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White Identity Politics and Country Music in the Mid-Twentieth Century U.S.

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I. Introduction

This paper examines how country music and conservative politics have become strongly associated with each other in the United States. It traces the history of country music concerning political campaigns, from Southern politicians using it during the pre- and post-WWII years to the gubernatorial and presidential campaigns of George Wallace. In addition, country music was utilized in the presidential campaign and presidency of Richard Nixon, who solidified the identity of the conservative political community with this brand of music. The importance of country music and musicians in American politics increased over time, from playing complementary roles in Southern politicians' campaigns to articulating political ideas and values that supported national campaigns of presidential candidates and marking the conservative shift in American society.[1]

Race played a central role in the development of the political associations of country music. Country music became prominent in the American national political scene, beginning with the presidential campaign of the staunch segregationist George Wallace. Wallace is known in history for his "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" 1963 inaugural address penned by the segregationist speech writer, Asa Carter, and his "stand in the schoolhouse door" demonstration during his first year as governor of Alabama to prevent Black students from entering the University of Alabama and make good on his campaign promise. Richard Nixon adopted Wallace's

campaign methods and strengthened ties with country music. Nixon's famous Southern and ethnic strategies of luring former Democratic supporters to the Republican Party were an attempt to unite Northern and Southern white voters who did not support the social changes centered around race in the 1960s. Country music began as "hillbilly" music, a specifically white genre of Southern music, separated from the "race music" of the Black Southerners in the 1920s,[2] and developed, as Geoff Mann argued, as a form of music that was involved in the production and reproduction of whiteness.[3] It provided an apt medium to express white political solidarity in the guise of working-class identity and a shared concern for social and cultural issues. This paper highlights how country music came to mark white identity politics.[4]

While the use of country music in political campaigns has been documented in the history of country music, most notably by a prominent historian of this genre, Bill Malone, its political implications, particularly related to race, have been downplayed.[5] In recent decades, scholars have examined the political associations of country music. Lester Feder pointed out that country music today is presumed to be white and politically conservative and argued that it was instrumental in forging an image of the South as the "geography of values," which the non-Southern working-class whites, who felt alienated from mainstream American society, could call home.[6] Bruce Schulman contended that the popularity of country music during the 1970s was part of the "redneck chic" phenomenon where conservative whites, both the working-class and the affluent middle-class, identified with the Southern working-class whites through Southern cultural products such as country music.[7] In contrast to Feder and Schulman's contentions, Peter La Chapelle argued in his work—which chronicles the development of Southern Californian country music led by Southern migrants from the 1930s to the early 1970s—that the music's Southern roots and "Okie ethnicity" was de-emphasized when it turned politically conservative after World War II. The music became mass-mediated while its community became middle-class and suburbanized.

Politically conservative country musicians adopted the image of the Western cowboy and shunned the rural, poor, and Southern "hillbilly" image.[8]

This difference in assessing country music's Southern and working-class image parallels the debates over the role of the South in the rise of conservativism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Feder and Schulman's works are in line with John Egerton's thesis about the nationwide spread of white Southern racism.[9] Moreover, Dan Carter pointed to the centrality of race in conservative politics by demonstrating the signs of Wallace's legacy in later conservative politicians, which supports the Southern origin of conservative racial politics.[10] In contrast, Matthew Lassiter argued that Southern racism and exceptionalism did not explain the rise of conservativism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He identified the suburbs of the Sunbelt, the burgeoning area spanning from the Southwest to the Southeast that flourished after World War II, as opposed to the Deep South, the formerly segregated Southeastern states, as the source of conservativism, where middle-class whites in mostly exclusively white communities defended their privilege with the rhetoric of color-blindness and meritocracy.[11]

This paper argues that race binds the regional and class differences in the politics of country music. Close analyses of songs show that Southern and working-class images were used as a cover to promote ideologies that benefited white Americans. With the use of country music in political campaigns in the South during the Jim Crow era of de jure segregation, country music came to be associated with white Southern politicians, even though the music itself may not have explicit political messages. Moreover, country musicians sought to strengthen their ties with politicians and eventually created music that expressed conservative values and defended the status quo and the existing social order that privileged whites, particularly from the late 1960s. In addition, songs that were ostensibly set in the South promoted ideologies with a broader racial appeal to the country music audience. This paper also demonstrates that this association between conservative politics and country music was such that

both politicians and the media perceived the country music audience as political constituents to be courted during political campaigns. Drawing sources from archival documents, newspaper and magazine articles, and works by prominent country musicians, this paper illuminates the historical roots of the current association between conservatism and country music.

