

It's a Man's World: An Analysis of the Roles of Women
in the Male-Dominated Country Music Industry

by

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ABSTRACT

This honors thesis addresses the gender bias of the country music industry. Women are severely underrepresented on country radio, leading to more underrepresentation on touring and festival lineups, award show nominations, streaming playlists, and more. Many believe the myth that “women don’t want to hear women.” However, data shows that audiences are eager to hear country music from female voices. Fans have craved country music from female artists since the birth of the genre, as the genre was shaped by iconic female voices and songs. Many female artists have had successes in album sales and tours within recent years, proving that country music fans are supportive of women in the genre. To research for this project, I gathered data from Billboard charts and Mediabase radio airplay charts to exemplify the gap between male and female representation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“We can’t sign another girl right now – we already have one” (PBS). This is what up-and-coming country artist Kalie Shorr heard when she walked into multiple major record labels in Nashville. After racking up millions of streams, proving that audiences were eager to hear her music, she was immediately turned down because of her gender. Sadly, this is not the only case of gender bias in the country music industry. Women are being shunned from the genre they had a direct hand in building.

Loretta. Dolly. Reba. Shania. Country music would not be what it is without these women and countless others. From Patsy Cline’s “Crazy” to Carrie Underwood’s “Before He Cheats,” women in country music have bridged the gap between country and pop, bringing country music to a larger audience. Why, then, are female artists being told that no one wants to hear their music?

Women in country music receive a fraction of the airplay on radio that the men receive. This is not by accident; in fact, many radio programmers say they are not ‘allowed’ to play two women back-to-back, for fear of losing listeners. However, no data shows that radio listeners turn the radio off when women are played. In fact, data shows that listeners *do* want to hear more female voices on country radio.

The inequality of country radio is just the beginning. When female artists are not played on the radio, it decreases their likelihood of being placed on festival and touring lineups, award show nominations, streaming playlists, and more. Women must overcome these obstacles in order to create a career, simply for being a woman.

While the industry has never been an equal playing field, there was a time when female voices flooded the radio airwaves. I grew up listening to women like Martina McBride, The [Dixie] Chicks, and Sara Evans on the radio. I remember seeing Taylor Swift on CMT when I was six years old, dreaming of being like her one day. Country rising star Lauren Alaina reminisces on these days in her song “Ladies in the 90s,” singing “I was raised on radio waves where the ladies dominated. Sometimes I close my eyes and just replay it.” Young girls today are being denied the chance to hear female voices on the radio that tell their stories. They are being denied the opportunity to believe that they, too, can pursue a career in country music with equal opportunities as the men.

II. THE INEQUALITY BEGINS IN COUNTRY RADIO

From vinyl to compact discs, digital downloads to streaming platforms, the available methods for consumers to access musical content have drastically evolved since the first commercially available long-play vinyl album was introduced 90 years ago (American History Now).

While these products improved with each technological advance, what remains in the forefront of consumer choice is the method of delivery that pre-existed them all: terrestrial radio. Because the business model is centered around the sale of advertising and sponsors, terrestrial radio is free to all listeners. According to *lyrics.com*, there are 18,015 songs that mention the word ‘radio,’ proving this format has remained a constant in our culture despite the evolution of the music industry toward digital delivery methods in the past few decades. While radio is currently not the only option for hearing new music, it has remained a consumer favorite due to its easy access and standard inclusion in automobiles; therefore, it remains important to the music industry. Radio airplay is crucial to a new artist’s success, *especially* in the country music market. In the research paper ‘Inequality on Country Radio: 2019 in Review,’ Jada Watson states, “Country radio still functions as the gatekeeper of the genre and is integral to the viability and indeed success of artists.” Therefore, if female recording artists are not receiving radio airplay, they begin their careers at a disadvantage. Airplay on radio leads to a larger fan base, placement on major tours and festivals, award nominations, increased streaming and downloads, and more product and merchandise sales. Minimizing radio airplay for female artists severely limits their chance of success by inserting an obstacle that is not present for male recording artists.

In 2019, only three songs performed by female artists achieved Number Ones on the Mediabase Country charts. Only five songs by female artists made the top ten last year, and two of those songs were by Carrie Underwood (Mediabase, “Top 15s of 2019”). How many songs by male artists hit number one last year, one might ask? 36.

One who does not listen to country radio might suggest that 2019 was just a fluke: Perhaps women did not release as many songs as men; maybe there are not ‘as many’ female artists as men; or maybe their songs just were not as good. I would disagree. The lack of women on the 2019 airplay charts was the result of an ongoing trend that has been, sadly, growing for years. Mediabase released its *Top 100 of the Decade* list at the end of 2019, revealing a truth that many have been ignoring, or even fueling: female artists are being shut out of country radio, and have been for years. Out of 100 songs from an entire decade, only *two* solo female artists were featured (Mediabase, “Top 100 of the Decade”). These artists were Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert, notably the genre’s female frontrunners. Three of Lambert’s songs and two of Underwood’s songs made the cut. Two songs by male artists featuring a female artist made the list, and two groups featuring a woman appeared – one group being Lady A, formerly known as Lady Antebellum, who had 4 songs make the list (Mediabase, “Top 100 of the Decade”). This data concludes that out of the top 100 songs played on country radio from 2010-2019, 88 were by male artists. For approximately every 17 songs by a male in this list, there is one song by a solo female artist. This ratio is unacceptable.

Mediabase is a program that collects data from radio stations and releases weekly airplay charts displaying spins, audience size, stations, adds, and points. Spins are the number of times the song has been played. Adds are the amount of radio stations that

‘added’ a song to their rotation for the first time. A song’s spins and audience size are put into a formula to calculate points. The exact formula is only known by those who work at Mediabase. There are 156 radio stations that currently report their data to Mediabase (Owen). Most songs at the top of the charts are spun by all 156 of these stations. If stations are being trained not to play women, how will a woman ever reach the top of the charts? If a woman never climbs to the top of the charts on radio, how will her music be heard by a larger audience?

It wasn’t always this way. Women used to rule country radio – as I will discuss further in Chapter IV. Songs by women in the Top 20 on the Billboard Country Airplay Chart have declined by 75% in the last 20 years (Watson). While this suggests the decline has been occurring for a while, the controversy began emerging into the public eye around 2015 through what is known as “tomato-gate” or “salad-gate.” Radio consultant Keith Hill advised radio stations not to play women’s songs back-to-back, comparing the female artists of country music to the tomatoes in a salad. Hill remarked:

If you want to make ratings in country radio, take females out. The reason is mainstream country radio generates more quarter hours from female listeners at the rate of 70 to 75 percent, and women like male artists. The expectation is we're principally a male format with a smaller female component. I've got about 40 music databases in front of me, and the percentage of females in the one with the most is 19 percent. Trust me, I play great female records, and we've got some right now; they're just not the lettuce in our salad. The lettuce is Luke Bryan and Blake Shelton, Keith Urban and artists like that. The tomatoes of our salad are the females. (Penuell)

This comment sparked a fire in the country music community. Icon Martina McBride posted a picture sporting a “tomato” shirt next to her husband, who wore a “tomato lover” shirt. Her caption read “Proud Tomato” (Stefano, “Martina McBride Brings Awareness to #SaladGate With ‘Tomato’ T-Shirts”). She sold these shirts for her charity Team Martina. Due to popular demand, McBride had to open the t-shirt sales up for three extra days (Keel, “‘Tomato-gate’ galvanizes women in country music”), supporting the idea that country music fans support female artists and want to hear them on country radio.

