester," in *Sweet Dreams: The World of Patsy Cline*, ed. Warren R. Hofstra (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013): 22-66.

both for the performers, their music, their audience, and more generally the creating of an industry identity. Particularly foundational is Sheila Whiteley's *Women and Popular Music*, which situates various female pop stars in their historical context and with broader feminist discourse.²³ In her second chapter, Whiteley articulates the interactions between cultural identity and musical characteristics through representations of women in rock music of the 1960s.²⁴ Ideas of cultural identity are further expanded in the twelfth chapter, 'Authenticity, Truthfulness, and Community: Tori Amos, Courtney Love, P.J. Harvey and Björk,' with Whiteley's discussion of how these artists use musical elements to create introspective narratives about their lives.²⁵ The discussion of narrative lives is influential on this document because so much country music, and the music discussed here, is supposed to represent a Real-Life situation or scenario.

Beyond investigations of women in popular musics, there are select studies of masculinity in popular music. Combined with the studies of women in popular music, study of masculinities and male artists are particularly important for this document because it is focused on solo male artists. Freya Jarman-Ivens' edited collection *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music* questions both how masculinity exists in popular music, and also what masculinity is. In their introduction to the collected essays, Ian Biddle and Jarman-Ivens articulate the complicated balance involved in talking about men and using the term "masculinity," while being

²³ Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

²⁴ Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music*, 32- 43.

²⁵ Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music*, 196-213.

conscientious of feminist work.²⁶ Several chapters are relevant to the investigation of Consent Songs, including Ian Biddle's, "'The Singsong of Undead Labor': Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the 'New' Male Singer / Songwriter," which looks at how recent male singer / songwriter's navigate a relationship between "voice, nostalgia, and masculinity."²⁷ One important element of this chapter, which I draw upon for my own analysis, is Biddle's description of the feminine in the songwriters he discusses. Biddle remarks that if, "the feminine is to function as anything other than a ghostly cipher...it must be given reign to challenge the very ground on which contemporary masculinity is built."²⁸ An important distinction he makes throughout the chapter is the absence of a feminine ability to challenge within the music—it is a "ghost cipher."²⁹ Biddle's "ghost cipher" rings true with my own discussion of "silent female partners" in the Consent Songs of contemporary country music.³⁰

²⁶ Ian Biddle and Freya Jarman-Ivens, "Introduction," in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007), 4.

²⁷ Ian Biddle, "'The Singsong of Undead Labor': Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the 'New' Male Singer/Songwriter," in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007), 125.

²⁸ Biddle, "'The Singsong of Undead Labor': Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the 'New' Male Singer/Songwriter," 141.

²⁹ This discussion of "ghost cipher" femininity is particularly important to my later discussion of a silent female voice in Consent Songs, but Biddle's argument is particularly nuanced as he points out the relevance, and importance of noting how femininity is structurally removed from the popular musics he discusses in relation to more general gender discourses. See: Biddle, "'The Singsong of Undead Labor': Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the 'New' Male Singer/Songwriter," 141.

³⁰ Biddle, "'The Singsong of Undead Labor': Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the 'New' Male Singer/Songwriter," 141.

Feminist theory along with other discussions of gender, opened a door that was then filled by queer theory as another branch of gender studies. Whiteley co-edited a volume with Jennifer Rycenga titled *Queering the Popular Pitch*, focused on issues of, “race and ethnicity, forgotten histories, the body in music, and the use of popular music in power politics.”³¹ The chapters that make up the edited collection have sparked further queer studies of popular music.³² Queer studies plays a role in shaping how identity, and specifically gender identity is created in popular music forms, including country music. This shows the importance of work

³¹ See: Sheila Whiteley, “Introduction,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006), *xiii*; Judith Halberstam, “Queer Voices and Musical Genders,” in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007): 183-195; Mark J. Butler, ““Some of Us Can Only Live in Songs of Love and Trouble”: Voice, Genre/Gender, and Sexuality in the Music of Stephin Merrit,” in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007): 235-259.

³² Chapters of particular relevance to this study include: Karen Tongson, “Tickle Me Emo: Lesbian Balladeering, Straight-Boy Emo, and the Politics of Affect,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006): 55-66; Mario Rey, “Albita Rodríguez: Sexuality, Imagining, and Gender Construction in the Music of Exile,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006): 115-130; Jeffrey Callen, “Gender Crossings: A Neglected History in African American Music,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006): 185-198; Freya Jarman-Ivens, “Queer(ing) Masculinities in Heterosexist Rap Music,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006): 199-220; Sheila Whiteley, “Popular Music and the Dynamics of Desire,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006): 249-262; Stan Hawkins, “On Male Queering in Mainstream Pop,” in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, eds. Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga (New York: Routledge, 2006): 279-294.

that looks not only at women composers, performers, artists, and songwriters, but at their male counterparts and how their identity formation affects the broad social impacts of popular music. Further still, queer studies allow for an understanding of androgynous and non-gender specific music. Asian American music studies has been particularly pioneering on this front. The work of Deborah Wong and Eric Hung has been influential in understanding how identity is constructed from an intersectional perspective.³³ African American music studies, too, has been influential—particularly the work of Kyra Gaunt in *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, which investigates the handclapping games of black girls as a form of identity shaping popular music.³⁴

It is important to note that there are many different ways to go about looking at identity formation, and feminist frameworks provide a foundational example for work that has already been done. Not surprisingly, much of this work has been focused on women musicians, although the findings of these studies can be easily extended to musicians who identify as male, as well. The majority of this work is concerned with the ways that music fans form their identities through the consumption of music. Too, there is scholarship on the ways that musicians construct their identity through references to other established artists or in opposition to them. This project is concerned with how artists construct their identities, specifically how they rhetorically, musically, and iconographically distinguish themselves from values that are considered to be “un-country.”

³³ Deborah Wong, *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³⁴ Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

Many popular music scholars have pointed to the ways that popular media have helped artists present themselves as socially progressive while also using iconography that might be interpreted as socially regressive. For instance, Meredith LeVande, in her essay “Women, Pop Music, and Pornography,” has examined how women like Gwen Stefani and others use their image for their own benefit as artists and as a means of female empowerment.³⁵ LeVande argues that Stefani takes images that could be seen as pornographic and turns them into sources of empowerment.³⁶ She is quick to point out that the issues raised about Stefani’s pornographic image are often not thought of as feminist problems. Rather that they become feminist problems through the lens of popular music studies, which considers the connections between music, musicians, and media distribution.

The lens of black feminism has been trained on sexual identity and identity formation as prominent analytical themes. Annette Houlihan and Sharon D. Raynor’s 2014 article “Popular Cultural Narratives of Rhianna’s Experience of Intimate Partner Violence” focuses on the music that Rhianna produced following her very public experience of intimate partner violence with ex-boyfriend Chris Brown. Through Rhianna’s album “Rated R” Houlihan and Raynor describe the various identities Rhianna had through her songs, media coverage and perception, and her personal identity. Important in their work is the complexity of identity—one simple contrast comes in how Rhianna portrayed herself in songs as opposed to the image created of her by the media. Although this article is specifically focused on how abuse affects the formation of a

³⁵ Meredith LeVande, “Women, Pop Music, and Pornography,” in *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2008): 293-312.

³⁶ LeVande, “Women, Pop Music, and Pornography,” 301

woman's identity, broader implications of identity formation through performance and media interaction are present.³⁷

Narrative theory, too, holds a place outside of feminist and queer studies in popular music scholarship. The use of narrative is present in the work of Keith Negus, who uses is concerned with how pop songs can create a sense of perceived time, and that this perceived time can shift sometimes in the middle of a song.³⁸ The concept of narrative time in song has also been discussed by Jocelyn Neal in her article, "Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music," which I will use as a tool for analyzing Consent Songs because of Neal's detailed discussion of musical cues to dictate the passage of time.³⁹ Quint Randal's work creates a typology for analyzing pop song lyrics based on narrative theory. In his article, "A Typology for Analyzing Pop Song Lyrics Using Narrative Theory and Semiotics," Randal uses the typology he has constructed as a means of understanding pop music as cultural story telling.⁴⁰ Broader implications from this work include how to teach songwriting, but also how music can create a narrative for an entire generation or community.

Though Randal's and Negus's work are but two examples of how narrative is used outside gender studies, there are clear implications for broadening the applicability of narrative

³⁷ Annette Houlihan, and Sharon D. Raynor, "Victim, Risqué, Provocateur: Popular Cultural Narratives of Rihanna's Experience of Intimate Partner Violence," *Australian Feminist Studies*, 29, no. 81 (2014): 325-341.

³⁸ Keith Negus, "Narrative Time and the Popular Song," *Popular Music and Society* 35, no. 4 (October 2012): 483-500.

³⁹ Jocelyn Neal, "Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music," *Music Theory Spectrum* 29 (2007): 41-72.

⁴⁰ Quint Randal, and Keith Evans, "So What Does "Set Fire To The Rain" Really Mean? A Typology for Analyzing Pop Song Lyrics Using Narrative Theory and Semiotics," *MEIEA Journal* 13, no. 1 (2013): 125-147.

theory. Narrative theory has been used to theorize how people come to identify as gendered bodies through constructed narratives and discursive fields—where language (lyric) is all encompassing with a plethora of meaning.⁴¹ Rob Fatal’s work with lesbian punk rock uses narrative theory to understand the message of the music both on the surface of understanding the music, but also on a deeper level of understanding the performer. His article, “Lezbophobia and Blaming the Victim: Deciphering the Narratives of Lesbian Punk Rock,” looks at lyrics in lesbian punk rock and how they send messages to society both directly and indirectly. Fatal uses narrative theory in this deciphering of direct and indirect messages to society, a concern of this document’s investigation of Consent Songs in contemporary country music.

Jada Watson and Lori Burns’s 2010 article about the Dixie Chicks album “Not Ready to Make Nice” considers how the group used lyric and musical elements to resist institutional oppression. After being ostracized from the country music industry focused in Nashville and Texas, and media more generally, the Dixie Chicks went to Los Angeles, California to record their fourth studio album, *Not Ready to Make Nice*. The title track was their attempt to find their voice again after being so shut out of media, country radio, and the commercial country music machine. They used this track to tell audiences exactly what they were displeased over, using word choice powerfully to create their own narrative and experience through lyric., the music video for “Not Ready to Make Nice” shows the different voices within the song through showing different members of the group singing. It creates meaning through imagery furthering the lyric

⁴¹ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

narrative that is created through time and place temporality, which are relevant issues to investigations of Consent Songs, as well.⁴²

In country music studies, scholars have also examined the ways that artists have constructed public personas. In a 1986 article, Pamela Saur described examined the ways that gender roles are constructed and reinforced in artist biographies and autobiographies, arguing that gendered language and familiar tropes reinforce conventional gender roles.⁴³ Kristine M. McCusker has also published on gender and country music, with a focus on performance of gender.⁴⁴ Studies of gender and country music are very relevant to this document, since gender norms and masculinities are prominent features in the analysis of Consent Songs. Along with the study of gender and country music, studies of the country music industry and its role in the creation of “country” identities is relevant to this document’s means of grappling with the commercial nature of Consent Songs.

The Country Music Association (CMA) exerts a great deal of influence over how country music is marketed. From the organizations founding, they worked hard to move beyond the hillbilly type cast that has been present since the early twentieth century. Shifting the image of country music in this way eliminated the bad press country music was getting and kept the

⁴² Jada Watson and Lori Burns, “Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice: The Dixie Chicks are ‘Not Ready to Make Nice,’” *Popular Music* 29, no. 3 (October 2010): 325-350.

⁴³ Pamela S. Saur, “The Sexual Double Standard in the Biographies of Country Entertainers,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 9, no. 2 (1986): 65-74.

⁴⁴ Kristine M. McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Kristine M. McCusker, “Gendered Stages: Country Music, Authenticity, and Performance of Gender,” in *Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, Travis D. Stimeling, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 255-373.

industry afloat during the 1950s. It was a major step in getting country music accepted across the nation as “Top 40” and “Hot 100” playlist formatting on radio stations became more popular. Diane Pecknold concludes her chapter by arguing that the CMA has created an identity for country music that is more rooted in culture (authenticity) rather than commercialism.⁴⁵

As the CMA tried to distance itself from the “hillbilly” stereotype in the 1950s and 1960s, a different phenomenon occurred in country music during the early 2000s. As Jocelyn Neal has documented, the resurfacing of the term “redneck” and its continued use since 2004 articulates the importance of the culture surrounding country music.⁴⁶ Although the brunt of Neal’s argument is that country artists, their fans, and audience members at these artist’s performances do not “emerge in black and white.” Rather, fans embody the culture and the term “redneck” in ways that are beyond race. Class structure is, in Neal’s view, a more telling and important element to this country music culture than race. Pamela Fox’s text *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* works in a similar vein to Neal’s article, with more of a focus on gendered elements in country music.⁴⁷ Fox focuses more centrally on how gender and gendered roles have evolved over time, adapting to the way’s country music is changing as it moved into the twenty-first century and contemporary country music.

⁴⁵ Diane Pecknold, “The Selling Sound of Country Music: Class Structure, and Early Marketing Strategy of the Country Music Association,” in *Country Music Annual 2002* eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002).

⁴⁶ Jocelyn R. Neal, “Dancing Around the Subject: Race in Country Fan Culture,” *Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 555-579.

⁴⁷ Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

Identity formation has been a long-standing concern in popular music studies, and continues in this document through the investigation of gender identity and role construction in Consent Songs and contemporary country music. This document uses this scholarship in part to understand how the male artists discussed in this document are constructing their identities as safe, and “good” men through media and industry. Although this section could not list all work that has been done in popular it has provided an overview of major concerns in the scholarship and how they will be addressed in this document.

II. Conclusions

The study of sexuality and gender in country music, and popular music more generally is an expansive field. It includes research focused on masculinity, femininity, gender roles, as well as class, race, and community disparities. There is still, however, room for the continuation and expansion of these conversations, particularly as applied to contemporary country music. As seen in the previous sections, there is ample framework for continuation and collaboration of study both within country music studies and its overlap with popular music studies.