II. Country Music and Southern Political Campaigns

As Malone documented, politicians began using country music during the Great Depression. Dr. J.R. Brinkley of Milford, Kansas, "a doctor of questionable credentials and a master huckster,"[12] owned a radio station where country musicians performed to promote his hospital. He used this medium, along with select country musicians such as Roy Faulkner (the "Lonesome Cowboy") who frequented his radio program, for his unsuccessful gubernatorial campaigns in 1930 and 1932.[13]

Wilbert Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel, a flour salesman who became a business owner in Texas, employed similar tactics of using radio and country musicians to promote himself and his business and later, along with his popularity and celebrity status, to promote his political campaigns. He won the 1938 Texas gubernatorial election, backed by the Hillbilly Boys, a band he had launched to promote his Hillbilly Flour Company. The band included his own children and warmed up the crowds at his campaign events, where O'Daniel entertained his audience "with attacks on the 'professional politicians,' promises of a $65 a month pension for old people, and pleas for a return to the old-fashioned virtues of home, mother, and God." The press called him "the hillbilly governor," and his methods of blending country music, radio, and politics became a precursor to other successful political campaigns in the same year, such as Stuart Hamblen's Democratic primary campaign for Congress in California and Jerry Sadler's run for a seat on the Texas Railroad Commission.[14]

In 1944, country musician Roy Acuff entered the Republican and Democratic gubernatorial primaries as a protest candidate running against the incumbent governor of Tennessee, Prentice Cooper, who declared that country music was a disgrace to the state. Cooper had refused to visit the Grand Ole Opry, a weekly country music stage concert broadcast live on the radio from Nashville, Tennessee, which served as the center of country music. Acuff withdrew from the race that year; however, in 1948, he won the Republican primary after campaigning with his Smokey Mountain Boys.[15]

Another country musician who became a politician was Jimmie Davis, credited (with some dispute) as the author of the song, "You Are My Sunshine." He successfully ran for governor of Louisiana in the 1944 election, using the song for his campaign, which he opened in the fall of 1943 in Jonesboro, Louisiana, backed by a country music (then hillbilly) band that included mandolinist Joe Shelton of the Texas-based group, the Shelton Brothers. According to Malone,

> Courting the voters with a sincere and homey patter that united them all in the common bond of rural nostalgia, and always singing his hit song, "You Are My Sunshine," . . . Davis surmounted the opposition of both New Orleans and the Huey Long machine to win the election.[16]

Davis ran again in the 1960 election, campaigning on states' rights and segregation, using "You Are My Sunshine" once again as his campaign theme song.[17] As a musician, Davis had sung African American blues and recorded with African American musicians in the 1930s. However, as governor, Davis supported the legislation promoting segregation.[18] By the mid-century, country music became the staple of Southern populist politics where the lines blurred between politicians and entertainers; nevertheless, racial lines remained ever present, as African Americans were disenfranchised and white politicians adhered to the enforcement of segregation.

III. The George Wallace Campaigns and Country Music

According to Malone, the George Wallace campaigns were instrumental in advancing country music in the 1960s U.S.[19] Wallace was, at first, skeptical of the political use of music as he first ran for governor of Alabama in 1958. However, after witnessing country singer Webb Pierce drawing a large crowd at one of his rallies, Wallace routinely invited gospel singers and musicians and singers from the Grand Ole Opry. Country musicians such as Minnie Pearl, Bill Bolick, Grandpa Jones, Tammy Wynette, and Roy Clark supported Wallace.[20] Malone contends that Wallace shared sentiments with the country musicians and boosted their pride by seeking their support during the campaigns, which was "important for a musical form that was self-conscious about its alleged inferiority and anxious for acceptance."[21] The use of country music in official political campaigns legitimized the musical genre, which had long been associated with low social status.