When Country Aircheck publisher Lon Helton first heard Hill’s remarks, he “did not blink an eye because everyone knows this” (Keel, “Sexist ‘tomato’ barb launches country-radio food fight”). He replied:

Remember, since the 1960s, program directors have been telling people not to play two women back to back. It has nothing to do with sexism. It has to do with the fact that through the years, you have had very few hits by women, so you want to spread them out a little bit because there are fewer of them. (Keel, “Sexist ‘tomato’ barb launches country-radio food fight”)

Comments such as these perpetuate the idea that there is nothing that can be done regarding this issue. According to people like Helton and Hill, it is not even an issue at all. He claims that the reason women are not being played on radio is because there are not as many hits by women, when in actuality, the reason that there are not as many hits by women is because they are not being played on radio. It is a never-ending circle of excuses, and it is ridiculously frustrating. There would be more hits by women if radio programmers would play them. There would be no need to ‘spread out’ their hits because

they would be getting equal play as the men. It is interesting to note that Helton wholeheartedly admits that his thinking is outdated. He admits that he is still following ‘protocol’ that began in the 1960s. He also says, “Generally, about 15% of songs on country radio are from women. The 1990s, when women such as Shania Twain, Faith Hill, Trisha Yearwood, Patty Loveless and others dominated the airwaves, was an aberration” (Keel, “Sexist ‘tomato’ barb launches country-radio food fight”). According to Oxford Languages, the definition of the word ‘aberration’ is “a departure from what is normal, usual, or expected, typically one that is unwelcome.” Helton apparently cannot fathom why these female artists were popular, and the thought of female artists being popular on radio is unwelcoming to him. Did he not stop and think that maybe listeners actually enjoy music by female artists? Maybe it wouldn’t be abnormal for female artists to be popular on radio if radio programmers would actually play their music. Of course, it is abnormal for their music to be played when the sad truth is that their music is usually ignored.

This thinking is still just as prevalent in 2020. In early January, an innocent tweet sparked a wildfire of backlash on Twitter. *Variety* writer Chris Willman sarcastically tweeted, “I turned on the 105.1 country station in L.A. just now, and they were playing the new song by Gabby Barrett, and then, without any pause or interruption at all, they went into a Kelsea Ballerini song. Can’t they get fined for that?” A Twitter account for Michigan radio station 98 KCQ then responded, “We cannot play two females back-to-back. Not even Lady Antebellum or Little Big Town [both groups contain female members] against another female. I applaud their courage.” This tweet ignited a heated conversation when young female artists like Kelsea Ballerini and Kacey Musgraves

tweeted their responses. This radio station openly admitted that they were not only prohibited from playing female songs back-to-back, but they couldn't even play songs by groups featuring a female back-to-back. This Twitter thread revealed the deep roots of this inequality. These issues will never be solved if radio stations are still following these 'protocols' that prevent them from playing female artists equally.

Many radio programmers make the excuse that audiences do not want to hear songs by women, especially sad songs or ballads. However, ballads by women have proven to do well on the charts. Where is the disconnect from the audiences to the radio programmers? When Maren Morris was considering releasing her melancholy track "I Could Use a Love Song" as a single around 2017, a radio programmer prodded, "For the love of God, don't make that a single – it's a ballad. No one wants to hear a bunch of sad women on the radio" (Yahr). Well, Morris proved him wrong. Apparently, people *do* want to hear sad women on the radio, as "I Could Use a Love Song" became Morris's first No. 1 single as a solo artist in January of 2018 (Mediabase, "Top 50 – Week of January 16, 2018"). Senior vice president for promotion at MCA Nashville Katie Dean revealed that a radio program director once pleaded with her, "Please don't bring me a female with a ballad" (Yahr). Country music prides itself on being about real-life, raw storytelling. Iconic female country ballads include Patsy Cline's "Crazy," Deana Carter's "Strawberry Wine," and Lee Ann Womack's "I Hope You Dance" (Yahr). Each of these songs received huge chart success: Carter's and Womack's songs reaching Number One on the Billboard Hot Country Songs Chart, and Cline's song reaching Number Two. Not only were these songs successful on the charts, they also became staples of the country music genre and even crossed over to pop audiences. These are 'women singing sad

songs,' and they were, and continue to be, tremendously successful. Other recent Number One ballads by females have continued to prove this theory wrong, including Kelsea Ballerini's "Peter Pan" (2016), Carly Pearce's "Every Little Thing" (2017), Ingrid Andress's "More Hearts than Mine" (2020), and Maddie and Tae's "Die From a Broken Heart" (2020).

Ten percent. That is unfortunately the 'magic' number of radio spins for female artists. Songs by women took up 10% of the total spins for songs within the Top 150 on Mediabase's Yearend Airplay Reports between 2010-2019. An entire *decade* of music, and women only make up ten percent. Furthermore, women made up only 10% of the daily spins on Mediabase's Weekly Airplay Reports in 2019. Songs by women were only featured by 10% of the songs in the Top 10 and Top 20 of Mediabase's Weekly Airplay Charts and Billboard Weekly Airplay Charts, and songs on Billboard's Yearend Airplay Chart in 2019 (Watson). In addition, the 24 songs by female artists that rank within the Top 150 received 1.2 million spins in 2019 combined, making up only 10.2% of the annual spins in 2019 (Watson). In her research with SongData and CMT's Equal Play Campaign, Watson states, "Ten percent...it's just enough airplay to show that songs by women are *receiving* airplay, but not enough to make their work visible to viewers."

As previously mentioned, female presence in the Top 20 on the Billboard Country Airplay Chart has declined by 75% in the last 20 years (Watson). A study by SongData and WOMAN Nashville in April of 2019 revealed that the number of songs by women on the Yearend Airplay Reports declined by 66% between 2000-2018. This study also revealed that the total spin disparity between men and women increased from a 2 to 1 ratio in 2000 to 9.7 to 1 in 2018 (Watson). That is a major leap. For almost every 10 men

a listener will hear on country radio, one woman will be played. This suggests that over the past 20 years, things have not only gotten worse, but they continue to do so. Of the 1,500 songs that appeared on the Yearend Airplay Reports between 2010-2019, 1,224 of the songs (81.6%) were by men, 186 (12.4%) were by women, and 90 (6.0%) were by male-female ensembles. These songs were released by 184 individual artists – 71.2% male, 22.8% female, 6.0% male-female groups (Watson). A decade of music, and 81.6% of it is by men.

As shown in Figure 1.1, female presence on country radio has not only declined since 2000 but also represents a miniscule fraction of airplay compared to the men. Furthermore, spins for male-female ensembles have also declined within the last four years (Figure 1.1). Gray represents spins for male artists, purple represents spins for female artists, and yellow represents spins for male-female ensembles.