In this document I hope to raise the question of consent, and how it exists, or does not exist, in contemporary country love songs—Consent Songs. I will problematize these consensual, consenting relationships in contemporary country music because they create heterosexual patriarchal stereotyping. These songs by solo male vocalists work with implicit bias and triggers differently than songs that come from bro-country or support hook-up culture. Songs about long term, romantic, heterosexual relationships receive the casual marking of “good” or “acceptable” beyond what a song about a one-night stand would get. Further still, they operate in a way that accepts these romantic, heterosexual relationships even if they are a one-night stand—

so long as they are not described as such. The most important element of a consent song is intent, intent for an artist to present himself as a positive male figure who respects the women he is singing both to and about. In order to understand and make sense of these songs and the impact they have and can have on society I will borrow from existing scholarship in popular music studies and elsewhere as described in the Literature Review. This will facilitate an intersectional approach to both studying gender, sexuality, masculine identities, and contemporary country music.

The first chapter brings together the literature discussed in the introduction with the context and body of music in question throughout the remainder of the document. Included in the first chapter is a comprehensive definition of the “Consent Song” in contemporary country music. The second chapter involves the detailed analysis of song examples of the different categories of consent songs. Chapter Three is a more focused case study of the music of Sam Hunt using a similar framework from Chapter Two. The conclusion will bring together the preceding three chapters, connecting the theoretical framework for this document with current scholarship, as well as identify areas for continued investigation.

Chapter 1

Situating Consent in Contemporary Country Music

I. The Soundscape of Contemporary Country Music and Consent Songs

On the most basic level, consent songs present a relationship at any stage as monogamous and consensual—both parties involved have agreed to whatever is or has transpired within the song. The broad nature of consent songs, and their pervasion within the more general landscape of contemporary country music, situates them as the key topic for investigating the broader societal implications of contemporary country music. In order to present a more holistic impression of consent songs, only solo-male artists are represented in this document because of their dominance in country music. Additionally, the decision to not discuss the music of female artists is due in part to the sonic makeup of bro-country music, of which female artist's output is not a part. Consent songs function in a space that opposes, either overtly or covertly, the guiding themes of a quintessential bro-country song.⁴⁸ An important distinction to make at this juncture, is that the specific *sounds* of bro-country songs have been subsumed into the more general nature of popular contemporary country songs, of which consent songs are a part.

Generally speaking, the popularity of contemporary country music is connected with the country music industry, which includes radio and internet streaming formatting for garnering

⁴⁸ Florida Georgia Line, Luke Bryan, Jason Alden, and Dirks Bentley's music from around that time show bro-country's musical and thematic influences: guitars, "booze, boys, and the girls they're eyeing across the party." This sub-genre's success is marked by the immensely popular hit single "Cruise" featuring rapper Nelly from Florida Georgia Line—this was a-top the Billboard Hot Country chart for twenty-four weeks. See: Adam Carson, "'Bro-Country' Is Still Thriving, Even if Everyone Hates It," *Time*, accessed 20 March, 2018 (<http://time.com/3502546/florida-georgia-line-bro-country/>).

new audiences and keeping old ones.⁴⁹ Through my own listening to and investigation of a wide swath of artists, the function of different sounds in contemporary country music fall into three general categories: 1) songs that have clear influence from other pop music genres, specifically pop, hip-hop, and R&B; 2) artists that show more rock influence (similar to 1990s and early 2000s country music); and 3) artists who adhere to more typical commercial country sounds with no apparent influence from recent developments in pop music.⁵⁰ Although consent songs can fall within any of these three categories and move fluidly between them depending on the type of song, these various sub-categories of contemporary country often dictate a song's chart performance, and audience reception therein.

Authenticity is created through theme in consent songs as they bridge a stylistic gap between the bro-country sounds of the 2010s and lighter pop-country styles that have grown popular over the last decade.⁵¹ Musical differences between artists like Sam Hunt, discussed later

⁴⁹ Eric Weisbard, "Country Radio: The Dialectic of Format and Genre," in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press): 229-247.

⁵⁰ Examples of this more traditional country sound's influence has manifest in music released in the last several years. Groups like Midland and Brothers Osborne have released music with a resoundingly country vocal twang, and an acoustic-rock influence not reminiscent of bro-country's sonic features. Brittney McKenna, "How Midland's New Album Polishes Up Their Bar Band Sound," *Rolling Stone*, September 22, 2017, accessed April 17, 2018 (<https://www.rollingstone.com/country/features/midland-on-bar-band-roots-new-album-on-the-rocks-w504844>).

⁵¹ Journalist Jewly Hight, among others, articulated how sounds evolve in country music, pushing against a genre grounded in tradition and mediated by more "conservative terrestrial radio" (Jewly Hight, "How the Sound of Country Music Changed," *The Record: Music News from NPR*, accessed March 21, 2018 (<https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2018/03/20/594037569/how-the-sound-of-country-music-changed>). See also: Charles L. Hughes, "Country Music and the Recording Industry," in *Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D.

in this document, and the more traditional acoustic stylings of Jon Pardi are but one example of contrasting musical styles with similar song themes. Pardi, originally from Northern California, sings with a pronounced twang in his voice. The twang and vocal techniques that create the sounds Pardi (among other artists) is known for helps create the functionally authentic sound.⁵² The functionally authentic sound, as discussed by Stephanie Vander Wel in “The Singing Voice in Country Music,” is one facet of constructed authenticity. In the framework of consent songs, however, the disparity of sound does not preclude overlap in theme.

It is important to note that the categorization of sounds—pop influences, and rock / acoustic influenced—cannot paint the whole picture of contemporary country music. It is the specific sounds, along with themes that creates a songs popularity. Artists who release music that contains crossover sounds—Sam Hunt, Thomas Rhett, Brett Eldredge, Brett Young, Michael Ray—garner an audience beyond the “traditional” country fan base.⁵³ In essence, there is no way

Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 205-227; Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Eric Weisbard, “Country Radio: The Dialectic of Format and Genre,” in *Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 229-247.

⁵² Stephanie Vander Wel, “The Singing Voice in Country Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music* ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 157-175.

⁵³ The artists mentioned in this section are but a few of numerous artists who have increased popularity outside of the “traditional” country fan base. Country music fan culture has been well documented, see: Johnathan Wynn, “Country Music and Fan Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music* ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 479-493; Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, “Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore,” *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (1996): 900-907; Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

an artists sound and their songs theme can live in a vacuum—both are how contemporary country music is created and forms a distinct series of sounds. It is through deeper investigation of themes within the music that consent songs begin to present as an alternative to hook-up culture. As an alternative, the issues related to hook-up culture as representative of dominant social norms, are both present, and contrasted in a deliberate manner.

II. The “Country Gentleman”⁵⁴

On September 21, 2017, *New York Times* pop music critic Jon Caramanica published a piece titled “In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (for Now),” in which he extolled the virtues of country music’s “gentlemen.”⁵⁵ In contrast to bro-country men who—like Luke Bryan and Florida Georgia Line, among others—strut around in too-tight pants with weathered baseball caps and “comical masculinity,” these gentlemen “focus on uncomplicated, deeply dedicated love or, alternately, being hopeless on the receiving end of heartbreak...[oozing] respect, charm, and, occasionally, dullness.”⁵⁶ In the September 22, 2017 edition of the *Times*’s “Popcast,” Caramanica extended his analysis, pointing to a gender “crisis” within country music that has

⁵⁴ Jon Caramanica, “In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now),” *New York Times* (posted September 21, 2017, accessed March 14, 2018) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/21/arts/music/country-gentleman-thomas-rhett.html>)

⁵⁵ Jon Caramanica, “In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now).”

⁵⁶ Jon Caramanica, “In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now).”

created the need for the development of a “gentler man.”⁵⁷ A persona best exemplified by such artists as Thomas Rhett, Brett Young, Michael Ray, Brett Eldredge, and Chris Young.

Caramanica invokes familiar tropes of authenticity, as well, suggesting that, in contrast to the contrived hyper-masculinity of bro-country, artists of the “country gentleman” type write music that has a “genuine personality.”⁵⁸

The motive behind writing music that gives “personality” and a sort of genuine emotion moves beyond the used and reused tropes of the bro music. Although there is a litany of songs that fit the trope(s) of a Country Gentleman it is beneficial to first unpack the issues related to the creation of the Country Gentleman as a positive idea for other artists to strive for. Perhaps the most obvious of these elements is the use of the word “gentleman.” The societal implications of the term gentleman inflect “old school” politeness, insinuating gendered interactions laced with the “uncomplicated...love or...heartbreak” described by Caramanica.⁵⁹ The Country Gentleman also reinforces gentlemanly masculinity as an acceptable and desired element of a successful heterosexual relationship. Artists express the current nature of their, perhaps unwitting, gendered politics through one-sided narratives and stories not necessarily about their own lives while trying to remain culturally and musically current. It is the Country Gentleman trope that allows for these cultural and musical tendencies to be acceptable.⁶⁰ Particulars of individual songs are

⁵⁷ Jon Caramanica, host, “Bye, Bro. In Country Music, It’s the Year of the Gentleman,” Podcast (Mp3 podcast), *New York Times*, September 22, 2017, accessed March 15, 2018 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/22/arts/music/popcast-bro-country-gentlemen.html?r=0>).

⁵⁸ Jon Caramanica, “Bye, Bro. In Country Music, It’s the Year of the Gentleman.”

⁵⁹ Jon Caramanica, “In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now).”

⁶⁰ The publication of both Caramanica’s article and subsequent podcast for the New York Times occurred shortly after the September 8, 2017 release of Thomas Rhett’s third album, *Life Changes*. This document will

discussed later in this document, but it is relevant to list a series of traits associated with songs and artists who can easily be categorized as “country gentleman.” The following paragraphs will use Thomas Rhett and Chris Lane as examples for the creation of the “country gentleman” and the type of song they produce—Consent Songs.

Caramanica marks the start of the Country Gentleman by the release of Thomas Rhett’s second studio album, *Tangled Up*. Host of Rhett’s hit single, “Die a Happy Man,” according to Caramanica this marks the start of the country gentleman because it is “so straightforward.”⁶¹ Yet, contrasts with bro-country aside, “Die a Happy Man” is just a love song. Indeed, the remainder of songs discussed by Caramanica as part of the “country gentleman” movement, are all love songs with the particular “gentlemanly” flavor seen in “Die a Happy Man.” To begin with Thomas Rhett’s “Die a Happy Man,” the country gentleman’s love song strikes a balance between being personal with genuine personality and alienating the audience from connecting their lives to the song. Rhett creates his personal authenticity and cultivates an image of sameness with his audience through his crafted image on social media.⁶² Rhett’s—and his wife Lauren Akins’s—social media presence creates an impression that their relationship is coated in positivity, love, and mutual respect. A central element to this presence is the addition and visibility of their children and the candid nature of many photos. Lauren Akins frequently posts

discuss Rhett’s music along with that of other artists to paint a broader picture of the “Country Gentlemen” and my own categorization of “Consent Songs.”

⁶¹ Jon Caramanica, “In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now).”

⁶² For a more detailed investigation of this concept see: Ian Biddle, “‘The Singsong of Undead Labor’: Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the “New” Male Singer/Songwriter,” in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007): 125-144.

images of herself without makeup on and more crafted images of her and Thomas Rhett's home and family life on Instagram.⁶³

Chris Lane embodies the image of the Country Gentleman in ways similar to Rhett. Lane's hit single "For Her" is a romantic track that uses very specific female gendered pronouns.⁶⁴ A nod to the pop-country sub-genre of contemporary country music, Lane's first hit single "For Her" begins with descriptions of the "her" in the song. Lyrics such as "she makes you wanna die for her" and "she got a smile that makes your worst day feel like it's your birthday" balance an appropriate level of familiarity to allow listeners to create their own version of the story.⁶⁵ The generic lyric qualities of "For Her" contrast with Rhett's "Die a Happy Man" where Rhett describes his relationship in detail from his point of view. Yet both songs construct a relationship narrative that holds with the formulation of a "Country Gentleman."⁶⁶

It is important to also recognize the "country" aspect of the "Country Gentlemen."⁶⁷ It implies that there is something specific about these men, their music, and the genre it fits within. Defining musical features of country music are blurred through crossover influence but the themes within consent songs are more contiguous. The ambiguity and crossover sounds of artists such as Thomas Rhett and Chris Lane present an arbitrary binary between song content and theme and the sounds that characterize 'country' or 'contemporary country' for an artist. Too, the

⁶³ Rhett makes reference to Lauren Akins' social media following and their family in the song "Live Changes" from third studio album release *Life Changes* from September 2017.

⁶⁴ Chris Lane's "For Her" peaked at number 17 on the *Billboard* Hot Country chart on September 16, 2017. (<https://www.billboard.com/music/chris-lane/chart-history/country-songs>).

⁶⁵ Chris Lane, "For Her," *Girl Problems* (Big Loud Records, 2016).

⁶⁶ Jon Caramanica, "In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now)."

⁶⁷ Jon Caramanica, "In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now)."

specific qualities of country music, what makes country music “authentic,” are remarkable in this context—a continuation of the questions first asked by Richard Peterson in *Fabricating Authenticity*.⁶⁸ Musical stylings of contemporary country allow for broader audiences—they are the artists who get radio airplay—but their lyric content and general themes are problematic.⁶⁹ The combination of musical styling and lyric content helps to construct the country gentleman, who in turn are a part of the broader issue of Consent Songs.

IV. Categories of Consent Songs

For the purposes of this study, there are three different categories of Consent Songs used to describe the music: “Breakup,” “Hypothetical Relationship,” and “Real-Life.” These categories provide a way to articulate and categorize the variances and nuances of this music. It also creates a more detailed definition of Consent Songs for practical application to a discussion of music beyond contemporary country. This section will identify and define the three different categories of Consent Songs. Even though there are separate categories, they are malleable and tend to overlap as will be expanded upon in the following discussion of each category.

⁶⁸ Peterson, *Fabricating Authenticity*.