Wallace was not the only politician who employed country musicians in his campaign during the 1958 Alabama gubernatorial race. In May 1958, *The Wall Street Journal* ran an article titled, "Alabama Hoedown: Few Issues Split Them So Governor Candidates Lean on Hillbilly Music." As the title indicated, all 14 candidates were segregationists, with the most moderate, James H. "Jimmy" Faulkner, arguing for "the importance of 'separate but equal facilities' for Negroes" because "electing rabble-rousers and demagogues is the surest way to bring segregation to an end in Alabama."[22] To distinguish themselves, the candidates employed country musicians to attract the crowd. The article read:

> CHILDERSBURG, Ala.—"I'm as happy as a dead pig in the sunshine to introduce your next governor, George Wallace."
>
> The crowd applauds as hillbilly singer Minnie Pearl, in a bright yellow dress, completes her introduction and shakes hands with 39-year-

> old Circuit Court Judge Wallace on the flat-bedded campaign truck. Curly Brooks and his Western Rockers strike up a rousing fanfare with their bass fiddle and three guitars.[23]

According to the article, another candidate, the then Alabama State Attorney General, John Patterson, held a meeting in front of the Colbert County courthouse where Rebe Gosden and his Sunny Valley Boys performed "Should We Tell Him or Let Him Go on Trusting？" before the appearance of the candidate.[24]

According to Wallace's biographer, the Minnie Pearl appearance cost $3000 plus expenses. When Wallace's finance chairman learned that Wallace had invited Pearl to appear again at his rally, without any concern for the cost, he warned Wallace that there was no budget for it in the campaign. Wallace simply shrugged and said, "You take care of it."[25] Wallace had learned the tactic from his former mentor and later rival, Alabama Governor Jim Folsom, who employed the country music band The Strawberry Pickers to perform at his rallies. Folsom walked through the crowd, greeting people in an amicable and (for female voters) flirtatious manner, while the band performed their lively music. He would eventually climb on the back of the truck after the music ended.[26] However, unlike Wallace, Folsom advocated for expanding the rights of Black Alabamians.[27]

Minnie Pearl was invited again to the launch of Wallace's 1962 gubernatorial campaign. In contrast to the modest campaign event that she had attended four years earlier, this was a lavish occasion, covered by 14 television stations. Half a dozen country musicians performed before the appearance of Wallace.[28]

In 1968, when he ran as a third-party candidate for the presidency, *The Boston Globe* reported on the protests against Wallace's campaign in Massachusetts where there was an effort to gather enough signatures to get his name on the ballot. At a typical event at Elks Hall on Washington Street,

Weymouth, Massachusetts, a four-piece band performed country music before Wallace's appearance. They played "Dixie" right before the bandleader introduced Wallace as "the next president of the United States."[29] This article highlighted how country music was instrumental in articulating the Wallace campaign through a musical piece that was the symbol of Southern white supremacy.

In June 1972, *The Christian Science Monitor* reported on a Wallace rally where he was absent, which was perhaps due to his being shot a month earlier. The article reported on the low turnout at the event and the seeming lack of support from other Southern governors. Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, spoke at the event, along with former Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett and Senator John Sparkman of Alabama. Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter wore "Wallace in '72" pins; however, Rosalynn Carter told the press that the pin did not mean endorsement, while Jimmy Carter was spotted removing the pin before leaving the event. The event had expected a crowd of up to thirty thousand people and prepared food for ten thousand, but only one thousand people were present when the speech started. This came as a disappointment as the event was promoted with "good food, good speeches, and good music," which were "all the fixin's for real political hoopla." Country music stars from the Grand Ole Opry had been "imported free of charge." The report showed how, by this time, a country music performance at a Wallace rally had become a staple.[30]

George Wallace's son, George Wallace, Jr., became a musician after performing for his father's campaign. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1973 that the then 21-year-old son of the Alabama Governor had taken a leave from the University of Alabama to pursue a career in country music and that his father was supportive of his aspirations.[31] This closeness between the Wallace campaign, his personal life, and country music is reminiscent of O'Daniel's campaign in 1938 when his country band, which included his own children, advertised his business as well as his campaign. In addition, it

illustrates the overlap between the country music scene and Southern politics.