SPUN OUT: FEMALE ARTISTS RECEIVING DRASTICALLY LESS SPINS THAN MEN

Distribution by total annual spins on 2,850 songs on yearend reports (2000-2018)

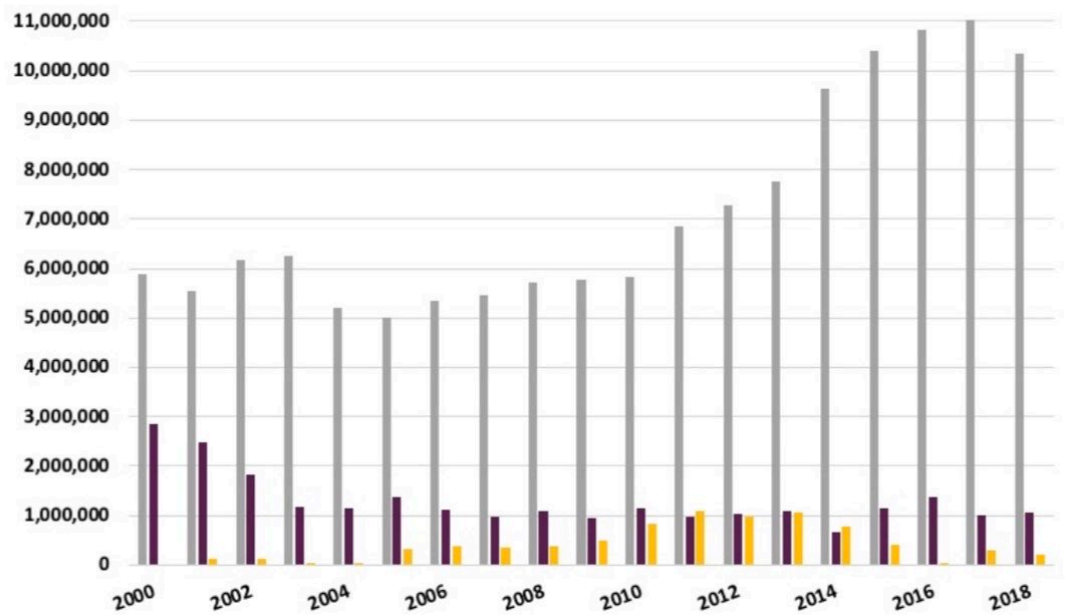


Figure 1.1. Spun Out: Female Artists Receiving Drastically Less Spins Than Men 2000-2018 (WOMAN Nashville).

In 2019, just four songs by women reached the Top 60 on the Yearend Airplay Reports: Kelsea Ballerini's "Miss Me More" at #23, Maren Morris's "Girl" at #35, all-female trio Runaway June's "Buy My Own Drinks" at #39, and Carrie Underwood's "Southbound" at #47. Ballerini, Morris, and Underwood's songs each reached the #1 on the Weekly Country Airplay Reports in 2019, while Runaway June's song peaked at #5. While Runaway June did not hit the #1 spot, their #5 peak made history. They were the first all-female ensemble to make the Top 10 since SheDAISY in 2005 (Watson).

The highest percentage of songs by women on the chart occurs between #31-40 with 13 songs (1.4%) and #61-70 with 12 songs (1.3%) - revealing that women are not just marginalized in the top positions of the charts, but they are underrepresented in the bottom positions as well (Watson). This implies that it is a difficult feat to get on the charts at all.

"Miss Me More," "Girl," and "Southbound" hit #1 on the Mediabase Weekly Airplay Charts on June 8, July 27, and October 5, respectively. Combined, these songs make up 5.8% of the weeks at #1, with the remaining weeks dominated by men at 94.2% of the year (49 out of 52 weeks). While three female artists released three songs that hit the top of the charts, 28 male artists released 38 songs that hit #1. In fact, multiple male artists had multiple #1s, including Jason Aldean, Dierks Bentley, Luke Bryan, Dan + Shay, Dustin Lynch, and Old Dominion with two songs each to hit the top position. Luke Combs and Thomas Rhett both had three songs top the charts. Combs occupied the #1 spot for 9 weeks with 3 different songs, amounting to 17% of the year (Watson).

On Billboard's Weekly Country Airplay Chart, no songs by women entered the Top 10 for 23 weeks. That is 44% of the calendar year – meaning women were absent

from the Top 10 for almost *half* the entire year. In 2019, male artists held the #1 position for 98% of the year (51 out of 52 weeks), with just 2% (1 week) of the year awarded to female artists on the Billboard Weekly Airplay Charts. This 2% was held by Maren Morris for “GIRL,” hitting #1 on July 29, 2019. There was a 17-month gap between this song and the last #1 hit achieved by a female artist, Kelsea Ballerini’s “Legends” on February 24, 2018. A year and a half passed before another female could get a number one hit on *Billboard’s* Airplay Chart. Something must change.

This inequality on Billboard’s Country Airplay Chart becomes more astounding when it is put into perspective. As seen in Figure 1.2, songs by female artists (solo and all-female duos or groups) only make up 17% of the Number Ones on the chart from the last 30 years. Out of 838 Number Ones since 1990, only 144 songs were by women (Figure 1.2). Even more saddening is that the lowest percentages of female Number One songs have occurred within the last decade. The highest percentages occurred in the late ‘90s and early 2000’s, with 1998 bringing a female majority of 52 percent. Sadly, this is the only year that this occurred. Some years, including 2019, feature a miniscule six percent.

NO. 1s BY WOMEN ON billboard COUNTRY AIRPLAY CHART

(SOLO & ALL-FEMALE DUOS/GROUPS)



DATA FROM JAN. 1, 1990, THROUGH AUG. 1, 2020

Figure 1.2. No. 1s by Women on Billboard Country Airplay Chart 1990-2020 (WOMAN Nashville).

It is not only the amount of spins that matters, but also what time of day a song is spun. Another SongData and WOMAN Nashville study published in December 2019 revealed that women received just 8.9% of daytime spins in 2018. Most spins occurred in the evenings and overnight, which has the lowest percentage of listeners – 8% and 4% respectively (Watson). Therefore, of the tiny amount of spins that women are receiving, only 8.9% of them are during a time where people are actually listening. The already miniscule chances that radio is giving female artists are made even smaller because of this setback. This report on Time of Day Airplay revealed that an average of 30 songs by female artists were played throughout the day, with 4 songs in the morning, 6 songs in the midday, 5 songs in the afternoon, 7 songs in the evening and 9 songs in the overnight (Watson). The most spins occurred in the overnight daypart, the time with the least amount of listeners. From 2018, there was an overall increase in spins for women – a 1.2% increase in spins overall. While this is a small improvement that might help a song’s chart trajectory, it does not help a female artist develop a fanbase because the increase was in the evening and overnight dayparts – the times with the least amount of listeners. The daytime spins – the daypart with the most listeners – remained the same (Watson). It’s as if any improvement in number of spins during this daypart is canceled out because of the time that they are spun. Women’s voices are still just as invisible to listeners.