⁶⁹ Eric Weisbard, “Country Radio: The Dialectic of Format and Genre,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Country Music*, ed. Travis D. Stimeling (New York: Oxford University Press): 229-247.

Consent Song Categories and General Features
<p>Hypothetical:</p> <p>“Realness” or “authenticity” of characters is in question; adjusted narrative timeline; if present, gendered language is consistent; idealized romance, relationship, or situation; most common and easily identifiable type.</p>
<p>Breakup:</p> <p>Either hypothetical or real-life stories; portray artist as vulnerable or fragile; romanticizing failed relationships; idealize a “perfect” relationship that ended; jealousy verges on convincing a partner to be in a relationship; pining for a partner who left or wanting to rekindle former relationship.</p>
<p>Real-Life:</p> <p>Song content about a current relationship; lyrics in present tense; romanticizing of sexual intimacy; specific details of a present tense relationship; clear connection to artist and their life; idealization of a relationship; idealization of present tense romantic partner</p>

Figure 1: Consent Song Category Chart

The most dominant song type is “Hypothetical Relationship,” which presents a narrative or story where the “realness” or “authenticity” of the characters and their story is in question. Marked by lyric ambiguity, the “realness” of a character is often in question. Usually a woman is being sung about but is never named.⁷⁰ These songs can also be extrapolated through the context of an artist’s personal life by what they share on social media, not just more formal interviews.

The “realness” of a song can be questioned through how a song’s narrative timeline is adjusted. An adjusted narrative timeline, as described by Jocelyn Neal in her article “Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music,” references music where the difference between years, months, days, or hours become interchangeable and

⁷⁰ Danielle Anderson, “Thomas Rhett Shows His Romantic Side in Brand New Video for ‘Die a Happy Man,’” *People*, September 17, 2015, accessed March 21, 2018, (<http://people.com/country/thomas-rhetts-new-die-a-happy-man-video/>); “Sam Hunt’s ‘Back Road’ Sets All-Time Country Chart Record,” *Rolling Stone*, August 4, 2017, accessed March 21, 2018, (<https://www.rollingstone.com/country/news/sam-hunts-back-road-sets-all-time-country-chart-record-w495954>).

unrecognizable.⁷¹ Neal describes what she calls the “Time-shift narrative” as a “combination of poetic devices, formal structures, and stylistically normative harmonic elements that together project the segmentation of and passage of time.”⁷² I will use Neal’s Time-shift narrative paradigm as a tool for analysis of consent songs in conjunction with other elements of narrative theory used in popular music studies.⁷³ The Time-shift narrative is particularly suited for understanding the Hypothetical Consent Songs, where the adjustment of a relationship timeline is segmented and specific narrative elements are lost. The most important “lost” features in the body of music discussed in this document is in fact consent.

Working in conjunction with adjusted timelines is gendered language that explicitly genders the characters in the story as male and female.⁷⁴ It is in combination that the adjusted timeline and use of pronouns create the “Hypothetical” category of consent song. These songs often show an idealized situation, presented as the narrator’s ultimate relationship goal, which is then shared with everyone who listens to the song. It can be seen as a series of instruction for the audience to follow so their relationship unfolds in similar ways. The authenticity of Hypothetical songs is present regardless of the ambiguity in these songs. Although the artist is not presenting a

⁷¹ Jocelyn Neal, “Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music” *Music Theory Spectrum* 29 (2007): 41-72.

⁷² Neal, “Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music,” 42.

⁷³ In particular, the work of Jada Watson and Lori Burns on the Dixie Chicks has informed how narrative and “realness” are discussed in Hypothetical Consent Songs. See Jada Watson and Lori Burns, “Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice: The Dixie Chicks are ‘Not Ready to Make Nice’,” *Popular Music* 29, no. 3 (October, 2010): 325-350.

⁷⁴ Use of pronouns is an element in the creation of consent songs and is an issue repeatedly addressed in the analysis of songs from all categories of Consent Songs.

personal story (represented later in the “Real Life” category) the Hypothetical song is still believable due in part to the predicated authenticity of country music. Common themes within these songs include almost falling in love, falling in love, or reliving or revisiting situations or relationships from the past that could have happened but did not, or a past relationship that might have ended but is now portrayed as perfect.

By contrast with Hypothetical songs, those about Real-Life relationships have clearer connection drawn either explicitly through lyrics or visual representation in a music video, to the artist’s life. Songs are often about the artists current partner and mention specific relationship details.⁷⁵ Common themes include stereotypes about how “good” or “perfect” the relationship is while still working to maintain particular levels of reality. These stereotypes include lyrics that describe the female partner as beautiful or perfect. References might allude her natural beauty, what she looks like when no one is watching, or without makeup.

Another important element to the Real-Life songs, and consent songs more generally, is how they interact with sex. In real life songs sex is more often described as “making love” or is just generally more romanticized. It is described as a consistently positive and reliable expression of love—less of a physical act and more of a metaphorical expression of an intangible perfect love. Real-Life songs, like Hypothetical consent songs, often seem too good to be true because

⁷⁵ Often details like this include the mention of a partner’s name, reference to a marriage, engagement, or the ending of a relationship. An important distinction to make between the Hypothetical and Real-Life songs is that in a Real-Life song, information is explicit in the song and does not have to be extrapolated from other sources like interviews, social media posts, or music videos—the ambiguity of a Hypothetical Consent Song where that extrapolation might be necessary is either not present or far easier to find in Real-Life Consent Songs.

they idealize love. The bad, ugly, or uncomfortable parts of a relationship are left out of the song, giving a disingenuous representation of real life with implied authenticity of country music.⁷⁶

Breakup Consent Songs are either a hypothetical situation or portrayed as a true story. They give the impression that the narrator is telling about a personal experience making the song seem as if it is about the artist's life, while still connecting to the listeners own experience.⁷⁷ Songs that depict the end of a long-term relationship, themes usually include expressions of how difficult it is to "get over" or "move on" from a person or relationship. Interestingly, these relationships are often portrayed as formerly loving or "good," with little attention paid to the details of a relationship that were not "good." The story in breakup songs is typically manifested in two ways: 1) the narrator or subject wants the relationship to continue or rekindle or 2) the narrator pines for the subject who has left him but has no alternatives.

Breakup Consent Songs about various manifestations of jealousy usually present in the context of a relationship narrative. Specific gendered language for these songs come from the male narrator believing he would be a better than the female subject's current male partner. These songs typically list the ways the narrator would be a better partner or boyfriend for the subject rather than the person—the subject—is currently with. Often, these songs describe the "true love" and "perfect" relationship that the narrator and subject would have if they were together. This is shown through the words used to describe and talk about their love as a person, the idea or ideal of love, the concept of love.

⁷⁶ See Richard Peterson, *Fabricating Authenticity*.

⁷⁷ Breakup songs blur the line between Hypothetical and Real-Life because they could be in the past tense or about a past relationship, while still being about a real experience. Yet, this grouping of songs is working to make the music and experiences described in it relatable to the audience.

Descriptions of physical beauty and material objects are often present to seduce the subject and / or make their current partner jealous. Creating and describing jealousy in a given person, the narrator or otherwise, is key to these Consent Songs. They are also working to gain approval and consent from the subject. The narrator connects with the audience through the invocation of typical human emotions of jealousy to make themselves seem pitiable and relatable. Defining features of Breakup Consent Songs include the use of gendered pronouns and being written in the past tense. Common themes of songs in the past tense include former sexual encounters, the partner almost getting married, or a formerly loving relationship that fell apart. These songs, too, sometimes name former or current partners by name, though the quintessential ambiguity of contemporary country music is most often upheld with markers of Hypothetical Consent Songs, just shifted to the past tense for a breakup song.

V. Broad Implications of Consent Songs

Country Gentlemen and their Consent Songs create a standard for their audience—the consumer—to strive for. Wrapped up in the moral authority of country music, this idea of goodness and appropriateness of cultural musical authenticity is replicated time and again in contemporary country music.⁷⁸ There is intrinsic implication of male “better-ness” or “appropriateness” connected with the representation of heteronormative relationships and lack of gendered inclusion and diversity of romance in Consent Songs. The moral authority of a consent song is promulgated by the media acceptance and approval of artists who are Country Gentleman

⁷⁸ For further information on cultural authenticity in popular musics see: Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, eds. *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

producing Consent Songs.⁷⁹ These songs use narrative tropes that predicate respect and consent between both partners in the relationship. Often these songs showcase an artist's respect for women with narratives about relationships with strong, autonomous, beautiful, engaging woman. The problem with Consent Songs in contemporary country music lies in a complicated balance between pushing back against the known "bad" (hook-up songs of bro-country) and the apparent "good" (the Country Gentleman). Understanding this music is complex because it inhabits a grey area created through lyrical ambiguity and constructed authenticity.

Perhaps the epitome of the "grey area" when dealing in Consent Songs and the Country Gentleman is how the songs engage with sex. Consent Songs deal with sex differently than the hook-up promoting bro-country song, which are far more overtly sexual. Although I offer no comprehensive definition for sexual representation in contemporary country music, I do point out general trends that exist in the mass of music categorized as Contemporary Country. Consent Songs that involve sex or intimacy fall into three general categories that work in counterpoint to the themes of Bro-Country: 1) songs that are clearly assuming or indicating consent and are about consensual loving relationships, 2) songs with emphasis on other elements of the romantic relationship that omit sex and sexuality (particularly female sexuality) but are crafted in such a way that sex and sexuality do not seem like they are missing, and 3) songs that leave any sort of sexual, sensual element of a relationship out of the music entirely.

Consent Songs are shrouded in romance, and sex and sexuality are always bubbling underneath the narratives that unfold in them. They are not tawdry, semi-pornographic tales,

⁷⁹ Jon Caramanica, "In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now)."

though; rather, they frequently frame sex and sexuality as part of a broader domesticity.⁸⁰ The Country Gentleman singing these Consent Songs mobilizes the moral authority of country music Consent Songs to position women as potential wives, or, at the very least, someone with whom to build a long-term monogamous relationship. Consent Songs present sexual intimacy as a medium- or long-term achievement in a consensual romance, not as an immediate goal. As such, these songs might be heard to offer a model of sexuality that resonates with abstinence initiatives that teach teenaged girls to “wait until marriage.”

A large body of songs leave out direct and indirect references to sex altogether, as though sex is not a factor in the stories that artists are trying to tell about themselves or their relationships. Instead, these songs often track closely to the narratives that one might find in a romantic comedy or “chick flick,” in which resolution comes not when the star-crossed lovers engage in a sexual act but when they commit to being with one another for all time. Much like the character tropes that appear in those films, Consent Songs frequently avoid offering specific character traits for the characters in the song’s narrative, allowing the listener to map their own experiences onto the narrative.

A common narrative heard in Consent Songs is the “boy-meets-girl” story. Often set in a bar, these songs provide a useful opportunity to compare the attitudes of the hook-up artist and the Consent Song artist. Hook-up songs typically tell the story of a male narrator who imagines a

⁸⁰ Scholarship on Patsy Cline is particularly informative on how domesticity is represented in country music. See: Warren R. Hofstra and Mike Foreman, “Legacy and Legend: The Cultural World of Patsy Cline’s Winchester,” in *Sweet Dreams: The World of Patsy Cline*, ed. Warren R. Hofstra (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013): 22-66; Joli Jensen, “Patsy Cline’s Crossovers: Celebrity, Reputation, and Feminine Identity,” in *A Boy Named Sue*, eds. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 111.

situation that puts those two people together for a short period of time—one night, a weekend.⁸¹ In a Consent Song, however, the two characters end up married, or at least committed to each other, by the end of the three-and-a-half-minute song.⁸² Both songs begin the same way, but end with dramatically different narrative resolutions. Yet, along the way the consent of the female object often gets lost in both hook-up and Consent Songs. Her consent is simply assumed in the narrative; seldom is it stated outright. The consequences of this assumed consent are vast, both for the women who are not given agency over their bodies and for the men who may or may not have sought their consent in the first place. Consent Songs promote a conscious masculinity that is constructed through the overt demonstration of love and the performance of romance, with sexual intimacy being implied along the way.⁸³ But if the Country Gentlemen seldom ask their partners for their consent, are they really any better than the “bros” who came before them?

One of the easiest observations to make about a Consent Song, given their presentation as “truthful” and “morally appropriate / correct,” is that the woman’s voice has no place within a male-voiced song. If these songs were duets, then perhaps there would be space for her voice to

⁸¹ Some examples of bro-country hook-up songs include: Luke Bryan, “That’s My Kind of Night,” *Crash My Party* (Capitol Records Nashville, 2013); Luke Bryan, “Country Girl (Shake It for Me),” *Tailgates & Tanlines* (Capitol Records Nashville, 2011); Cole Swindell, “Flatliner (feat. Dierks Bentley),” *You Should Be Here* (Warner Music Nashville, LLC, 2016).

⁸² Dylan Scott, “Hooked,” *Dylan Scott* (Curb Records, Inc., 2016); Sam Hunt “Body Like a Backroad,” *Body Like a Backroad Single* (MCA Nashville, 2017); Thomas Rhett, “Make Me Wanna,” *It Goes Like This* (Big Machine Records, 2013); Thomas Rhett, “Die a Happy Man,” *Tangled Up* (Big Machine Records, 2015).

⁸³ Ian Biddle, “‘The Singsong of Undead Labor’: Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the ‘New’ Male Singer/Songwriter,” in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007): 125-144.

be heard more clearly, but because it is not it speaks to the broader problem with idealization of romance in Consent Songs. A skewed romantic timeline makes it acceptable for men to ask something of a woman, be it sex, monogamy, marriage, or another other form of intimacy.⁸⁴

Beyond just asking something of a woman, there is also a presumption in this music, due in part to a disrupted narrative timeline, that the woman will say yes. A “yes” is assumed because of the masculine and romantic constructs these songs are based around—the assumptions of a Consent Song. Further still, assuming a “yes” then entitles a man to be upset when she says no. This balance between assuming “yes” and justified reaction to “no” is reinforced through gendered power dynamics. The lens of gendered power dynamics and female disenfranchisement makes it disheartening to think that, although contemporary country music is assumed to be positive and moral, these dynamics are continuing and being reinforced.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Romantic timelines are directly informed through the narrative timeline employed in popular music scholarship. For further detail see: Keith Negus, “Narrative Time and the Popular Song,” *Popular Music and Society* 35, no. 4 (October 2012): 483-500; Jocelyn Neal, “Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 29 (2007): 41-72; Quint Randal, and Keith Evans, “So What Does “Set Fire To The Rain” Really Mean? A Typology for Analyzing Pop Song Lyrics Using Narrative Theory and Semiotics,” *MEIEA Journal* 13, no. 1 (2013): 125-147.