IV. Richard Nixon, Jesse Unruh, and the Country Music Audience as Constituents

Richard Nixon's presidential campaign in 1968 also employed country music. Fearing that Wallace would take away Southern white votes from Nixon, which would lead to Hubert Humphrey's victory, the Nixon campaign had country music star Stuart Hamblen appear in a TV commercial where he sang a song warning the Wallace supporters that their votes would send Humphrey to the White House. Furthermore, Nixon's advisors bought advertising blocks on country music stations in the South, particularly slots on programs hosted by popular country musicians, such as Buck Owens, Ernest Tubb, and the Wilburn brothers, and the popular televangelist Wally Fowler. With financial help from Southern industrialists, the Nixon campaign also enlisted popular country musicians such as Roy Acuff, Tex Ritter, and Stuart Hamblen.[32]

During the 1968 presidential election, most country singers supported either Wallace or Nixon.[33] Malone contended that this particular political association was due to a series of anti-protest music that emerged during this period, such as Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" and "Fightin' Side of Me." As per Malone, "the country music world (performers, audience, and industry) found the manners, values, dresses, and lifestyles of the dissenters offensive," and the political stances of the country music performers "reflected what a large segment of Americans believed (the so-called silent majority)."[34]

Furthermore, Malone saw the conservatism in country music as a result of the country music industry's efforts to "legitimize itself through an attachment to the American mainstream or the establishment."[35] He thus viewed country music as reflecting a general sentiment, instead of actively playing a part in forming or enhancing that sentiment, downplaying race by not identifying the

assumed whiteness of the silent majority or the "mainstream or the establishment." Malone downplayed race in politics, for example, by asserting that "racial politics had played little role in Jimmie Davis's election in 1959 to a second term as a governor of Louisiana" without offering further explanation, even though Davis ran on states' rights and segregation.[36]

By the end of the 1960s, country music was so strongly associated with the conservative white working-class voters that Jesse Unruh, a Democratic candidate for governor of California, sought to reach out to the supporters of Governor Ronald Reagan through country music. *The Los Angeles Times* reported in 1970 that Unruh was challenging Governor Reagan and that his strategy was to reach out to the white conservative working-class voters through the local KFOX Country station in Southern California. This station catered to "thousands of transplanted Southerners and Midwesterners" who lived in the working-class residential areas in the middle of Southern California, whose "wages amount to no more than $10,000 a year and education does not reach above the high school level."[37] The station supported Reagan and Wallace in the previous elections, and Wallace placed much of his radio ads with the same station. The article characterized the music played on KFOX as follows: "Everyday, the country and western music goes out from a radio station in Long Beach, telling of lost love, hard work, unquestioning commitment to America and unshakable belief in God."[38] It quotes lyrics from Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" to illustrate this conception of country music. According to the article, Unruh frequently appeared on the radio during his successful primary campaign and incorporated country music in his general election campaign. At an event in Sacramento, Unruh performed a country song (a self-composition) criticizing the Reagan policies, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum," in which he sang, "Oh, if they'd give up their Cadillacs and their colored TVs, we could give needed tax breaks to the oil companies."[39] This was in line with his criticism of Reagan as serving the rich at the expense of the poor.

Nicknamed "Big Daddy," Unruh was a long-time California state legislator who had served as the Speaker of the California State Assembly, a position he lost when the Democratic Party lost its majority position in the 1968 election.[40] Unruh was from a poor Southern family, similar to the country radio's audience, and believed that he could win over country music-listening blue-collar workers by stressing economic issues over social ones such as race and student riots. Unruh contended that the working-class white voters who had supported Wallace did so out of their fear of Black people and similarly supported Reagan who stressed "law and order" in the face of student unrest and the rise of "Black militants," along with attacks on welfare and government spending. With the worsening economic situation, however, the working class could no longer afford to worry about such issues and instead focused on jobs and the economy.[41]

Nevertheless, *The Los Angeles Times* article presented surveys and interviews with KFOX listeners, who were "typical of the white, Southern California blue-collar worker in income, education, fundamentalist protestant religion and Southern, border state and Midwestern background,"[42] and proved Unruh's point wrong. Despite the rise in unemployment, which people were aware of, all 15 interviewees responded that their number one concern was "emotional issues," such as student violence, racial tension, and law and order. Notably, none of them mentioned economic issues. A man waiting in an unemployment office who had lost his welding job told the interviewer that he did not blame the government for the loss of his job; he instead blamed the "[t]eamster's strike and other labor disputes that cut off materials." Moreover, he was opposed to withdrawing from Vietnam and criticized war protestors. The wife of a truck driver was quoted as saying that she was most concerned with "riots the colored people are having and the kids who take dope and the riots these college kids are having about the war." A country music record store owner, who supported Wallace, expressed a similar sentiment, stating that his main concern was "[d]ead beats, people who won't go to work"; students,

in his opinion, were "in the same category."[43]