According to another study by WOMAN Nashville, this trend of gender-biased Time of Day Airplay programming has been around for a while. As shown in Figure 1.3, women were more represented on country radio in 2002, with 22.8% of songs spun within a 24-hour period. Although that is still not great compared to the men’s 75.3%,

2018 showed a drastic decrease down to 8.9% for female artists, compared to the male's 89.3% (Figure 1.3). However, although more songs were played during each day period in 2002, the data concludes that most female songs were played during the evening and overnight hours – still the time with the least amount of listeners, just as it is today. Representation has decreased, as the male-to-female ratio has increased from 3.4:1 to 10:1 in the 16 years encompassed by this study. Furthermore, one thing has remained the same: the most amount of spins that women receive are during times when listeners are asleep.

THEN AND NOW: 24-HR CYCLE ON RADIO

Number of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles played throughout the day in 2002 and 2018

3.4 : 1



10 : 1



2002

Daypart	Songs by Men	Songs by Women	Male-female ensembles
AMD (6:00-10:00)	31	9	1
MID (10:00-3:00)	48	14	1
PMD (3:00-7:00)	38	11	1
EVE (7:00-12:00)	59	17	1
OVN (12:00-6:00)	62	19	2
Total 24 hr cycle	238 (75.3%)	71 (22.8%)	6 (1.9%)

2018

Daypart	Songs by Men	Songs by Women	Male-female ensembles
AMD (6:00-10:00)	43	4	1
MID (10:00-3:00)	59	6	1
PMD (3:00-7:00)	46	5	1
EVE (7:00-12:00)	67	7	1
OVN (12:00-6:00)	88	9	2
Total 24 hr cycle	303 (89.3%)	30 (8.9%)	6 (1.7%)

What does a typical 24-hour cycle look like? These tables display the number of songs by men, women and male-female ensembles over a 24-hr period in 2002 and in 2018 to show the change across this 17-year period. The dataset for this study shows an increase from approximately 316 songs in a 24-hr rotation in 2002 to 339 in 2018. Using those two figures as an average for these years and then mapping them against the percentages of men, women, and male-female ensembles in the 24-hour cycle and distributing them by their percentage in each daypart provides one perspective for viewing the distribution of songs by artists across the dayparts. It is imperative to note that this includes current and recurrent songs, accounting for all songs played in a day.

Figure 1.3. Then and Now: 24-HR Cycle on Radio 2002-2018 (WOMAN Nashville).

Some positive change was seen toward the end of 2019. Women had an average of 18% of the individual songs on the Weekly Airplay Reports, increasing from 17% in January to 23% by December (Watson). This number began improving in August of 2019, after Maren Morris's song "GIRL" hit Number One. The other spike in spins occurred in November, concurring with the 53rd Country Music Association Awards show that celebrated women. Any increase in spins for songs by female artists is progress; however, there is one component of radio rotation that has not been introduced yet – recurrent songs. Recurrent songs are those that are still in radio rotation, even after being released many months or years prior. In 2019, 75.2% of songs played on radio were current, while 24.8% of songs were recurrent. Female artists occupied only 18.9% and 3.9% of the current and recurrent songs, respectively. Male-female ensembles had only 2.8% of the current songs and a mere 0.7% of the recurrent. On the other hand, songs by men took up 53.5% of the current songs and 20.2% of the recurrent. In total, there were 572 current songs and 216 recurrent songs by men in 2019 rotation. In contrast, there were only 202 current songs and 42 recurrent songs by women. This also leaves a mere 30 current songs and 7 recurrent songs for male-female ensembles (Watson).

The distribution of these songs is even more startling. Songs by female artists receive 10.1% of the spins in 2019, with 8.5% for current singles and 1.6% for recurrent songs (Watson). This suggests that even after a female artist manages to climb the charts, her song will immediately be cast away once it exits; most likely to never be seen again. On the other hand, current singles by men receive an overwhelming 88.6% of the total spins in 2019, with 51.8% to current singles and 36.8% to recurrent singles (Watson). How is it that 36.8% of spins on radio are songs by men that are *years* old, yet *new* songs

by female artists sit at a miniscule 8.5% of spins? Even more disheartening is that current songs by male-female ensembles only receive 1.2% of the spins in 2019, and a miniscule 0.1% for recurrent songs (Watson). Another interesting point to note: of the 42 recurrent songs by women in rotation in 2019, the one with the most streams is Bebe Rexha's collaboration with Florida Georgia Line, "Meant to Be." Bebe is not a country artist, and yet her collaboration with FGL blows every other female recurrent song on this chart out of the water. "Meant to Be" had 60,838 spins in 2019, three years after its 2017 release. The second song that even comes close is Kelsea Ballerini's "Miss Me More," with 33,274 spins in 2019, also three years after its release (Watson). It is interesting that a female pop artist got almost *double* the amount of spins as Ballerini's, perhaps only because her song featured an all-male duo.

When looking at the 42 recurrent songs in radio rotation by women in 2019, it is important to note that ten of them are holiday songs. This lessens the progress of the spike in spins in December 2019 because it wasn't more spins for *current* songs by female artists, it was the introduction of holiday songs into the rotation. This is saddening for two reasons: the spins were not allocated to helping new female artists get heard on the radio, and it seems the only time even female *icons* can be heard on the radio is through holiday songs. Integral female artists to the genre include Reba McEntire and Martina McBride. They only enter the recurrent charts with their Christmas songs, with the exception of Reba's 2017 release "Back to God" (Watson). How can it be that these groundbreaking artists cannot get their smash hits played on radio today? If men can get 20.2% of their years-old songs played, women deserve just the same. It is impossible to count the number of times I have heard "All My Friends Say" by Luke Bryan on today's

radio when this song was released in 2007. Not that I have anything against this song – I'm just using it as an example. My point is, why are female artists who helped shape the country genre itself being ignored from today's radio? There seems to be plenty of space for the male artists, whether the song was released yesterday or 13 years ago.

To put all of this into perspective, Figure 1.4 demonstrates the disparity of radio spins between men and women. From 2002-2018, the male artist with the most radio spins was Kenny Chesney with 6,053,827 spins. Meanwhile, Carrie Underwood is the top woman with 3,507,890 spins – barely *half* the amount of Chesney's. Furthermore, Toby Keith is the tenth top male artist with 3,570,774 – *more* than Carrie's as the number one female. In addition, the male-female ensembles are severely underrepresented as well. Half of the groups listed are not even together anymore or, in The Band Perry's case, not making country music anymore. Most of these solo female artists were most popular on the radio in the 2000s, and, although they are still making music today, they are not being played. In contrast, all of the top ten males are still frequently played on radio today.