⁸⁵ Lyric phrases that reinforce this diminution of women are things like “pretty little” “little” “pretty little girl” “girl”, or any variation thereof. Several songs released in 2017 and 2018 used the word “woman” to elevate the status of a female character in a song. Examples include Tim McGraw and Faith Hill’s “Speak to a Girl” from their first joint album *The Rest of Our Lives* in November, 2017. This track moves between using the words girl and woman, elevating woman both the people and the word as more important or better than the use of the word “girl.” Dierks Bentley’s release of “Woman, Amen” in spring of 2018 uses “woman” exclusively, aligning the female character of the song to a heavenly status. Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, “Speak to a Girl,” *The Rest of Our Lives*

The trappings of a Consent Song's elements—consent, sexual compatibility, intimacy, love, romance—are automatically given and are treated as the immediate consequences of monogamy. Characters in Consent Songs do not have to work to maintain a relationship after they have formed it. As such, consent is not only assumed once, but it is assumed to be present at all times, much as earlier U.S. statutes and court precedents indicated that a woman could not be raped by her husband because their marital status gave him full access to her for sexual purposes.⁸⁶ Just because hyper-romance exists in a narrative does not mean sexual consent necessarily exists alongside it.

After discussing what will, eventually, become the bigger picture of relationships and relationships within country music, Consent Songs appear to have darker implications. Domestic violence, relationship abuse, and marital rape, to name a few, are all present in society today, but often get overlooked as an element for consideration as an effect of music, rather than a subject for music. The biggest difference in specific consideration as an effect of music, comes from the implied societal value of a Consent Song that teaches right from wrong within societally created boundaries for interaction. It is easy to brush past this apparent issue with the argument that it is not the *intention* of consent songs and the country gentlemen to be heard or viewed in this light.

(McGraw Music, LLC, 2017); Dierks Bentley, "Woman, Amen," *The Mountain* (Dierks Bentley / Capitol Records Nashville, 2018). For further scholarship on the balance of gender power dynamics in popular music see:

⁸⁶ Sources on marital rape and consent in a broad, global frame work include: Kersti Yllö and M. Gabriela Torres, eds., *Marital Rape: Consent, Marriage, and Social Change in Global Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Melanie Randall, Jennifer Koshan, and Patricia Nyaundi, eds. *The Right to Say No: Marital Rape and law Reform in Canada, Ghana, Kenya, and Malawi* (Portland: Hart Publishing, 2017).

The fact remains, however, that questions about relationship abuse and violence *can* be asked; this in and of itself, is the problem.⁸⁷

VI. Conclusions:

The one-sided narratives of Consent Songs imply consent from both parties—silent or otherwise—as they present a happy, positive relationship narrative. Realistically, and idealistically anyone should be able to say no at any point in a relationship, the same should be true in these songs. Yet, not everyone is able to say “no” in Consent Songs, either because there is a silent partner, or a partner is being spoken for by the narrator. A societal narrative of what a relationship *should* look like is glossed over, presented with no problems, or questions of consent. Women are left out of the story, and men are left with a series of masculine expectations. Shrouded in excessive romance, the masculinity constructed in Consent Songs becomes toxic masculinity. Consent Songs are a problem for men and women—how men learn to perceive or act in relationships, and how women perceive their autonomy in a song narrative and industry where they are unheard. The following chapters will engage with how the idea of Consent Songs, their various types, and the broader implications of these songs as they engage with country music more generally.

⁸⁷ One example of relationship violence coinciding with popular music is that of Rhianna and Chris Brown, see: Annette Houlihan and Sharon D. Raynor. “Victim, Risqué, Provocateur: Popular Cultural Narratives of Rihanna’s Experience of Intimate Partner Violence.” *Australian Feminist Studies* 29, no. 81 (2014): 325-341.

Chapter 2

Consent Songs of the 2010s

I. Introduction

This chapter seeks to examine the Consent Song repertoire in more detail. In particular, I propose that Consent Songs fall into three types: 1) Break-up Songs, 2) Real-Life Consent Songs, and 3) Hypothetical Consent Songs. Most of the songs investigated in this chapter could be read as falling into multiple types, so the use of these categories highlights the song's dominant form, while also revealing how malleable the categories can be. To examine these Consent Songs in detail, this chapter considers several different songs, along with the relevant corresponding music videos. Although the importance of a music video in helping understand the meaning behind a song is debatable and greatly depends on both the song and video, for the purposes of this document they will be used as an extension for understanding the relationships being described and presented within the music.⁸⁸ Organized around these thematic categories, this chapter will first look at the narrative of romance present in consent songs, then at love as it has ended, lastly turning to love that might never happen—the hypothetical.

Before moving to their differences, however, it is worthwhile to note that contemporary country music boasts a number of songs that are similar in how they all about mundane, middle-class romance. One example is Eric Church's "Like a Wrecking Ball," which references a specific house and to coming home to "baby" after a long time on the road, to *their* house that has "[felt] them make love" before.⁸⁹ That song presumes that consensual sex is part of their

⁸⁸ Watson, ""Resisting Exile and Asserting Musical Voice: The Dixie Chicks are 'Not Ready to Make Nice.'"

⁸⁹ Eric Church, "Like A Wrecking Ball," *The Outsiders*, (EMI Records Nashville, 2014).

relationship, and it reaffirms it by pointing to the relationship's stability. Church's song stands in contrast with Thomas Rhett's "Die a Happy Man," which does not offer such a clear trajectory from first encounter to domestic bliss. The assumption of consent within the relationship trajectory of "Die a Happy Man" is problematic in relation to consent. The female partner is not afforded a voice within the song, and is instead assumed a willing participant, an idea reinforced by the Real-Life context of the song in Rhett's life. A Real-Life context does necessarily mean there is or was consent. To investigate this assumption of consent in this music further I will first turn to Breakup Consent Songs, which illustrate the vulnerability of emotion in Consent Songs and their artists.

II. A Consenting Breakup

Breakup Consent Songs narrate either a hypothetical situation or a real-life story, either way giving the impression that the narrator is singing about a personal experience, portraying genuine and vulnerable emotion. This vulnerability is often from the male narrator's perspective, articulating how difficult it is to "get over" or "move on" from a person or relationship. The two songs investigated in this section are Luke Combs "Hurricane" (2015) and Chris Young's "I'm Comin' Over" (2015).⁹⁰ Both songs are about long-term, consenting relationships that have ended but the characters continue to interact with one another. The interactions in both songs are of a sexual nature. They acknowledge that the committed relationship is over, but their sexual interactions are appropriate because it did exist at one point. This is an important feature of these

⁹⁰ Combs' "Hurricane" did not make it on to the radio and hot country charts until 2017, the year after Combs debut album *This One's for You* was released (2016). Luke Combs, "Hurricane" *This One's For You* (River House Artists, 2017); Chris Young, "I'm Comin' Over" (Sony Music Entertainment, 2015).

breakup songs, and Breakup Consent Songs more generally—the sexual aspect of their interactions is acceptable because they had once been in a committed relationship.⁹¹

Luke Combs, a rising star of contemporary country music, had his first hit single in “Hurricane,” released in 2016 from his debut album *This One’s for You*. A pining ballad with heavy electric guitar and a strong rock influence, “Hurricane” has just enough pop infused in it to make it on to the radio. Telling the story of a relationship that has ended, the narrator begins by describing his emotional mindset in the immediate aftermath of the relationship’s demise. He tries to forget his ex-girlfriend but is unable to. Through lyric metaphor we find out that the “Hurricane” in the song is, in fact, his ex-girlfriend. By the first chorus she has “rolled in” to the bar where the narrator is trying to forget her. These allusions to the weather come to represent not only the ex-girlfriend, but also his turbulent emotions. This narrator is emotionally fragile; after all, it was he who was hurt as the girl just went on with her life. The narrator’s emotional fragility is represented in the first verse with the line “got talked into goin’ out / with hopes you were staying in.”⁹² Indicating the narrator’s reticence to go out with friends, it is a reminder that the narrator is still emotionally connected to the subject of the song. The male’s fragility continues in the chorus as Combs sings, “I was doin’ all right / but just your sight had my heart stormin’,” indicating that the narrator is unable to “move on” from his hurricane. It is almost as

⁹¹ The creation of appropriate sexual interaction in a breakup song is entirely based on there being a constructed consenting relationship acknowledged at some point in the song. In breakup songs this typically comes in the explanation of why or how a relationship ended, or through what the narrator would do differently if they had another chance. In the case of both songs investigated in this section, the relationship is implied and only acknowledged through references to what the two characters had before.

⁹² Luke Combs, “Hurricane.”

though their connection is too strong, reinforced through the threat of extreme nature referenced by the hurricane metaphor throughout the song.

This depiction of the narrator as fragile is interesting when compared to the constructions of masculinity that are present in country music more generally.⁹³ The Country Gentlemen reveal a sensitive side to their otherwise dominant male personalities.⁹⁴ These artists—including Combs—revel in showing their sensitive side. Showing vulnerability and fragility as positive characteristics contrasting with the hard-edged masculinity enveloped by bro-country.⁹⁵ Yet, as I have previously indicated, bro-country's masculine identity is defined more through the context of casual interactions with women and less by the fragility that emotional openness and commitment bring out in Consent Songs. In “Hurricane,” Combs acknowledges his own emotions as the vulnerable male character with the woman portrayed as emotionally aloof or callous.

Yet for all the “good” that Combs brings to representing a sensitive man, the song ends with the narrator and subject back in bed together. The song's bridge finds the subject “bend[ing]” the narrators “heart back to [her] bedside.”⁹⁶ This moment clearly indicates sexual intimacy with no clarity about the nature of both parties' consent to that interaction. Throughout

⁹³ For further discussion of constructed masculine fragility in see: Biddle, “‘The Singsong of Undead Labor’: Gender Nostalgia and the Vocal Fantasy of Intimacy in the “New” Male Singer/Songwriter.”; Freya Jarman-Ivens, “Don’t Cry, Daddy’: The Degeneration of Elvis Presley’s Musical Masculinity,” in *Oh Boy!: Masculinities in Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 161-180.

⁹⁴ Caramanica, “In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now).”

⁹⁵ Adam Carson, “‘Bro-Country’ Is Still Thriving, Even if Everyone Hates It,” *Time*, accessed 20 March, 2018 (<http://time.com/3502546/florida-georgia-line-bro-country/>).

⁹⁶ Luke Combs, “Hurricane.”

the entire song, the narrator has been trying to get over this woman, but as soon as she blows into the bar that progress is discarded altogether. The unanswered question, then, is if this interaction is really what the narrator wanted or if the hyper-romantic description of undeniable or unavoidable attraction led him to make decisions he would later regret.

Like Combs's "Hurricane," Chris Young's "I'm Coming Over" describes a relationship that has ended, but has left lingering physical attraction between the narrator and subject. Marked by the rock-influenced sound of much of Young's music, this ballad has heavy drum beats and electric guitar interspersed with enough slide guitar to balance the contemporary pop-rock influences. When the narrator says "I'm coming over runnin' every red light / to hell with the closure save it for another time," it indicates that he is trying to move on from a relationship but does not want to or is unable to move on. This line is the beginning of the chorus and is heard repeatedly throughout the track. In the chorus following the bridge, the backing track stops, Young's voice is isolated, and he sings the line an octave lower.⁹⁷ The line's isolation and the octave shift take power out of his voice, making it sound more intimate, sincere, and vulnerable.

In contrast with "Hurricane," the relationship and various interactions between the narrator and the ex-partner in "I'm Coming Over" are described as mutual decisions and interactions happening between the two people. This mutual agreement is indicated in the chorus as the relationship between the narrator is characterized as "we breakup, we makeup, and we make love" in the first verse. Their mutual agreement is heard again in the second verse with "I'm all alone but / you're on my phone / tell me you miss me / and that you're at home."⁹⁸ The use of "we," particularly at the beginning of the song, shows the presence of a "togetherness"

⁹⁷ Chris Young, "I'm Comin' Over."

⁹⁸ Chris Young, "I'm Comin' Over."

that is no longer present in the context of the relationship being described. There is emphasis on the narrator “coming over” to the girl, which points to her wanting and instigating those interactions through the whole song.

Additionally, the use of “we” in the opening line, and then again in the bridge is used to describe the relationship—reinforcing the idea of a consensual, long-term, romantic relationship that has come to an end or at least is not working anymore.⁹⁹ While that particular level of interaction is represented as consensual, the narrator appears to be the person instigating continued interaction—lyrically responsible and dominant—because he is the one who is “comin’ over.” Through various levels of lyric description of the character’s interactions a fuller picture of the relationship being described. In both “Hurricane” and “I’m Comin’ Over” the interactions described in the song indicate various levels of decision making and representations of decision making in the songs make them excellent examples of Breakup Consent Songs. They maintain ambiguity because there are no clear or personal description of anyone in the songs. There are only descriptions of former relationships, how good they were, why they ended and how they could be continuing still.

III. A Real-Life Love Story

Artists writing and recording songs about their own relationships and love lives is certainly not a new phenomenon in the 2010s, nor is it the intent of this document to portray it as such. Songs that construct a romantic narrative are plenty in country music. In contemporary country music

⁹⁹ The opening lyrics in the first verse of “I’m Comin’ Over” are: “We say goodbye, see you around / We turn our backs, then turn back around / We breakup, we make up and we make love / We can’t seem to let go girl.” It is the only time the word “we” is used in such rapid sequence in the track; Chris Young, “I’m Comin’ Over.”

these songs can be set apart through the contextualization of a Consent Song. Consent Songs manifest in the direct love songs discussed in this section, through clear lyric markers as highlighted in the previous chapter in the discussion of Real-Life Consent Songs. That category of Consent Song will be discussed in detail here.