The article pointed out that welfare was prevalent in some of the economically weak regions where the interviews took place. Nevertheless, the interviewees blamed lazy, undeserving welfare recipients, who were presumably, in their minds, not their own people and probably not white. The interviews documented in this article illustrated the prevailing sentiment of the country music audience that cultural and racial "others" were threatening their lives, contrary to what Unruh had hoped.[44] Unruh lost the election by over five hundred thousand votes.[45]

An analysis of the 1970 California state elections by two political scientists, published a year later, confirmed that California voted mostly along party and ideological lines, contrary to Unruh's expectations.[46] According to the report, Unruh attempted to gain the blue-collar vote by accusing Reagan and his administration of being elitist and "the captive of 'the white, the conservative and the rich.'"[47] However, this accusation was "met with indifference, if not disbelief."[48] Union membership dropped in California, and organized labor was no longer a solid voting bloc. Union members did not vote in large proportions for Unruh.[49] Before the election, Unruh had pointed out the declining importance of labor unions in Democratic politics and criticized both the liberal politicians and the unions. The former idealized the working class as the "noble savage," expecting them to lead the progressive movement, while the latter failed to embrace Democratic policies and were yet to overcome racist policies.[50]

Unruh's campaign proved that the country music audience was perceived as constituents. This was true with the Nixon campaign two years earlier, which bought advertising slots to appeal to country music audiences, presumably Wallace supporters. Unruh's expectation that the audience would identify with him through a shared class and regional background turned out to be false. Instead of rallying around economic issues, white working-class voters with Southern roots focused on cultural issues and saw hippies, student

protestors, and "lazy" welfare recipients as the root of the problems.

V. "Okie from Muskogee," "Coal Miner's Daughter," and Conservative Ideologies in Country Music

Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" (1969) is often cited as an example of a political country music song that represented the conservative turn of the late 1960s. Bruce Schulman argued that the rise of the Sunbelt led to the resurgence of country music in the 1970s. Songs such as "Okie from Muskogee," "Coal Miner's Daughter," and Charlie Daniels' "The South Is Gonna Do It Again" celebrated the South and "boasted a populist, conservative political philosophy. Without overt racial messages, they expressed subtle antiblack or anticity sentiments, usually directed against welfare and government programs."[51]

The narrator of the song, an "Okie" from Muskogee, Oklahoma, praises men who live in small towns like Muskogee for adhering to pre-counter-cultural values and lifestyles. This contrasts with "the hippies out in San Francisco" and presumably other counter-cultural figures such as student protestors. The narrator contends that Okies in Muskogee do not take drugs, burn draft cards, or engage in promiscuous sexual activities. Conversely, they wear leather boots instead of "beads and Roman sandals;" keep their hair short, unlike the hippies who have "long and shaggy" hair; wave a national flag at the courthouse; and "respect the college dean" (presumably instead of engaging in protest demonstrations). Muskogee is, supposedly, so peaceful that "white lightening is still the greatest thrill of all," which implicitly suggests violence in other locations where protest demonstrations frequently take place.[52] President Nixon regarded this song as embodying the values of the "silent majority," a term he famously used in his 1969 speech to refer to those who did not participate in anti-war demonstrations and quietly supported the war. Nixon had used a similar term, "the forgotten Americans," a year earlier in his

nomination acceptance speech to refer to "the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators." Nixon subsequently invited Haggard to perform at the White House.[53] This song vilified the same groups of people as those attacked by the Southern Californian voters Unruh tried to reach, such as hippies, anti-war demonstrators, and student activists. Moreover, it sent a strong political message by promoting obedience to authority and defense of the status quo and tradition while vilifying protestors who attempted to change the social order, associating the protestors with violence.

Robert W. Van Sickel contended that songs like "Okie from Muskogee" were anomalous and that most commercial country songs were apolitical or even anti-political. He based this observation on an examination of *Billboard* Number 1 country songs between 1960 and 2000. He used politics in a narrow sense: "If political content were present in country song lyrics, the most obvious topics to look for would be [government, law, and crime], as most citizens and scholars conceptualize 'politics' largely through the workings of government and the legal system."[54] According to Van Sickel, "racial themes are virtually nonexistent in commercial country music," which is "not surprising" because "unlike contemporary rap and hip-hop music, in which the artists are largely African-American but the listening public is racially mixed, country music is produced and consumed by whites."[55] The idea that white people do not have race and that race only becomes an issue in the presence of Black people is in itself an ideology that permeates country music and other forms of popular culture.