	Men	# Spins Overall	Women	# Spins Overall	Male-female ensembles	# Spins Overall
1	Kenny Chesney	6,053,827	Carrie Underwood	3,507,890	Lady Antebellum	2,503,755
2	Keith Urban	5,235,361	Miranda Lambert	2,036,921	Sugarland	1,705,646
3	Blake Shelton	4,933,768	Taylor Swift	1,906,183	Little Big Town	1,471,922
4	Jason Aldean	4,865,790	Sara Evans	1,214,648	The Band Perry	1,205,061
5	Brad Paisley	4,508,122	Martina McBride	1,170,216	Thompson Square	713,907
6	Luke Bryan	4,250,997	Kelsea Ballerini	990,565	Gloriana	441,511
7	Tim McGraw	4,243,805	Reba McEntire	874,463	Trick Pony	270,310
8	Rascal Flatts	4,227,866	Faith Hill	673,927	Steel Magnolia	169,523
9	Dierks Bentley	3,670,892	Maren Morris	626,866	Heartland	149,151
10	Toby Keith	3,570,774	Gretchen Wilson	596,451	Edens Edge	83,367

Figure 1.4. Top Ten Men, Women, and Male-Female Ensembles Based on Overall Spins 2002-2018 (WOMAN Nashville).

So what impact does this have on a female artist's success? It deliberately puts her at a disadvantage compared to her male counterparts by not getting radio airplay. Based on Mediabase's Country Airplay Reports and Billboard's Country Airplay Charts, one would assume that there are only a few women participating in the genre, or that female artists just aren't putting music out that is 'good enough' to receive airplay. WOMAN Nashville recently stated:

People trust their stations. They believe if you aren't consistently on radio, their trusted source for music that matters, then you're probably lesser somehow. Radio is the primary contributor in creating a culture among listeners who believe women just aren't making the kind of music that can cut it. That's not true and it's just one more by-product of years of training listeners poorly.

This implies that the notion of "audiences only want to hear men" is inaccurate because they already *only* hear men. If audiences do not have a chance to hear anything else, how will they know the difference? Jada Watson puts it in simple terms:

By limiting airplay for songs by women to less than 10% of the daytime spins, radio is not offering women the same platform for development and exposure as male artists, making their voices and stories unfamiliar to audiences. Audiences respond more favorably to what they hear and know, and audiences know songs by men.

Kingston, Ontario's Pure Country 99 program director Brittany Thompson recently admitted that country radio does "a better job establishing and promoting male artists" (Watson). Radio personnel know the impact of what they do to promote artists,

the problem is, they only do it for the men. Radio airplay boosts a career. Imagine what could happen if they did this for women. Radio airplay affects more than just radio airplay charts. It affects merchandise sales, ticket sales, touring opportunities, award show nominations, and more. It even affects streaming algorithms. Streaming is usually seen as the 'great equalizer' of the music industry. It prides itself on offering an equal playing field. However, a SongData study from September 24, 2019 shows that on Spotify, the average user is presented one song by a woman for every 11 songs by men. Even worse, users have to refresh their system at least 12 times before being offered just one song by a woman. SongData experimented with Spotify's recommender system, seeing that Spotify generated 121 songs by men before the listener was presented with one song by a woman. This song was Miranda Lambert's "Mama's Broken Heart," recommended at the 122nd spot. This is a 31.5 to 1 ratio of songs by men to women within the first 200 recommendations on Spotify. I experimented with the recommender system on Apple Music, my streaming service of choice. When I searched the keyword 'country,' a list of artists and albums populated on the page. Of the 20 country artists recommended to me, all were men except for Carrie Underwood. Her profile is the 17th to be recommended. This does not look like an equal playing field to me.

The current year has shown some improvements. Five songs by female artists have hit number one on the Mediabase Country Charts this year. Three songs featuring both male and female voices reached number one as well. These songs are: Lady A's "What If I Never Get Over You" in January, Maren Morris's "The Bones" in February, Gabby Barrett's "I Hope" in April, Ingrid Andress's "More Hearts Than Mine" in April, Carly Pearce and Lee Brice's "I Hope You're Happy Now" in June, Miranda Lambert's

“Bluebird” in July, Maddie and Tae’s “Die From a Broken Heart” in August, and Thomas Rhett, Reba McEntire, Hillary Scott, Keith Urban, and Chris Tomlin’s “Be a Light” in September. Andress and Barrett made history with their No. 1 songs. Never in the history of the Mediabase Country Airplay chart have two debut female artists had No. 1 singles back-to-back (Nicholson, “Ingrid Andress, Gabby Barrett Make Country Radio Chart History”). Let’s hope this provides opportunities for other new female artists.

In 2015, Sony Music Chairman and CEO Gary Overton boldly stated, “If you’re not on country radio, you don’t exist” (Watson). Audiences cannot purchase what they do not know. If women are nonexistent on country radio, they don’t exist to audiences. Therefore, audiences cannot support an artist that they do not even know about. A woman’s career is put at a disadvantage by not getting this chance of exposure. Radio airplay impacts streaming and downloads. The first seven years of the Billboard Yearend Streaming Charts show only 8.6% (15 songs) of the 175 songs were by women. One of these 15 songs is “Meant to Be,” Bebe Rexha and Florida Georgia Line’s smash pop-country crossover hit, which topped the charts in both 2018 and 2019 (Watson). Once again, this song is not by a female country artist. The Billboard Yearend Digital Song Sales Chart shows that between 2013-2019, fewer than ten songs by a female artist enter the chart every year, totaling 41 of the 350 charting songs (Watson). This is an average of 11.7% of the songs each year in this period. I would argue that these numbers would increase if women got more airplay on country radio during the dayparts where audiences are actually listening. Women deserve more than the mere 10% they are receiving. Good female country artists *do* exist; in fact, there are many of them. However, a listener would not know that by listening to today’s terrestrial radio. The inequality needs to end.

III. TOURING, FESTIVAL LINEUPS, AND AWARD SHOWS

The inequality is not unique to just country radio. Women are significantly absent from many prominent tours, festivals, and award nominations. Exposure on major tours, festivals, and award shows puts female artists in the public eye where they might not have been before. Without this exposure, female artists experience yet another setback that is not present for male artists.

In Chapter V, I will discuss many of the recent successful tours by female artists, including the superstars who utilize their status to support their fellow women by having them as opening acts. However, there seems to be a disconnect from the male artists to the female artists in terms of touring lineups. Many male superstars of the genre have the opportunity to lift up a female artist's career, yet they use all of their opening act slots on other men.

Luke Bryan's past four tours from 2017-2019 featured 20 supporting acts, and only two of them were women: Lauren Alaina on his 2017 "Huntin', Fishin', and Lovin' Everyday Tour" (CMT, "Luke Bryan's Huntin', Fishin' and Lovin' Every Day Tour Launches in May") and Carly Pearce on his 2018 "What Makes You Country Tour" (Stefano, "Luke Bryan Adds 2018 What Makes You Country Tour Dates"). Neither of his 2019 tours "Sunset Repeat Tour" or his "Farm Tour 2019" featured any female artists (Red Light Management). However, his 2020 – rescheduled for 2021 – "Proud to Be Right Here Tour" is featuring three openers, two of whom are female artists. These acts include newcomer Caylee Hammack, all-girl-trio Runaway June, and male rising star Morgan Wallen (*lukebryan.com*). This is an exciting improvement, as being an opening

act for such a major country act can jumpstart the career of any artist, especially a female artist who might not be getting as much radio airplay as her male counterparts.