Thomas Rhett rocketed to fame in 2015 with his hit single “Die a Happy Man.”¹⁰⁰ A Real- Life Consent Song about his wife, Lauren Rhett Akins, “Die a Happy Man” gives a snapshot of their relationship.¹⁰¹ The song makes benign activities such as dancing in the living room seem like magic—making normal, relatable experiences seem extraordinary. Rhett’s lyrics contrast benign activities with a bucket list of travels or adventures. His list includes building a mansion in Georgia, driving a sports car up the coast of California, seeing the Northern Lights, the Eiffel Tower at night. His list is qualified, and their relationship normalized with the acknowledgement of Rhett just needing “[her] hand in [his] hand” with “[her] crazy love.”¹⁰² Rhett goes on to explain the parts of his real and “crazy love,” contextualized as “true” and “real” because Rhett is the narrator and his wife the subject.

Formatted as verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, the verses provide details about Rhett’s real life, and the chorus’ present the bucket list items as less important than their love. The first verse references a specific event—“last night”—with sensual, romantic references to sexual intimacy rather than explicit references. Marvin Gaye in the background, a bottle of wine, dancing under

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Rhett, “Die a Happy Man” *All Tangled Up* (Big Machine Label Group, 2015).

¹⁰¹ Danielle Anderson, “Thomas Rhett Shows His Romantic Side in Brand New Video for ‘Die a Happy Man,’ *People*, September 17, 2015, accessed March 21, 2018 (<http://people.com/country/thomas-rhetts-new-die-a-happy-man-video/>).

¹⁰² Thomas Rhett, “Die a Happy Man.”

the stars in the rain, all indicate sensual romantic intimacy between two people. Rhett sings about the “look in [her] eye” leading into the first chorus, moving from tangible elements of sensuality to the intangible. In the first chorus, the list of dreams includes seeing the Northern Lights and the Eiffel tower at night.¹⁰³ Contrasting descriptions of the chorus, listing dreams as less important than their love, places normality and real life in a categorized box. A middle class romance is promoted through the comparison of their relationship with recognizable but less attainable vacations, trips and lifestyle.¹⁰⁴ Not everyone can afford to travel to these far off lands, or buy expensive things like sports cars and mansions but they can afford a romantic evening dancing on the lawn “under September stars.”¹⁰⁵ Playing to middle and low-class identity reinforces the importance of finding, keeping, and cherishing another person and your relationship with them.

“Die a Happy Man” could be read as a proclamation of love, with reassurances and explanations of why the narrator loves the subject of the song. Holistically, however, specific lyrical instances prove to be less “wholesome” than those reassurances and proclamations appear on the surface. The way these reciprocated feelings are approached and presented through specific actions and situations problematizes a “positive” impression of the song. Contextualized as a happy consensual, long-term relationship without any sort of backstory, there is no apparent timeline given for the relationship. This leaves the listener wondering how much time the pair spend together before they reached the level of intimacy described in the song. Answers to these

¹⁰³ Thomas Rhett “Die a Happy Man.”

¹⁰⁴ Leigh H. Edwards, “Country Music and Class.”

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Rhett, “Die a Happy Man.”

questions can be learned from what is known about Rhett and Lauren Akins's publicly but not from the song.¹⁰⁶

An interesting element of "Die a Happy Man" is the objectification of the partner, which is masked by the clear romantic intent of the song. The trope of a Country Gentleman makes the objectification in "Die a Happy Man" acceptable because of the Real Life contextualization. The Consent Song paradigm, though, points to issues with lyrics such "the cutest, the hottest, a masterpiece," which combines descriptions of physical and emotional levels of intimacy.¹⁰⁷ It does, however, matter who is hearing these descriptions. If the contextualization of the song was not present, would it be far creepier, raising questions about who and what the narrator is talking about.

Dylan Scott's breakout hit "My Girl" works within a similar framework of "Die a Happy Man," Scott having done interviews explaining the origin and meaning of the song.¹⁰⁸ Originally reticent to release the track, Scott was concerned that his audience would not want to hear a "mushy gushy love with [his] girlfriend," who is now his wife.¹⁰⁹ "My Girl," a lighthearted pop-country track, begins with a physical description of the subject, Scott's wife Blair Anderson. The lyrics present very normal, average descriptions of Anderson—"she looks so pretty with no

¹⁰⁶ Maria Carter, "The Real-Life Love Story Behind Thomas Rhett's "Die a Happy Man"," *Country Living*, November 8, 2017, accessed March 22, 2018 (<https://www.countryliving.com/life/entertainment/a38112/real-love-story-behind-thomas-rhetts-die-a-happy-man/>).

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Rhett, "Die a Happy Man."

¹⁰⁸ Kelsey Hendrix, "Dylan Scott on His Hit Song and Baby on the Way—and How His Wife Rapping Eminem Inspired it All," July 17, 2017, accessed March 21, 2018 (<http://people.com/country/dylan-scott-my-girl-top-five-single-baby-on-way/>).

¹⁰⁹ Kelsey Hendrix, "Dylan Scott on His Hit Song and Baby on the Way."

makeup on / you should hear her talkin' to her mama on the phone / I love it when she raps to an Eminem song / that's my girl."¹¹⁰ This introductory verse presents the subject's physical descriptors from an insider's perspective. It shows a personal, private side of the person being described and the relationship they are in. The track moves beyond the surface level, acting as a snapshot into more intimate elements of their relationship.

An identifying feature of "My Girl" is how Scott makes the personal or "private" aspects of the relationship "public" and relatable. Lyrically, there is a balance of "private" and "public" struck between verses and chorus. Descriptions in the verse blend personal intimacy and generic relatability for the audience.¹¹¹ This divide is explicitly drawn by Scott in the chorus where he sings "Yeah that's my girl in the passenger seat / windows down dancin' around causin' a scene / that's my girl sippin' crown and sprite / and a ballcap turned back ooo she got me like / yeah baby girl you gone and done it again / makin' all the guys wishin' you were with them / but I bet they don't see what I see when I see my girl."¹¹² The lyrics of the chorus indicate what the general public sees, Scott claiming possession over her through the repeated phrase "My Girl." He is assuming her unique characteristics described in the song as his own.

The possessive, paternalistic qualities of the song are easily overshadowed by a dose of romance and pop music influence. Scott's voice is low, and the opening of the track sounds more mellow with fewer accompaniment parts. Pop influence is heard at the beginning of the track where Scott's vocal line is repeated in an echoing, distorted fade. Topped with a pulsing

¹¹⁰ Dylan Scott, "My Girl," *Dylan Scott* (Curb Records, Inc., 2016).

¹¹¹ This element of Consent Songs is present in many of the examples seen in this document, particularly in the work of Sam Hunt discussed in Chapter Three, and in the discussion of Thomas Rhett's "Die a Happy Man."

¹¹² Dylan Scott, "My Girl."

electronic drum sound, the pop influence is best heard in the chorus which leaves out most of the minor instrumental elements, like slide guitar, that make it sound like a country song. The pop-y, positive music overshadows the possessiveness on the part of the narrator, especially in the chorus. It is there the refrain of “my girl” is used repeatedly to connect the narrator with the subject and maintain a certain level of relatable ambiguity—“my” girl could be anyone’s girl. Scott romanticizes the possession of a romantic partner, particularly a man’s possession of a woman, through the use of clear gendered pronouns. The pronouns gain the paternalistic influence through the use of “girl” rather than “woman.”

In the first and second verses Scott sings about a girl with no makeup on, talking to her mother on the phone, smiling when holding a baby, and describes her as having “saved” him.¹¹³ Although this list does not do justice to the level of romance in which it is sung—Scott’s baritone voice with a slight growl presents an endearing sort of honesty in his singing—these descriptions of “my girl”, through their general nature, are part of how the audience is brought into the song. There is something for every audience member, whether they want the sort of relationship or partner Scott either is or is singing about, or are in a relationship and desiring the elements of “My Girl” to be part of their story.

By contrast with Scott’s “My Girl” Dustin Lynch’s hit “Small Town Boy” describes the narrator, placing emphasis on why the girl loves the small town boy. Lynch is not inviting the audience into his world, rather is expressing why someone is in love with him. “Small Town Boy” begins with two people already in a relationship, connecting them to their physical placement in a “small town” along with other familiar tropes of rurality in country music. These tropes of rurality are actually the first lyrics in the song, situating the description of the female

¹¹³ Dylan Scott, “My Girl.”

character's placed affection before the first chorus: "I'm a dirt road / in the headlights / I'm a Mama's boy / I'm a fist fight / kinda county lines / kinda cold beer / little hat down / little John Deer."¹¹⁴ Too, the record promotes the male narrators pride and gratitude that this girl wants to be with him—it is a way of expressing love without using so many words; a way to show the parameters and detailed features of their relationship.

"Small Town Boy" functions as a love song by describing the silent female partner in an exceptional and positive light. Lyrics in the chorus, "she's my with me 'till the end girl / turn it up to 10 girl / she could have anybody that she wants or be anywhere she wants to be / she loves a small town boy like me...", indicate that the song is structured around the male narrator's gratitude and awe for his partner. The acknowledgement of her "exceptional" qualities show a power balance in the song that indicates how their relationship works. One example could be the idea that just because a woman has chosen to be with a man, means that the relationship is automatically perfect, or functions in this sort of "exceptional" "idealized-romance" plane. Lynch's "Small Town Boy" plays upon the tropes of rurality as what his partner loves about him—what makes their relationship function. Too, these tropes show an integrated power in the relationship because the woman could "be with anybody she wants to be."¹¹⁵

Lyrical integrated as "Small Town Boy" might be, it does not show gendered equality. It continues to reinforce gender double standards because of what the narrator says the girl loves about him. "Small Town Boy" is different from the other two Real Life Consent Songs investigated in this chapter because Lynch has not given clear indication that the song is about or

¹¹⁴ Dustin Lynch, "Small Town Boy," *Current Mood* (Broken Bow Records, 2017); Richard Peterson, *Fabricating Authenticity*; Hugh Barker and Youval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music*.

¹¹⁵ Dustin Lynch, "Small Town Boy."

inspired by a real person. Instead, it is the lyric present tense of the song that places it in the Real-Live category. “She loves a small town boy like me,” never wavers from the present tense, the record never thinking about the future or moving backward—it is a snapshot of a relationship happening in the linguistic present-tense for the duration of the track.¹¹⁶

IV. The Hypotheticals

From his 2017 self-titled release Brett Eldredge’s “The Long Way” begins with a mellow but forward moving pulse indicative of the whole album, with a sound more removed from the bro, pop-country elements of other artists discussed in this document.¹¹⁷ The mellow vibe of the song is perpetuated by Eldredge’s own vocals, with an easy-going baritone, his voice is echoed by a slide-guitar providing a counter melody. The track describes, in the most basic way, the narrator meeting a girl who he wants to get to know well, giving the impression of a relationship that has either been going on for a while, or is moving quickly. “Take Your Time” is a Hypothetical Consent Song because of the lack of clarity in the pace and timing of the relationship being described.

The song begins, “Don’t think I’ve ever seen your kind of pretty / wandering ‘round this midnight madhouse city / you gotta look that says you got it all together / so if you don’t mind I’d like to know you better,” opening the narrator and subject’s rapidly moving interaction. The lead in to the chorus describes elements and objects that the narrator wants to have in a relationship. Yet, this relationship does not exist—the narrator has not formally met the object of his affection in the song. Reinforced through the bridge of the song, “didn’t think tonight when I

¹¹⁶ Dustin Lynch, “Small Town Boy.”

¹¹⁷ Brett Eldredge, “The Long Way,” *Brett Eldredge* (Atlantic Recording Corp., 2017).

walked in / I'd be falling for a place I've never been," the narrator is falling for a "place," interchangeable with the idea of a person.¹¹⁸ "The Long Way" is a love song between a man and silent female partner—but the pair have yet to actually meet or have any sort of real interaction.

An excellent example of the problematic nature of Hypothetical Consent Songs, "The Long Way" presents unrealistic expectations of an initial meeting between two people. This, combined with the romantic, ballad-like nature of the song allow for the hyper-romantisization of the character's interactions, or lack thereof, appear appropriate. The track remains a one-sided narrative, which is reinforced visually in the music video for the song released in October, 2017.¹¹⁹ In the video Eldredge walks into a bar, up to a female character but never appears to speak with her. He then walks through the narration of the track: going to her hometown, seeing her childhood home, etc. Like Rhett's "Die a Happy Man" video, there is only eye-contact and slight physical interaction to link the characters together. One telling element of "The Long Way" video is the opening when Eldredge reaches out and almost touches the female character's hair as she walks away. Only one example of many, "The Long Way" music video is constructed as a hypothetical scenario, with Eldredge and the female lead character in the video, portrayed by Sadie Robertson, enacting the song's lyrics.¹²⁰ The conclusion of the video reminds the listener

¹¹⁸ Brett Eldredge. "The Long Way."

¹¹⁹ Brett Eldredge, "The Long Way," dir. Jim Shea, released October 17, 2017, accessed April 23, 2018 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Zs_5VghD6U).

¹²⁰ Sophie Schillaci, "Brett Eldredge Gushes Over 'The Long Way' Leading Lady Sadi Robertson's 'Amazing Spirit,'" *Entertainment Tonight Online*, February 7, 2018, accessed April 22, 2018 (<http://www.etonline.com/brett-eldredge-gushes-over-the-long-way-leading-lady-sadie-robertsons-amazing-spirit-exclusive>).

and viewer that the song truly is the narrator *imaging* the unfolding of a relationship as the video ends where it began: in a bar.