In addition, Van Sickel contended that even though country music is considered to be the "art of the working class," themes such as work and poverty are rare in country music. Even when poverty is mentioned, it is "never with any apparent awareness that the working class as a whole may have gotten a less than equitable deal in the United States."[56] I would argue that such a lack of class awareness is indeed ideological. Loretta Lynn's autobiographical song, "Coal Miner's Daughter" (1970), for example, which

Van Sickel interpreted as simply expressing the idea that "poverty is seen as a source of virtue and strength," affirms the notion that poverty is a private problem that can be dealt with at home, as opposed to a social problem that requires political activism and government intervention. The family in this song is a nuclear family with a hard-working father and a caring, stay-at-home mother. Even though they have financial difficulties, they overcome them with hard work, love, and faith. The father works two jobs, working in the field during the day, growing corn and raising pigs, and as a coalminer at night. The mother washes clothes by hand, to the point that her hands bleed, without complaining and, after a long day of labor, still has the time and energy to read the Bible to the children at bedtime.[57] The song ignores the class-specific issues of the life of a miner and turns the family into a model of a post-war nuclear family.[58] This family embodies the ideal of conservative white Americans in that it does not rely on welfare, the father does not join the union, and the mother blithely accepts her domestic role. They are content in their fate and do not call for social change. Accordingly, the success of their daughter is proof that no social change is necessary, and the poor only need to work hard. This hard-working, loving, Bible-reading white coal miner's nuclear family is implicitly contrasted with the stereotyped, lazy, welfare-dependent, single-mother, Black family that conservative policymakers and commentators encourage people to imagine.

This song contrasts with the themes in several coal miners' songs that were prevalent in folk music, which was associated with left-wing politics. Bob Dylan's "North Country Blues" (1964), for instance, is written from the perspective of a coalminer's daughter who lost her mother as a child (it is later revealed in the song, in passing, that her father also died a long time ago in a mine accident); loses her older brother, who raised her, in an accident; drops out of school to marry a coal miner; bears three children; is abandoned by the husband who has become alcoholic after losing his job due to mine closure; and expects all her children to eventually leave town.[59] This coal miner's

daughter tells a different story of a miner's life from Lynn's account. There is no room for hard work in the face of a closing mine and the love of the family does not protect family members from dying. It calls for a fundamental structural change in the system, which is necessary to improve their lives.

While both "Okie from Muskogee" and "Coal Miner's Daughter" are set in the South (Muskogee, Oklahoma and Butcher Holler, Kentucky, respectively), the values they espouse are not specific to the South; they are presented as universally American. They idealize white Americans who defend the status quo and social order by not engaging in political activism and adhering to "traditional" values and lifestyles. Explicitly or implicitly, they criticize the same types of people that the country music audience/voters that Unruh tried to reach out to did—hippies, student protestors, and the welfare-dependent poor, who challenged the status quo and called for a structural change.

Notably, both songs were included in the Country Music Association's (CMA) 1972 record album dedicated to President Nixon, titled *Thank You Mr. President*. Each song on the record was matched with a commentary that included a quote from Nixon's previous speeches to articulate the spirit of the song. These were narrated by country singer Tex Ritter, a former president of the CMA and a Republican candidate for the United States Senate in Tennessee in the same year. "Coal Miner's Daughter" was associated with the value of hard work and was matched with a quote from Nixon's speech where he praised those who engaged in menial work. "Okie from Muskogee" was tied to "American idealism" that could "bring about a modern miracle." The CMA made an explicit case that country music was in step with the President, musically expressing the values and ideals of his politics.[60]

In his 1974 book, *The Americanization of Dixie*, John Egerton argued:

> Nixon succeeded where Goldwater failed: he Americanized the politics of Dixie and managed to hold his own in the rest of the country, and in 1972

> he swept to an easy victory behind a national force of mostly white, mostly middle- and upper-class voters who vastly outnumbered the poor, the racial minorities, and the white liberals.[61]

According to Egerton, Nixon came up with the Southern strategy during the 1968 presidential campaign when George Wallace was becoming threateningly powerful. Thus, Nixon took the following measures:

> ［Nixon］ unabashedly appropriated some of the Alabama governor's principal weapons of attack: he came out against busing as a means of achieving school desegregation, he promised to appoint "strict constructionists" who shared his judicial philosophy to the Supreme Court, he took a tough stance on "law and order," and he wooed and won some of the South's most conservative politicians, chief among them being South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond.[62]

At an event for high-level Southern Republicans in Atlanta, three weeks before the 1972 election day, Nixon addressed the Southern strategy by claiming that Southern issues were indeed American issues. He stated: "What are the so-called Southern issues？ This answer is going to surprise you. They are the same here as they are in America."[63]

Nixon's insistence that the South was not different from the rest of America was echoed in his praise of country music as non-regional American music, rather than Southern music, a claim he made at the Grand Ole Opry in 1974.[64] In both his speeches to white Southerners, Nixon elevated the（white） South as the standard and norm of American culture and society by claiming that Southern issues and music were simply "American."

Nixon also reached out to white Northerners, who had formerly supported the Democratic Party, by appealing to their racial identity and anxiety. Thomas Sugrue and John Skrentny argued that Nixon's white ethnic strategy exploited

the working-class white Northerners by gaining their support through an affirmation of their ethnic white identity while failing to enact policies that would economically benefit them.[65] They noted the following regarding Nixon's strategy:

> ［Nixon's］ policies and rhetoric directed ethnicity down the narrow channel of the politics of resentment. . . Rather than developing labor and trade policies to stabilize wages and provide for greater employment security for the working class（Black and white）, they reinforced the redefinition of white working-class identities in ways that fostered a sense of cultural difference.[66]

Feder argues that country music not only gave voice to the "forgotten Americans" but also "offered a symbolic geography offering the South as a homeland to those who felt displaced by changes in the modern life." Feder further contends that the music "defined an imagined community of the listeners most alienated from American culture and politics in the late 1960s—white Southerners and, now identifying with them for the first time, lower middle-class whites elsewhere in the country." Country music allowed these non-Southern whites to become members of this community.[67]

However, it was not only the working class and lower-middle-class white Americans who joined the imagined community of country music. The "redneck chic" phenomenon of the 1970s revealed that even middle-class and upper-middle-class white Americans shared conservative political positions through the consumption of country music. They "adopted the term redneck as a badge of honor, a fashion statement, a gesture of resistance against high taxes, liberals, racial integration, women's liberation, and hippies," and became a powerful political force.[68] Country music provided a means for white Americans of different classes to coalesce on social issues and solidified their racial identity.

VI. Conclusion

This paper highlighted how country music came to be associated with conservative American politics in the twentieth century. The music emerged in the segregated South as white music and was used by populist, untraditional politicians, such as former salesmen and musicians, to appeal to the almost exclusively white electorate in the South and Midwest. It became a campaign staple to use country musicians to warm up the crowd, at least in some parts of the South, as shown by George Wallace and a dozen of his rivals, employing country music bands in the 1958 gubernatorial election. Wallace further cemented the association of country music with reactionary politics based on racial resentment through his continued use of it in subsequent presidential campaigns. As the Jesse Unruh campaign showed, by the beginning of the 1970s, the country music audience was perceived as a political constituent strongly tied to social conservatism. Country music connected white audiences and electorates, otherwise disconnected in terms of geography and class, through a shared political ideology that was centered on cultural issues and the defense of the existing social order that protected their white privilege. Thus, country music became a tool of white identity politics.

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Notes

1 Historian Jeff Roche argued that Barry Goldwater changed the image of "conservatives" from "wealthy, eastern bankers or industrialists—the sort of silk stocking crowd that appeared in Thomas Nast's cartoons" to "western, middle-class entrepreneurs or middle-management suburbanites" who believed in a hardline foreign policy and were against big government. He also contended that

the conservative ideology shifted in the mid- to late 1960s to emphasize the cultural issues in defense of "community values" and the status quo. Jeff Roche, "Cowboy Conservativism," in *The Conservative Sixties,* ed. David Farber and Jeff Roche (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 84–85. I use the term "conservative" following this interpretation for this paper.

2 Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3,* 3rd. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 89.

3 Geoff Mann, "Why Does Country Music Sound White? Race and the Voice of Nostalgia," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (January 2008), 76.

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