Kenny Chesney is not only one of country music's biggest stars, but also one of the most popular touring artists of any genre. An opening slot on one of his tours would be a huge opportunity. However, in 2015, his "The Big Revival Tour" did not feature any women (Whitaker, "Kenny Chesney Announces 2015 Big Revival Tour Dates"). His 2016 "Spread the Love Tour" featured seven supporting acts, one of whom was a solo woman – Miranda Lambert – and two of whom were groups featuring women – The Band Perry and Little Big Town (Whitaker, "Kenny Chesney to Spread the Love With Full Summer of Tour Dates"). This looked like progress, until Chesney's 2018 "Trip Around the Sun Tour" brought along four supporting acts, none of whom were women (*kennychesney.com*).

Florida Georgia Line has been one of country's hottest acts since 2012. Their tours draw large crowds, presenting another big opportunity for a female artist to perform her music. However, their four tours from 2015-2019 featured 11 opening acts, none of whom were women (*florigeorgialine.com*). One accompanying act was Nelly, who is not a country artist, although he has collaborated with the duo in the past.

Jason Aldean is another one of country's most popular stars and touring artists. His five tours from 2015-2019 brought along 11 supporting acts, and only two of them were women – Lauren Alaina in 2018 and Carly Pearce in 2019 (*jasonaldean.com*).

On the other hand, male stars like Blake Shelton, Dierks Bentley, and Keith Urban have been known to champion their female counterparts. Shelton has featured a

female opener on his past three tours from 2017-2019, including Raelynn, Carly Pearce, and Lauren Alaina (*blakeshelton.com*). Urban brought along Maren Morris for his 2016 “Ripcord World Tour” (Stephens). For his “Graffiti U World Tour,” he featured Kelsea Ballerini and Lindsay Ell on the North American leg and pop singer-songwriter Julia Michaels for the Australian leg (Country Music Tattle Tale). Bentley’s 2015, 2016, and 2019 tours brought along Maddie and Tae, Cam, and Tenille Townes, respectively (*dierks.com*).

Since opening for Urban, Ballerini and Morris are now two of country’s female frontrunners. Ballerini has now had five number one singles and multiple Grammy and CMA Award nominations. Morris’s debut single “My Church” was still climbing the charts when she opened for Urban in 2016 (Thompson, “Keith Urban Praises Maren Morris for Being the ‘Real Deal’ in Country Music”). Now, she has four No. 1 songs, a Grammy Award, two CMA Awards, and multiple record-breaking singles and albums. Urban praised Morris, saying “I loved her voice, the first time I heard it. Loved her voice. Loved songwriting, the sound of the record. I could tell she had this really particular artistry. It wasn’t like anybody else. I just loved it. I wanted to take her out on tour right away” (Thompson, “Keith Urban Praises Maren Morris for Being the ‘Real Deal’ in Country Music”). Tenille Townes has had a very successful year since opening for Bentley. Her first U.S. single “Somebody’s Daughter” hit the top 30 on both the Billboard Hot Country Songs and Country Airplay charts (Turner). It peaked at #27 on the Mediabase Airplay Charts (Mediabase, “Top 50 – Week of July 1, 2019”). Townes won New Female Artist of the Year at the 55th Academy of Country Music Awards (Freeman) and Female Artist of the Year at the 2020 Canadian Country Music

Association Awards (Global News). One could easily conclude, aside from her talent and hard work, her exposure out on the road with Dierks Bentley boosted her career.

Being a supporting act on a major tour can be a launching pad to a career. Aside from the recent success of Townes, one of the prime examples is Taylor Swift. Before she became the mega-superstar that she is today, she was a young girl trying to ‘make it’ in the country music world. Stars like Rascal Flatts, Brad Paisley, and Kenny Chesney took her out on the road (*concertarchives.org*). Even legends like George Strait and Tim McGraw and Faith Hill took Taylor under their wing as a young artist, providing her with the opportunity of a lifetime to open for them on their major tours (*concertarchives.org*). These opportunities were monumental in Taylor’s career, putting her in front of huge audiences at an early age. At these live performances, Taylor would ask the audience to request her songs at radio – and they did (Jenkins). While there are obviously many other factors to the superstardom of Swift, her early days on tour with these artists served as the launching pad. If more of today’s top country artists brought women out on tour with them, who knows what could come of it.

Festivals are huge in today’s culture, including Bonnaroo, Coachella, and country music’s own CMA Fest. Country music has many other festivals all over the country. Women are incredibly underrepresented in these lineups as well. Performing at a festival is a great opportunity for an artist to get their music in front of a large, engaged audience.

Faster Horses Festival is a large 3-day festival in Brooklyn, Michigan. For the 2021 lineup, no female artist is featured as a headlining act, and only three out of the 16 acts total are women: Kelsea Ballerini, Gabby Barrett, and Carly Pearce. Ballerini and

Pearce are set to perform on July 16th, and Barrett on the 17th. This leaves the last day of the festival, July 19th, as a male-only lineup (*fasterhorsesfestival.com*).

The Country Fest, scheduled for June 2021 in Ohio, will feature 16 acts. Only two of these artists are women: Raelynn and Ashland Craft. Again, no woman is featured as a headliner. Raelynn performs on the first day of the festival, and Craft on the third. This leaves two out of the four days as male-only lineups (*thecountryfest.com*).

While Live Nation's Country Megaticket was canceled due to the Coronavirus pandemic, its lineup is still interesting to discuss. Of the 12 acts on the lineup, no solo female artists were featured (*countrymegaticket.com*). Two artists on the lineup, Lady A and Sugarland, are groups that feature a woman.

Country Concert will take place next July in Fort Loramie, Ohio. Of the 20 artists that have been announced, only four are females: Ashland Craft, Lorrie Morgan, Deana Carter, and Jo Dee Messina (*countryconcert.com*). It is interesting to note that of these four women, Craft is the only 'new' artist. Morgan, Carter, and Messina were popular in the 1990's and 2000's. Morgan achieved three number one hits on Billboard's Country Airplay Chart (Billboard, "Lorrie Morgan – Chart History"). Carter recorded one of the most iconic country-pop crossover songs, "Strawberry Wine," along with two other number one hits (Billboard, "Deana Carter – Chart History"). Messina had six number one hits and 12 top tens, including "Bye Bye" and "Heads Carolina, Tails California" (Billboard, "Jo Dee Messina – Chart History"). Each of these women were among the most popular artists of the '90s and '00s, yet their sets are some of the earliest in the day, with Morgan performing at 4PM on Friday, and Carter performing at 2PM on Saturday followed by Messina at 4 PM (*countryconcert.com*). Because festivals are usually

standing-room-only and general admission, many fans do not show up until the later performance slots. Another interesting fact to note is that newcomer Ashland Craft is playing at the Country Club Saloon, a side stage, at 9:15 PM, while headliners John Pardi and Luke Combs will be taking the main stage at 8 PM and 10 PM, respectively (*countryconcert.com*). Most concertgoers will be at the main stage during this time, not wanting to lose their spot in the crowd even if they wanted to make it to Craft's performance. With Craft on the side stage, this leaves the first day of the festival with no women on the main stage. While Carter, Messina, and Morgan are performing on the main stage, it is a setback to have their sets so early in the afternoon. Because of each of these female artist's time slots, they are faced with yet another setback.