Lyrically, “The Long Way” describes a relationship that *might* be beginning and where it *might* go. As Eldredge sings in the chorus, “I’m falling for a place I’ve never been,” he is presenting the silent female partner’s hometown as an important stepping stone, or marker in the relationship.¹²¹ That Eldredge is falling for a connected place *and* girl, raises the idea of women’s association with purity in country music and country music’s love songs. Purity is often associated with small-town rurality.¹²² Eldredge cultivates a romantic Country Gentleman identity through songs like “The Long Way” by using tropes of purity and rurality which allow Eldredge to easily bypass hook-up culture and its connection to bro-country.

Akin to how Brett Eldredge associated himself with small town America and rural tropes, Easton Corbin’s music, along with his image, is constructed so as to align him with rural, small town America. Corbin, like Eldredge, embodies a more traditional country music feel with an emphasis on acoustic instruments without apparent processing and added electronics. He employs particular tropes of the Country Gentleman, pushing against the dominating themes of bro-country to cultivate his image as the “good guy.”¹²³ Corbin’s “Baby Be My Love Song” tells the story of a couple meeting in a bar, and describing the continuation of a relationship or interaction.¹²⁴ There is lyric emphasis on the narrator asking the subject of the song a question;

¹²¹ Brett Eldredge, “The Long Way.”

¹²² Tropes of rurality are an element in constructions of country musics authenticity. See: Richard Peterson, *Fabricating Authenticity*.

¹²³ Jon Caramanica, “In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now).”

¹²⁴ Easton Corbin, “Baby Be My Love Song” *About to Get Real* (Mercury Records, 2015).

from the title of the track, to “baby be [his] love song.”¹²⁵ By asking the question, and asking it repeatedly, Corbin is qualifying the appropriateness of the two character’s interaction. Indeed, by asking her to be his “love song”, he is open to the possibility for a romance that last longer than one night.

The end of the second verse drives home the idea that there is a possibility for continued romance. Singing “It don’t have to make sense / and it don’t have to rhyme / as long as it’s you / babe I’m all in / and when it’s over / just play it again”, the narrator wants the interaction, now described *as* the love song, to continue repeatedly.¹²⁶ Describing the idea of a relationship or a person as a love song strongly associates the lyrics with everything that can be wrapped up in a country love song, or any love song more generally. The song appropriates and condones assumed consent, romance, reciprocated affection, respect, marriage, by constructing the relationship in the track around those same themes.

Unlike Eason Corbin and Brett Eldredge’s general musical style, Chris Lane is a continuation of Sam Hunt’s 2014 legacy of pop and hip-hop crossover influence in country music.¹²⁷ Lane’s debut album *Girl Problems* was released in 2016, with “Fix” as Lane’s first hit and single release off the album.¹²⁸ A pop heavy, up tempo track “Fix” is marked, like other songs off *Girl Problems*, by interspersed banjo parts to giving a country flair. The banjo,

¹²⁵ Easton Corbin, “Baby Be My Love Song.”

¹²⁶ Easton Corbin, “Baby Be My Love Song.”

¹²⁷ For more about the evolving styles in country music see, among others: Jewly Hight, “How the Sound of Country Music Changed,” *The Record: Music News from NPR*, accessed March 21, 2018 (<https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2018/03/20/594037569/how-the-sound-of-country-music-changed>).

¹²⁸ Chris Lane, “Fix,” *Girl Problems* (Big Loud Records, 2016).

however, feels perfect in place with the rest of Lane's arrangement—aesthetically a pop-country crossover, with a nod to the musical bro-country vibe of artists such as Dylan Scott, Thomas Rhett, and Sam Hunt. The various musical aesthetics are also present in the music video for "Fix", along with Lane's live performances of the song.

"Fix" is an interesting example of a Hypothetical Consent Song because distinctions between a hook-up song and love song are blurred through Lane's musical blend and eschewing of hook-up themes. Displacement of thematic norms attributed to bro-country in favor of Country Gentleman themes, along with objectification of a silent female partner, categorize "Fix" as a Consent Song. However, the specific objectification in "Fix" is more about the potential sexual relationship between the narrator and subject of the song. Clearly marked as a female partner through continuous gendered pronouns, she remains silent aside from the soft echoing of a female voice on the track that adds background harmony. The female echo is heard only on the word "me" in the first verse, then is slightly softer in her echo throughout the chorus. The male narrator is representing himself as the best thing that could happen to this girl, and she seems to agree with her echoing of "me." The masculine self-assurance of the first verse is seen in the opening line with, "hey girl / you know what you been missin' / me, me yeah" then leading into the first chorus, "I'm what you need."¹²⁹

"Fix" contains drawn out metaphors around the word "fix," coyly referencing various stimulants, drugs or otherwise. The second half of the first verse goes, "I've got that love medicinal / I'll make you feel invincible / I'm more than recreational / I'm what you need," with similar references continuing throughout. The references in the chorus, however, are about the feelings associated with falling or being in love rather than various stimulants. Lyrics like, "I'll

¹²⁹ Chris Lane, "Fix."

be your first time, that's so right / Get you fallin' in love at the end of the night," bring together a reference to sexual intimacy and falling in love. At the end of the chorus Lane lists, "I'll be the high that never lets you down / The one you crave when no one is around / I'll pick you up and never let you go / Never let you go," a combination of commitment and sexual innuendo.¹³⁰

The relationship represented on the track is Hypothetical, and through the wordplay references to drugs, stimulants, and sex comes a man trying to convince a girl to be with him. The first verse indicates that they are not together with the line, "Hey girl, whoever you've been kissin' / It ain't me, me." This line, combined with the sexual references at the end of the chorus listed above indicate that the narrator is working to not only "get the girl," but "get the girl" for longer than just one kiss, or one night. The long-term intentions are reinforced through the repetition of the line, "never let you go" or "never let you down" at the end of each chorus and verse respectively.¹³¹ "Fix" is about "getting the girl," but it is even more so about *keeping* the girl after getting her. Lane is describing a heterosexual romance with commitment, and emotional and sexual intimacy through lyric metaphor and up-beat, pop-country music stylings.

V. Conclusions

Through the broad range of musical styles and appropriate corresponding video references I have shown that consent songs are not exclusive to artists or musical stylings of song. Those discussed in this chapter have ranged from slow ballads with pop influences, songs with acoustic sounds and a pronounced vocal twang, to the up-tempo pop-country hit. They all share a representation of consenting, heterosexual, monogamous romances. Variations in representation fall in line with

¹³⁰ Chris Lane, "Fix."

¹³¹ Chris Lane, "Fix."

the general categories of Consent Songs I have already defined. Importantly, the song examples also show the clear similarities between categories, and how the tools used to construct relationships narratives are often very similar within Consent Songs.

One of the most important elements in the construction and understanding of Consent Songs, is that they place importance on the relationship being described. From Thomas Rhett's "Die a Happy Man," describing his marriage, to Chris Lane's "Fix," that describes what a relationship would feel like; emphasis is placed on the two characters of the song: the male narrator and the (silent) female partner. Silence in the context of a presumed consenting relationship narrative is antithetical and harmful. It is the crux to why Consent Songs are problematic, and why Consent Songs, and the "Country Gentlemen" who produce them should not be branded as patently "good."¹³²

¹³² Jon Caramanica, "In Country Music, Nice Guys Finish First (For Now)."

Chapter 3

Sam Hunt

I. Introduction

At first listen, Sam Hunt's chart-smashing hit single "Body Like a Back Road" is little more than a catchy tune about a boy meeting a girl in a bar, followed by the unfolding of an undefined relationship between the pair. But the song's resounding popularity—it was number one on *Billboard*'s Hot Country chart for thirty-four consecutive weeks and peaked on the *Billboard* Hot 100 at number 6—suggests that there is more to this song than a catchy guitar-twanging hook, memorable whistling, and some automated finger snaps. This song, released in February 2017, surpassed the most recent longest-running number one on the *Billboard* Hot Country chart: Florida Georgia Line's "Cruise," featuring the rapper Nelly.

"Cruise" was top of the *Billboard* Hot Country for twenty-four weeks, and although elements of this track do not make for a fair comparison in the scope of this study—Florida Georgia Line is a country duo, and the record featured another artist—several similarities between "Cruise" and "Body Like a Back Road" are relevant here. Both "Body Like a Back Road" and "Cruise" speak to broader trends in popular music and country music's ongoing efforts to reach across genre divisions to develop a broader audience. Sam Hunt and Florida Georgia Line both desire—explicitly or otherwise—to bridge genre divides. But with great popularity comes great power to affect the attitudes of their fans through country music's authenticity.¹³³

¹³³ Scholarship on popular music and authenticity includes: Peterson, *Fabricating Authenticity*; Hugh Barker and Youval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music*.

Sam Hunt's musical output has played with the boundaries between the Country Gentleman and bro-country, and he has built a successful career by presenting himself as a "good guy." This chapter examines the ways that Hunt's musical output explores and, at times, blurs these boundaries and considers its impacts on the ways that audiences might understand consent, romance, and domesticity. To understand Sam Hunt's success, I will look at almost his entire catalogue, with emphasis on how its stylistic hybridity serves to frame Consent Songs, and consider how Hunt animates the core themes found in the Consent Song repertoire as Consent Songs position themselves in contrast to bro-country's overt sexuality. It is worth remembering that they might also be heard as reinforcing many of the same negative values and sexual mores as their bro-country cousins. To accomplish this goal, this chapter will first examine Hunt's debut album, *Montevallo*, in its entirety. Then it will take up Hunt's miscellaneous singles, including the blockbuster hit "Body Like a Backroad."

I. *Montevallo*

Hunt's music functions within the logic of the Consent Songs and, stylistically, has shaped much of the pop-country output from the 2010s. His debut album, *Montevallo*, offers a fascinating case study for the investigation of these Consent Songs not only because of the number of consent-related songs that are present on the album, but because the songs themselves form a sort of overarching Consent Song concept album. Using stylistic diversity to frame a number of settings, Hunt presents pop-country songs, songs with R&B influences, and quasi-bro-country songs. The album explores the boundaries between consensual monogamy and hook-up culture.

Montevallo's first three tracks—"Take Your Time," "Leave the Night On," and "House Party"—set up the love story that is present throughout the entirety of the album. In the first

track, we meet the girl, while in our second track, our couple—the narrator (presumed to be Hunt) and the nameless girl—are seen going out on the town together. In the third track, the couple has foregone a night on the town, instead staying at home and dancing to music in their living room in sweatpants, jokingly fearful that their “house party” will wake the neighbors and lead to a call to the police, neither of which are going to happen in this quiet domestic space.

Musically, the overarching relationship narrative is amplified by Hunt’s vocal approach and the backing tracks used to accompany him. As the narrator tries to meet the girl in “Take Your Time,” Hunt employs a style of speak-singing that critics have often described as sounding “Drake-esque,” and presents a limited melody that creates a catchy, hummable tune making Hunt’s music appealing for radio air-play.¹³⁴ This song is laid back, as well, showing that the narrator is cool and not too eager. In the second and third tracks, “Leave the Night On” and “House Party,” Hunt’s vocals are accompanied by a more upbeat pop-country sound, including heavy bass guitar and acoustic instruments such as banjo, slide guitar, and acoustic guitar.

By *Montevallo*’s fourth track, however, this emerging romance is disrupted by a breakup. “Breakup in a Small Town” initially appears to be a very literal account of the girl’s decision to break up with the narrator and to move on to another guy in the same town, a guy who our spurned narrator knows.¹³⁵ Musically, this song reverts back to the speak-singing of the first track, but has far more aggressive pop / electronic sounds in the chorus, maintaining occasional signifiers of “country” through the use of banjo, slide guitar, and organ-synth sounds. We might

¹³⁴ Brittney McKenna, “Sam Hunt is Country Drake: Here are Eight Reasons Why,” February 4, 2017, accessed March 21, 2018. (<https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/country/7677943/sam-hunt-country-drake-eight-reasons-why-body-like-back-road>).

¹³⁵ Sam Hunt, “Breakup in a Small Town,” *Montevallo* (MCA Nashville, 2014).

hear Hunt's performance here as sneering, calling out both the former female partner and her new companion. The next song, "Single for the Summer," might be heard as an extension of "Breakup in a Small Town" where the jilted lover moves on and has a fun summer in a city with very different people than the characters in "Breakup in a Small Town." After a summer of the single life, the narrator moves to the rebound, finding himself in an unhealthy relationship with a girl who wants her "Ex to See" her with another guy. But, unlike other Consent Songs in which the man presumes the consent of his female partner, here, the narrator's path to consent is clearly outlined. The girl must convince the narrator to be used to get back at her ex-boyfriend, and it is only at the end of the song that he agrees to go along with the plan to make her ex-boyfriend jealous.

"Make You Miss Me," is one of the more complicated songs on *Montevallo*, as it depicts the narrator's efforts to make a girl—probably his ex-partner—miss him. But, at the same time, the song could be heard as describing efforts to make sure that his current partner does not leave him in the first place. In either case, the narrator is clearly focused on showing the object of his desire that he is the best possible mate. Walking a line between creepy and romantic, "Make You Miss Me" offers no specific indication of the couple's relationship status or about the narrator's intentions to get back together with her. Rather, it is similar to "Breakup in a Small Town," but with the vital difference that the pain of the breakup is reversed. Here, the woman is being "tortured" by the man, whereas she was torturing him in "Breakup in a Small Town." Musically, "Make You Miss Me," is a mellow more heavily country influenced song with minimal pop influences only including heavy back beats emphasized with synthetic hand-clap sounds.

“Cop Car,” a song co-written by Sam Hunt but also recorded by Keith Urban, is about a Real-Life situation between Hunt and his now wife, Hannah Lee Fowler.¹³⁶ Reality of this track aside, it is a far more narrational track, with literal geographic placement and explicit depictions of love and falling in love. This track, a standout on *Montevallo* with its explicit romantic content, is the closest we get to comparing the content and style of Sam Hunt’s music to the likes of Thomas Rhett, Easton Corbin, or Chris Young, who’s sound and style is removed from that of Hunt, but conceptually fall easily within Consent Song parameters. “Cop Car” is also a song about a very Real-Life moment in a romance, allowing the audience to connect to it.