Lynchburg, Tennessee's socially-distant festival held in October 2020 included seven headliners, and Danielle Bradbery is the only female (*lynchburgmusicfest.com*). Out of 16 afternoon-supporting acts, only five are female.

Rock the South in Cullman, Alabama was canceled to the Coronavirus pandemic. However, it was scheduled to have 12 acts, with Ashland Craft and Ashley McBryde serving as the only female artists (*rockthesouth.com*).

Luke Bryan hosts a 4-night all-inclusive concert vacation in Mexico called "Crash My Playa." Since its genesis in 2015, only ten out of 65 performers have been female artists (*crashmyplaya.com*). Breaking this down year-by-year: In 2015, Kelleigh Bannen was the only female out of eight performers. In 2016, there were nine performers – none of whom were women. 2017 was the most promising year – but still not great – as three performers were women, and one was a male-female ensemble (Little Big Town). However, 2018 followed with only two women out of eleven performers. 2019 was even

worse, with Lauren Alaina as the only female out of 12 performers. 2020 featured only two females on the lineup of 12: Tenille Townes and Caylee Hammack (*crashmyplaya.com*). Even the website leaves female artists out, describing the festival: “Past performers include Blake Shelton, Florida Georgia Line, Dierks Bentley, Chris Stapleton, Little Big Town, Sam Hunt, Dustin Lynch, Luke Combs, Thomas Rhett, and more” (*crashmyplaya.com*). No solo female alumni are mentioned, with Little Big Town as the only male-female group mentioned. While I understand that many of these male artists are some of the genre’s most popular and deserve to be mentioned, why isn’t Maren Morris on this list? She is one of country’s biggest stars right now, arguably just as well-known as a few of the men mentioned on the list.

Award shows are yet another field of the industry where women are excluded in comparison to their male counterparts. The Country Music Association Awards and the Academy of Country Music Awards are two of the genre’s most prestigious award ceremonies. Entertainer of the Year is the most coveted award at both ceremonies. However, the female representation is significantly less than the male in both nominations and wins.

Of the 53 ceremonies of the CMA Awards that have taken place from 1967 to 2019, only 14 women have been nominated – some multiple times – taking up 44 of the nominations. Two male-female ensembles, Sugarland and Lady A, were nominated as well (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”). This means that women, including male-female ensembles, received 46 nominations over the past 53 years. The problem is, there were 265 nominations total, meaning that men received 219 nominations. 52 male artists have received these 219 nominations, many of them

nominated more than 10 times each (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”). This means that male artists received about 82% of the nominations while female artists received roughly only 17%. This leaves male-female ensembles with a miniscule 0.008% of nominations. Of the 53 awards for Entertainer of the Year that have been granted, only nine were received by women. Barbara Mandrell and Taylor Swift are the only two women to win the award twice, Mandrell winning in 1980 and 1981 and Swift winning in 2009 and 2011 (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”). This means that only seven female acts have ever won the award (in chronological order): Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, Mandrell, Reba McEntire, Shania Twain, The [Dixie] Chicks, and Swift. While only seven women have ever won, 25 male acts have won the award. (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”).

While only two women have won the award twice, nine men have won the award multiple times. Luke Bryan, Keith Urban, Vince Gill, and Hank Williams Jr. have each won the award twice. Alan Jackson, George Strait, and Alabama won the award three times. The most wins are occupied by Kenny Chesney with four wins total, and Garth Brooks with a whopping seven wins (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”). This award has only ever been granted as a back-to-back female win twice in its history: Mandrell in 1980 and 1981, and Twain’s win in 1999 followed by The [Dixie] Chicks in 2000 (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”). On the other hand, the men have had plenty of back-to-back success, even with the same artist winning year after year; for example, Alabama and Kenny Chesney each had three-year streaks of winning. In contrast, multiple periods of time existed where years passed before a female artist won the award or was nominated at all. The award ceremony began

in 1967, and it took four years until 1971 for a woman to be nominated. This woman was Loretta Lynn, and she was the first woman to win the award the next year in 1972. The next woman to break Lynn's streak of being the only female artist nominee was none-other-than *Grease* star Olivia Newton-John. Many other gaps exist, the largest being within the last 20 years. No female artist won Entertainer of the Year from 2001-2008, or from 2012-2019 (Country Music Association, "Past Winners and Nominees"). In fact, no solo female artist was nominated from 2002-2008. More recently, no women were nominated at the 2017 and 2018 ceremonies. Only two female acts have won within the last 19 years – The Chicks in 2000 and Taylor Swift in 2009 and 2011. Since Swift, no female has won the award. The 2020 Awards might hopefully change this, as both Miranda Lambert and Carrie Underwood have received nominations this year.

The Entertainer of the Year Award has been presented at the ACM Awards since 1970. This award has been won 51 times. Women have won only 11 times, meaning that men have won 40 times. Carrie Underwood and Taylor Swift have won multiple times; Underwood in 2008, 2009, and 2019, and Swift in 2010 and 2011 (Academy of Country Music). This means that only eight female acts have received this award, versus 18 male recipients. The eight females that have received the award are Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, Barbara Mandrell, Reba McEntire, Shania Twain, The [Dixie] Chicks, Underwood, and Swift (Academy of Country Music). Only 39 nominations have gone to female artists in the award's history of 254 nominations. These 39 nominations were received by 11 female artists, while the remaining 215 nominations were received by 49 male artists (Academy of Country Music). Loretta Lynn was the only woman represented as a nominee for seven years from 1971 to 1977 when Dolly Parton joined her as a

female nominee. Five years went by without any female nominations at all from 2003 to 2007, the gap beginning from The Chicks's nomination in 2002 and ending with Carrie Underwood's nomination and win in 2008 (Academy of Country Music).

Both the CMAs and the ACMs have experienced their fair share of controversy within the last year. As mentioned before, Garth Brooks has won the CMA Award for Entertainer of the Year seven times total, more than any other artist in history. He received serious backlash from fans, artists, and industry professionals for winning again in 2019, when many people believed Carrie Underwood was the most deserving nominee. When nominations were announced, many female artists endorsed their support for Underwood, including Miranda Lambert. She posted pictures of the duo performing together on social media, sharing a lengthy caption expressing her support for Underwood. After sharing her love for the other nominees – all male – Lambert expressed the reasons why Underwood was the most deserving of the title of 2019 Entertainer of the Year:

She put out her first single in 2005 and from then on country music was changed for good. That iconic voice has been classin' up our stages, charts, and televisions for a decade and a half. The voice. The legs. The songs. The brand. The mom. The wife. The Okie. The Jesus lover. The blonde bombshell that is Carrie. She blows me away every time I hear her sing. She never wavers in who she is or what she stands for. She has stayed true & pushed herself to be better...take it home! You Carrie the torch! (Reuter)