The next track, and the second-to last song on the album is “Raised on it” which speaks to a specific sect of Hunt’s audience—perhaps to the audience he was attempting to cultivate with his first (and to date only) full-length album release. “Raised on it” has a country feel that had been typified during the late 2000s and early 2010s by the likes of Luke Bryan, Dirks Bentley, Jason Alden, and other male stars prominent that period. Thematically it is situational like “Cop Car,” but is far less specific. The situation extends only in a way that a wide swath of people would relate to or aspire to relate to. Its vague nature makes a point and situates Hunt firmly as a country artist by playing to the authentic country stereotypes, and through that is the least sincere song on the whole album.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Marissa R. Moss, “Sam Hunt Defends His Country Cred on New Album ‘Montevallo’,” *Rolling Stone*, October, 28, 2014, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/sam-hunt-montevallo-album-interview-20141028>.

¹³⁷ Themes expressed in “Raised on it” play to twenty-something country fans who embrace ideas of small town rurality and laid back party culture. Further scholarship on country music’s authenticity includes: Peterson, *Fabricating Authenticity*; Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music*.

To follow the insincerity of “Raised On It” Hunt’s final track on his debut album is titled “Speakers.” It is slow and mellow with ample use of speaker feedback in the mix as a nod to the lyrics and title of the track. The feedback becomes sound that makes the piece sound like a memory, with Hunt’s voice smooth over it to make it a positive memory. “Speakers,” like “Cop Car,” is a love song, but has far fewer geographical place references. Instead the characters in the story told in “Speakers” are placed in the back of a car with speakers on. It is the only track that specifically references sex, but it does so with a lens of romance and sensuality. It is a solid conclusion to the stories of the first few tracks—broken apart in the middle to appeal to all parts of what would become Hunt’s fan base. Through the use of electronic sounds to create an echo-y musical environment, the arrangement of “Speakers” is thin. Only a few sounds at the low and high extremes of the frequency space leave room for Hunt’s vocals to fill out the middle-range sounds in the production of the song. With the emphasis of Hunt’s vocals and a lot of speak-singing, it is an intimate—literally and figuratively—conclusion to the album.

II. Hypothetical Consent Songs in *Montevallo*

“Take Your Time,” the opening track of Hunt’s debut album *Montevallo*, is a mid-tempo ballad that begins with the speak-singing style typical of this album, and the majority of pop-influenced songs Hunt has released. This song tells the story of two people as a slow, memorable guitar melody begins the song before Hunt’s opening line of “I don’t mean to bother you but...”¹³⁸ The two characters of the song, our male narrator and the woman he’s talking both to and about, first encounter each other in a bar setting. An important lyric distinction made early on is that both parties are out on the town with different groups of people, and not each other.

¹³⁸ Sam Hunt, “Take Your Time,” *Montevallo*. (MCA Nashville, 2014).

The first, somewhat bashful, unassuming line of the song is our first entry point into the start of a relationship as it describes the first encounter between two people at a bar. But what makes this first interaction the start to setting Sam Hunt apart from his bro-country counterparts and their hook-up promotion and female objectification is the opening line. Hunt is qualifying the appropriateness of the interaction. It becomes a nod or acknowledgement of the fact that his approaching of a person, a woman, in a bar, could have specific and often negative connotations. With a presumably deliberate choice to actually sing these qualifications, Hunt's sung melody says "I couldn't just walk by / and not say hi," before going back to the Drake-esque speak-singing.¹³⁹ Before his next sung qualification of intent, Hunt speak-sings about how everyone knows the girl's name, and that she is not looking for anything, before the song moves to the narrator describing that he does not want "to come on strong."¹⁴⁰ Yet, he does so anyway, and continues with a similar bashful tone throughout the rest of the first verse.

Musically, the first chorus is the first time we really hear Hunt sing—on this song, and the whole album. Using a simple vocal melody marked by short declarative statements, Hunt is convincing the girl, the woman in the song, to spend time with him. The first half of the chorus, with its sparse instrumental accompaniment part and emphatic harmonic pulse, points to the narrator's sincerity and intent to portray himself as the "good guy." From this first chorus onward through the bridge into the last repetitions of the chorus, the band accompaniment stays relatively full. The bridge section, a fuller arrangement, describes what the narrator does *not* want to do with the girl— "take her home etc.—but that he does want to be alone with her. From

¹³⁹ Sam Hunt, "Take Your Time."; Brittney McKenna, "Sam Hunt is Country Drake: Here are Eight Reasons Why."

¹⁴⁰ Sam Hunt, "Take Your Time."

these declarations of desire for some sort of intimacy, the arrangement builds back to the full version of the chorus heard one last time.

This song is a good example of the Hypothetical Consent Song because it engages with the idea of talking to a potential romantic partner by using situational descriptions. Specific lines of “approach” are odd or uncomfortable through their assumption that the *male* partner needs qualifiers to make himself comfortable with his actions. The male narrator walks a fine line of not wanting to seem too overtly romantic and eager in those moments, rather just taking his time. Taking time, but not being the random guy who just tries to pick her up in a bar. In the second verse we get a first glimpse of the female character. She remains silent, however, our male narrator that the girl he’s talking to does want this interaction to continue—there is mutual acquiesce to that prolonged interaction.

From the end of the second verse and extending into the second half of the song, a linguistic shift highlights the lack of consent in the song beyond the silent female partner. The illusion of consent is present because the narrator getting what he wants, her time, never hearing from the silent partner. This linguistic shift is not unique, seen also in “Ex To See” and “Body Like a Back Road.” The moment, linguistically, when consent is lost and the assumption of a relationship becomes apparent, point to the idea of a heroic masculinity in the narrator. He has convinced the girl that he is the good guy, has gotten what he wanted, all with a side portion of love and no indication of consent.

The fourth track of *Montevallo*, “Ex To See,” is another Hypothetical Consent Song, but does not have a shifting timeline. The listener is not transported into the past or the future, instead the song is just a snapshot within the character’s lives. The music in this of “Ex To See” is up-beat and aggressive, with a static, monotonous sharply sung vocal line and pounding

drums. Musical tension constructed in the mix of “Ex To See” enhances the story of the song. A male narrator is being used unwittingly by a female partner to make her ex-partner jealous. The narrator is upset he is being used until midway through the record where a distorted female voice is heard in the background leaving an apologetic voicemail during the bridge of the track. After hearing the voicemail the male narrator changes his mind and accepts his role in the plot for revenge. So our narrator is consenting to “play along” and make his partner’s Ex jealous.¹⁴¹ The clear consent of the narrator shows his commitment to this relationship, and his willingness to forgive reinforcing his ‘good guy’ status.

III. Real Life Consent Songs in *Montevallo*

Beginning with a soft wash of suspended cymbal, a melancholic piano melody, and slow drum beat, “Make You Miss Me” features a narrator pining for an ex-lover and their relationship.¹⁴² The track is clearly gendered by the use of specific pronouns that construct a heteronormative relationship narrative for the track. However, the song’s narrative is far more insular and self-centered. The narrator has a one-track mind, reminding the subject of the song to “wish [she] was sleepin’ in [his] shirt,” and wish he was the one calling at midnight.¹⁴³ These sort of descriptions, found throughout the song, represent the narrator as both the “good guy,” and as aware of his partners emotions and desires, even though there is no actual interaction described in the song.

¹⁴¹ Sam Hunt, “Ex To See.”

¹⁴² There is a female voice harmonizing with Hunt’s lyrics, only heard on this track of *Montevallo*; Sam Hunt, “Make You Miss Me,” *Montevallo* (2014).

¹⁴³ Sam Hunt, “Make You Miss Me.”

Written by Hunt, Jason Osborne, and Matthew Thomas Ramsey, “Cop Car” was originally recorded by Keith Urban in a similar arrangement with less pop influence. The song is about Hunt’s now wife, Hannah Lee Fowler, during an early time in their relationship, and is a very clear example of a Real-Life Consent Song.¹⁴⁴ The storytelling element of the track is reinforced by the lack of electronic sounds and extreme production. It also has a more romantic lilt because Hunt sings the whole track, rather than including moments of speak-singing. The song acts as a description of how the narrator fell in love with a girl in one evening and is the most straightforward love song on *Montevallo* with its Real-Life narrative authenticity.

The last track on Hunt’s debut album, “Speakers,” is the most sensually romantic love song on the album but does not have the same sort of narrative quality as “Cop Car.” With an emptier arrangement, “Speakers” is characterized by echoing microphone feedback sounds similar to “Ex to see,” and “Drinkin’ Too Much” (2017). Backed by electronic drum and bass sounds and the tick of a light high-hat, an echoing processed guitar line floats through the entire track. The echoing emptiness of the arrangement reinforces the locational placement of the song out in the “woods, no one for miles.”¹⁴⁵ As the only song about sexual intimacy between two people, it contradicts hook-up songs because it equates intimacy with the romanticism of nature. The narrator talks about both himself and his partner being “on fire” with love and sexual attraction but does not explicitly describe a sexual encounter.¹⁴⁶ Descriptive references of their

¹⁴⁴ Hunt talked about “Cop Car” at his concert in Burgettstown, PA in June 2017, detailing what the song is about (his now wife, Hannah Lee Fowler) and one of their first dates when they were in college at University of Alabama, Birmingham; *15 in a 30 Tour*, Sam Hunt, KeyBank Pavilion, Burgettstown, PA, June 17, 2017.

¹⁴⁵ Sam Hunt, “Speakers.”

¹⁴⁶ Sam Hunt, “Speakers.”

activities in the back of this truck with speakers instead romanticize their relationship through references to nature—their love characterized as a layer of protection from the wild and scary outdoors.

“Breakup in a Small Town,” like “Speakers,” is heavily influenced by pop electronic sounds with few nods to the more traditional sounds and instruments of country music. Like Hunt’s other tracks that boast a lot of pop-electronic sounds, there is a blend of speaking-singing and singing found in “Breakup in a Small Town.”¹⁴⁷ The choruses, much like the later “Ex to See” are all sung, with emphasized backbeats reminiscent of a hip-hop track that include crunched drum sounds, synthesized clapping sounds and processed slide guitar. Like “Cop Car” and “Speakers,” this song has specific geographic place markers that make “Breakup in a Small Town” appear more personal. Details like crushed grass in a drive way, paying at the same gas pumps, and listening to the same radio stations relate the subject matter to the audience and create sympathy for the male narrator.

“House Party” is another up-beat, catchy, pop-country song with a positive message and clear intentions. A Real Life Consent Song like “Breakup in A Small Town,” “House Party” is different because it is about a present tense relationship rather than a past one. The narrated story within “Breakup in a Small Town,” comes in the first verse, pre-chorus, and chorus. From the first verse of the song we understand that it going to just be the two characters in the song. The male narrator is going to have a house party as a way to make the girl happy, but the party will just be the two of them. He’s putting effort into their relationship to progress their story, outside of the context of the individual song. The song is specifically about a particular night, or moment

¹⁴⁷ Sam Hunt, “Breakup in a Small Town.”

within this pre-existing relationship and listener is dropped into a relationship that existed before and will continue after the context of the song.

“House Party” is a party song, but just for two people in a relationship. It is a romance song, about a monogamous, heterosexual, presumably consensual relationship, and a specific interaction within that framework. A direct comparison could be between the more romantic and object / person based Real-Life consent songs of Thomas Rhett with “Die a Happy Man.”¹⁴⁸ The key difference in realization about situational expectation between Rhett’s and Hunt’s tracks is that Rhett’s music has both the generalized sentiments and situational references *and* specific, personal people / objects references. The personal contextualization is not present in “House Party,” just the use of the present tense to situate the relationship.

III. The “Party” Songs

The lead single from *Montevallo*, “Leave the Night On,” is a heavily pop-influenced song depicting a relatively generic scenario between a man and woman.¹⁴⁹ From the beginning of the song the listener gets the impression that the two characters know each other well. Playing off tropes of rural small-town America, “Leave the Night On” depicts a quintessential night out with a romantic partner. Lines from the first verse represent the small town where, “they roll the sidewalks in this town all up after the sun goes down.”¹⁵⁰ Acceptable objectification comes in the chorus with a description of the silent female partner who is “killing in [her] Levi’s,” as it is assumed that the two characters are in some sort of consensual relationship, reinforced by the

¹⁴⁸ Thomas Rhett, “Die a Happy Man.”

¹⁴⁹ Sam Hunt, “Leave the Night On.”

¹⁵⁰ Sam Hunt, “Leave the Night On.”

line in the second verse, “Baby I know what you’re wishing for / I’m wishing for it too.”¹⁵¹ The verses continue the story line with tropes of romantic small town country life, but the chorus of the song objectifies the female character.

“Leave the Night On” is a simple and straightforward with little sexual innuendo or extensive wordplay. The perfect first single, it hits all of the main points of contemporary country music. There is a small town, a beautiful girl, a party to go to, a bar to be at with friends, a fun night to be out in the small town, and back roads to drive on. All of these themes firmly root the song with the country genre, reinforced by plucked banjo in the background, while still flavored with enough pop to make it relevant. As Hunt’s first single song, it situated him as a ‘good guy’ of country music who did not always sound “country.”¹⁵² “Leave the Night On” appeals to a wide audience because it is just generic enough to open the door for multiple interpretations, while still staying true to Hunt’s general lack of hook-up, bro-country style songs.

“Single for the Summer,” the fifth track off *Montevallo* is a heavily pop influenced track.¹⁵³ Another mid-tempo track with static arrangement, there is but a nod to country with the sailing slide guitar coexisting with the electronic drums, synth, and echoing, processed vocals layered with Hunt’s voice. The song is more of a cautionary tale about city life, and less about country living. In sharp contrast “Raised on It,” the second to last track off *Montevallo*, is a nod

¹⁵¹ Sam Hunt, “Leave the Night On.”

¹⁵² Sam Hunt’s “Leave the Night On” peaked on the *Billboard Hot Country* chart on November 15, 2014; “Sam Hunt Chart History,” *Billboard*, accessed April 24, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/music/sam-hunt/chart-history/country-songs>.

¹⁵³ Sam Hunt, “Single for the Summer,” *Montevallo* (MCA Nashville, 2014).

to the small town, country loving audience who would be the assumed fan base for Hunt's album.¹⁵⁴ This track is a rock influenced life style anthem for the young country singer who wears snapbacks not cowboy hats, but still wears Levi jeans, boots and lives in a small town. Through the constant refrain of "raised on it", Hunt is equating himself as this new country boy.¹⁵⁵

IV. "Body Like a Backroad" (2017)

As one of the more popular Consent Songs to emerge from this movement in contemporary country music, Hunt's "Body Like a Back Road" deserves special attention. A masterfully ambiguous song that can be interpreted in many ways, "Body Like a Back Road" is Hunt's latest hit in a catalogue of songs that fit squarely within the Consent Song framework. At its core, "Body Like a Backroad" is about a relationship the singer—narrator—wants to happen, or to continue, so the narrator and the girl—our subject—can keep driving down backroads, sitting outside with "the breeze and the birds" all "tangled up in the tall grass."¹⁵⁶ Half of the song—which makes of what music theorist Jocelyn Neal has described as a "time-shift narrative"—is devoted to objectifying the girl, leaving the specific romantic intentions of consent open for interpretation and appealing to a wider audience. In this Hypothetical Consent Song, there is no reflection of consent, only bland references to a committed relationship masked by the objectification of a female figure.

¹⁵⁴ Sam Hunt, "Raised On It," *Montevallo* (MCA Nashville, 2014).

¹⁵⁵ Sam Hunt, "Raised On It."

¹⁵⁶ Sam Hunt, "Body Like a Backroad" *Body Like a Backroad- Single* (MCA Nashville, 2017).

This objectification begins from the song's outset. Notably, the female character remains nameless and hails from a similarly anonymous place: "the girl" is "from the Southside / with braids in her hair." "The girl" enters a non-descript bar, immediately and dramatically disrupting the narrator's life, causing him to almost falls out of his chair. Following this dramatic and humorous first encounter, the narrator decides to pursue her romantically, a process that played out over some time, as he notes that it took him "six weeks" to get her number. But, in a rather shocking turn of events, once the narrator finally got to know this girl, they discover that they go "way back like Cadillac seats"—a reference to a sexual encounter in a vehicle. The song's chorus moves us from recollections of the past to the experience of the present. Here, the narrator continues his objectification, comparing the girl's body to a curving, familiar backroad where they are going slow—"driving 15 in a 30"—an obvious erotic invocation. On this backroad, the narrator wants to take "it," presumably the relationship with the girl, "slow, just as fast as [he] can."¹⁵⁷

Within the span of a verse and a chorus, then, we observe this narrator moving from objectifying a "girl from the Southside" to knowing every "curve [of the girl] like the back of [his] hand." One might assume that, somewhere along the way, this "girl"—presumed to be innocent as a consequence of her arrested girlhood—consented to something, especially if she's out driving on the backroads in a car with ample room in the back seats. Also assumed here is that her decision to give the narrator her phone number was an implicit consent for everything that follows. Although it would be easy to brush off the introduction of this song as a means to get to the more "fun" and provocative descriptors—sexual and bodily objectifications—of this

¹⁵⁷ Sam Hunt, "Body Like a Backroad."; Jocelyn Neal, "Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music."

girl, I would submit that the song dangerously assumes, but never explains their consent by using the quick elision between the first verse and chorus to gloss over important details.

Such a reading is reinforced when we consider the second verse, which does not move the narrative forward but instead persists in the objectification of the “girl,” presenting her actual body to the narrator’s audience. Coated with sexual innuendo, the second verse begins with a description of the girl’s physical attributes. Paired with the timeline and geographical place descriptions within the chorus, the listener gets the distinct impression that the relationship has progressed to a point where the pair have spent enough time together in a variety of locations to know each other intimately. Descriptors like “hips like honey / so thick and so sweet” are used in conjunction with place descriptions of the backroad, using simile to make her body seem like a real, relatable place. The bridge, too, continues this geographic analogy, this time treating her body as a roadmap to pleasure: “on the highway to heaven / headed south of her smile, / get there when we get there. / Every inch is a mile.”¹⁵⁸

“Body Like a Backroad” is clearly about sex and backroads, and much like Hunt’s bro-country colleagues, he seems to be very interested in his own sexual desire and satisfaction. What is perhaps even more surprising, though, is that the musical accompaniment heard here also echoes that of bro-country, particularly in its invocation of pop, R&B, and hip hop production practices. Musically, “Body Like a Backroad” is catchy and has a hummable, snappy opening tag, marked by sharply plucked acoustic guitar notes layered with electric finger snaps. Together, they serve to give a solid backbeat without the presence of a drum set; in fact, no solid drum set groove is heard until the start of the second verse, after the first complete iteration of the chorus. To add to the catchy but curated informality of the song’s introduction and first verse,

¹⁵⁸ Sam Hunt, “Body Like a Backroad.”

we hear voices talking casually in the background, giving the impression that the performance is occurring live in a bar setting, which sets the tone for the location in which both characters of the story in “Body Like a Backroad” appear. Yet, these sounds also play to the objectification of the nameless female character, as the first audible human sounds are a cat-calling whistle and a murmur of male objectification that precede the narrator’s recollections of the first time he meets this girl. These informal background sounds continue through the remainder of the song and are most easily heard in the mix when Hunt is not singing.

Like much of Sam Hunt’s music, “Body Like a Backroad” bridges the gap between the love songs of Thomas Rhett and Brett Young and the often-criticized bro-country artists like Luke Bryan, Jason Alden and Florida Georgia Line. It is this sort of middle ground that complicates a song that is promoting a type of heterosexual, consensual, and monogamous romance, even though it is full of blatant sexual innuendo and objectification. But these issues are not limited to the recorded version of the song that dominated the airwaves. It extends into Hunt’s live performances of the song, as well. For example, Hunt performed “Body Like a Back Road” at the *Billboard* Musical Awards on May 21, 2017 in a staging that began with him sitting on a stool and ended with him in nearly the same place that he started.¹⁵⁹ That same spring, however, Hunt performed the song at the Academy of Country Music Awards, where he sang the bridge while sharing a seat with his now wife, who apparently inspired the song, Hannah Lee

¹⁵⁹ Nick Williams, “Sam Hunt Brings “Body Like a Back Road” To 2017 Billboard Music Awards: Watch,” *Billboard*, May 21, 2017, accessed March 23, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/bbma/7801163/sam-hunt-body-like-a-back-road-billboard-music-awards-2017>.

Fowler.¹⁶⁰ In this latter setting, then, viewers are shown the object of his affection, an object to be treated as furniture, used as a stage prop, and treated as a smiling—but still silent—muse.

Fowler's presence as an object in Hunt's Academy of Country Music Awards performance appears sweet on the surface, but her silence remains troubling, especially in light of the much-publicized challenges that she faced in her relationship with Hunt. Rather than a tawdry tabloid tale, though, these challenges are presented as part of a narrative in which Hunt himself becomes domesticated. Released on January 27, 2017, Hunt's "Drinkin' Too Much" predated the release of "Body Like a Backroad" by a month and the marriage of Fowler and Hunt by three months. The song, which serves as a sort of apology to Fowler (who is named directly in the song), details Hunt's drinking problem, his less-than-proud moments, the dissolution of their relationship, and his efforts to win Fowler back. Hunt also references his debut album, *Montevallo*, by way of an apology for naming his album after Fowler's Alabama hometown. Here, yet again, Hunt presents Fowler as an object, in this case one to be lost and regained, but she does not have an opportunity to offer a rebuttal to his perspective. As such, we assume that she is a consenting partner to these conversations—especially considering that she married him after the release of this single and the events it describes. But, at the same time, this song normalizes the notion that a man can go out into the world and act in ways that are unsuitable for domestic life and still be permitted access to that domestic life if he reforms.

The release of "Drinkin' Too Much" included both the studio produced version, and an acoustic version ("Drinkin' Too Much (8pm)"). Both versions conclude with a piano rendition of

¹⁶⁰ Associated Press, "Sam Hunt Makes History, Explains Origin of Single "Body Like a Back Road," July 31, 2017, accessed March 23, 2018, (<http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2017/07/31/sam-hunt-makes-history-explains-origin-single-body-like-back-road.html>).

the gospel song “How Great Thou Art,” which begins twelve seconds after Hunt’s vocals end and lasts for the final thirty-six seconds of the nearly four-minute song.¹⁶¹ In the “produced” version of “Drinkin’ Too Much,” the entirety of the song, including the ending section, contains several digitally processed sounds and echoing microphone feedback, sounds also heard in the *Montevallo* tracks “Speakers” and “Cop Car.”

V. Conclusions:

As this chapter has illustrated, there are songs from Sam Hunt’s releases that are clear consent songs, and others that are far more ambiguous. Reading Sam Hunt in terms of Consent Songs engages with the way all of his music engages with relationship narratives. All of the songs are about heterosexual, consenting, monogamous relationships—some clearly indicated and others subtler. It is the subtlety of Hunt’s recordings, the musical elements that blur genre lines, lyric interplay and various ways of speaking and singing on the records, that make Hunt a unique artist worthy of this detailed investigation. Hunt’s relatively large success is interesting because he has only released one album (*Montevallo* in 2014) and two singles in January and February of 2017 (“Drinkin’ Too Much” and “Body Like a Backroad”). He is clearly doing something right to have had so much success for such little output compared to other male artists.

¹⁶¹ Sam Hunt, “Drinkin’ Too Much,” *Drinkin’ Too Much – Single* (MGA Nashville, 2018); Silence on the track between Hunt’s vocals and the piano version of “How Great Thou Art” is between 0:48-0:36, this version of the song is 3:52; the 8pm version is 4:36, a minute and a half longer.

Conclusion

This document has shown how contemporary country's male artists are failing to represent consent in their music. The framework constructed in this document to talk about consent—Consent Songs—is useful for categorizing and identifying music with similar themes. Though outside the scope of this study, it is my hope that the issue of consent and the idea of a Consent Song could be applied to other genres of popular music. Important in the discussion of Consent Songs is their wide, sweeping, all-encompassing nature. Country Consent Songs have no specific sound or style, but their themes have permeated contemporary country music. Consent Songs create unrealistic expectations of relationships for both men and women because the music is relatable and personal. As American society—and indeed global society—is becoming more aware about sexual misconduct and assault, this is an important moment to question the music that is shaping our lives.

Although this project has focused on male country artists, analysis of the music of female country artists and single- and mixed-gendered groups and duos would provide further insight into how the Consent Song framework can be more broadly applied to country music. Work with the Consent Song framework could be expanded beyond contemporary country music to provide fruitful investigations of other genres of popular music including rap, hip-hop, pop, and R&B. Too, a queer reading of these songs would provide meaningful understanding of the various identity constructions perceived from the music.

By treating country music as a subset of popular music, the recordings discussed in this document point to how contemporary country music shapes popular culture and modern society. Peterson's fabricated authenticity comes full circle, as the authentic tropes of country music are manifested in commercialized love songs misrepresenting consenting relationships to an

audience who believes in country music's authentic, moral authority.¹⁶² Yet, it is an easy misrepresentation to understand. Real-Life Consent Songs are telling listeners about Thomas Rhett's relationship with his wife, Lauren Akins, and Dylan Scott's feelings about his wife, Blair Anderson.¹⁶³ Hypothetical Consent Songs give an ideal—they are the love song that could turn out to be true—and Breakup Consent songs idealize the past, a relationship that did not work, the girl who got away, the tragic, fragile man whose creepy actions and thoughts about an ex-partner are now acceptable in Consent Songs.

The focus on male artists reinforces a central point of conflict in country music today. Although there are numerous female country artists, their work does not garner as much attention as their male counterparts. There are far fewer solo female artists on country radio than male artists due in part to scandals involving molestation of female artists on country radio tours and belief of radio programmers that their target audience (women) prefer to hear male artists.¹⁶⁴ Though there is no backing for these claims, women's voices are marginalized from country

¹⁶² Richard Peterson, *Fabricating Authenticity*.

¹⁶³ Maria Carter, "The Real-Life Love Story Behind Thomas Rhett's 'Die a Happy Man,'" *Country Living*, November 8, 2017, accessed March 22, 2018, (<https://www.countryliving.com/life/entertainment/a38112/real-love-story-behind-thomas-rhetts-die-a-happy-man/>); Kelsey, Hendrix, "Dylan Scott on His Hit Song and Baby on the Way—and How His Wife Rapping Eminem Inspired it All," *People Country*, July 17, 2017, accessed March 21, 2018 (<http://people.com/country/dylan-scott-my-girl-top-five-single-baby-on-way/>).

¹⁶⁴ Jada Watson, "Toward a Data-Driven Analysis of Gender Representation in Billboard Country Song Chart, 1985-Present," presented at International Country Music Conference, Belmont University, June 2017; Jada Watson, "'Girl on the Billboard': Changing *Billboard* Methodologies and Ecological Diversity in Hot Country Songs," presented at International Association of Popular Music Studies—United States Branch, Vanderbilt University, March 2018.

radio and from the industry. It is because of this marginalization that these male artists discussed in this document have become dominant. Their songs—Consent Songs—are a dominating format existing across the various musical stylings of country music, appealing to different audiences, and crossing over into pop and top-forty chart formats.

As men dominate the country charts and airwaves, so too are they dominating the women in their songs. The masculinity represented in Consent Songs proposes a fragile, supportive, accepting man who promotes a women's right to autonomy and respect in a relationship. However, as I have shown, this masculinity is flawed because consent is never truly represented in a Consent Song. It is instead skirted around using lyrical, narrational, and musical devices that give the illusion of consent's presence. The Country Gentlemen so aptly described by Jon Caramanica are not doing the women they sing about any favors. The Gentlemen are not better than the Bros. They would just like us to think they are.

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