While Brooks is undoubtedly a country music icon, many seemed to think that the Entertainer '*of the Year*' aspect was forgotten when considering him for the award. Not to

say that he was *never* deserving of the award, but that he was not the most deserving for the year of 2019. CMA member and writer for LYRIC Magazine James Daykin tweeted his comparison of Underwood and Brooks for the eligibility period for the 2019 awards, providing the following examples of each artist's achievements. During this period of July 1, 2018 to June 30, 2019, Underwood released her sixth studio album *Cry Pretty*, which she co-produced and co-wrote nine of the 13 songs. The album debuted at #1 on the Billboard 200 chart, making her the first woman to hit the top of the Billboard 200 with four country albums. The album also earned the biggest sales week for a country album in the last three years, and the biggest sales week for a female artist in 2018. It was RIAA Certified Gold, along with her single "Cry Pretty" that also was the most added song to country radio during its debut week. The album peaked at number one on the US Billboard 200, US Top Country Albums, UK Country Albums, Canadian Albums, and Australian Country Albums Charts. Underwood then launched her "Cry Pretty Tour 360" in May of 2019, with 63 shows across the U.S., Canada, and Europe. Along with her incredible vocals, she played guitar, bongos, and piano during her shows. *Rolling Stone* described the production as "second to none" (Gray). She donated \$1 from every ticket to Danita's Children, a charity for children in Haiti. Aside from her monumental album release and tour, Underwood also appeared on *The Tonight Show*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* She performed at the iHeart Radio Music Festival, the ACM Awards, the American Idol Finale, the CMT Awards, CMA Fest, and the American Music Awards. She appeared on the Grand Ole Opry for eight performances. She won Favorite Female Country Artist at the American Music Awards, Top Female Country Artist at the Billboard Music Awards, and Female Video of the Year and Video of the

Year at the CMT Awards. She was granted a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and honored at the CMT Artists of the Year ceremony. Not to mention, she has *hosted* the CMA Awards for 12 years. In contrast, during the eligibility period for the 2019 award, Brooks played 12 shows. He released no new studio albums; releasing only legacy, live, and compilation albums. He released three singles, although one called “Dive Bar” is a radio-only single, inaccessible for fans to download or stream. The comparison is undeniable. Garth Brooks will forever be one of country’s greatest, but this data points to a superior Entertainer *of the Year*: Carrie Underwood. The Country Music Association states the criteria for the Award:

This Award goes to the artist. The Award is for the act displaying the greatest competence in all aspects of the entertainment field. Voter should give consideration not only to recorded performance, but also to the in-person performance, staging, public acceptance, attitude, leadership, and overall contribution to the Country Music image. (Country Music Association, “About the CMA Awards”)

It is clear that Underwood was the deserving pick for this award for this eligibility period. Brooks *is* an amazing entertainer – one of the greatest. However, Underwood better fits the criteria for Entertainer of the Year for 2019. What *more* can she do? No woman has won this award since Taylor Swift in 2011. If Carrie Underwood cannot seem to win the award, what woman can? She is one of country’s biggest superstars of all time, yet she has never won the award once. Furthermore, the 2019 CMA Awards were dedicated to ‘celebrating women,’ with Underwood as a host along with Dolly Parton and Reba McEntire. The show opened with a medley of female country hits, featuring the

hosts alongside The Highwomen, Martina McBride, Tanya Tucker, Sara Evans, Terri Clark, Jennifer Nettles, Gretchen Wilson and Crystal Gayle (Houghton). Despite the show's clear efforts to lift up the women of the genre, the show ended with a devastating EOTY loss for Underwood – leaving her empty-handed, as she lost in the Album of the Year, Album of the Year (Producer), and Female Vocalist of the Year categories as well (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”).

Even Brooks admitted in an interview that he thought Underwood was a shoo-in for the award and that he was unprepared to hear his name called as the winner: “It was the year of the women, so we were all expecting Carrie anyway, and she justly deserved it as well as the other nominees. We were sitting there talking and boom, your name gets called and you don't have anything prepared” (Whitaker, “Garth Brooks Thought Carrie Underwood Would Win 2019 CMA Entertainer of the Year”). Describing the backlash after his win, Brooks stated, “We got killed pretty bad” (Hutchinson). One disappointed fan wrote: “The 2019 CMAs could have been so special. however, it will forever be remembered by Carrie Underwood losing to Garth Brooks for entertainer of the year. every headline about last night's show has the same theme: anger & disappointment for Carrie...and rightfully so. such a shame” (Pasquini). Another exasperated “What does Carrie Underwood have to do to win entertainer of the year? Like I could write a 50 page paper on everything she did this year and maybe a page on what Garth did. Come on CMA. She hosts the show, y'all. Shake my head. Shake my head” (Pasquini). Other fans called the result “tone deaf” and a “slap in the face” (Pasquini).

This controversy came to a shocking conclusion in July 2020, when Brooks announced he wished to take his name out of consideration for Entertainer of the Year

permanently. After seeing the backlash, he stated that “it’s time for somebody else to hold that award” (Leimkuehler, “Garth Brooks withdraws from running for CMA ‘Entertainer of the Year,’ country music’s stop prize”). He admitted that he was swayed by a particular tweet reading something similar to “Hey man. This guy, why doesn’t he just step down (and leave) the entertainer for the next generation?” (Leimkuehler, “Garth Brooks withdraws from running for CMA ‘Entertainer of the Year,’ country music’s stop prize”). While the CMA stated that voting rules do not allow organizers to remove artists from the balloting process, the roughly 7,000 voting CMA members granted Brooks’ wish. He is not nominated for the award this year. The contenders are Eric Church, Luke Combs, Keith Urban, Miranda Lambert, and Underwood (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”).

The Academy of Country Music Awards also received backlash this year, again with the controversy surrounding Underwood. For the first time in history, there was a tie in the Entertainer of the Year category when Carrie Underwood and Thomas Rhett both won the award. The CEO of the Academy stated, “We have an independent third party accounting firm that tabulates our results based on nearly 5,000 voting members of the Academy. Our awards policy is that in the event of tie both artists receive trophies” (Newman). He goes on to say, “Both of this year’s winners are so worthy, and we are thrilled that Thomas Rhett won his first entertainer of the year. Carrie Underwood’s record-breaking third win in that category, is much deserved” (Newman). However, once again, outraged fans took to Twitter. One viewer fumed, “I’m furious. You couldn’t let a female win on her own. This is ridiculous and so embarrassing” (Day). Another fan angrily tweeted, “Seriously?!? ‘What are you gonna tell her?’ ...When you can’t have

Entertainer of the year by yourself...and it needs to be shared with a man” (Day). Another suggested, “I just don’t understand why they didn’t have another round of voting where people chose between Carrie and Thomas Rhett. Imagine the Super Bowl or a World Series game ending in a tie” (Day). While I personally am a fan of Thomas Rhett, I also agree that the protocol should be changed in the event of a tie for the most coveted award of the night. It seemed tasteless, as the current climate of country music is so diminishing of women. If there could have been a tiebreaker and Rhett won by himself, there still would have been upset fans. However, the sharing of the award felt participation-trophy-esque, especially considering the CMAs backlash concerning Carrie. Again, *what more can she do?*

The unequal treatment of women versus men in such vital parts of the music industry – touring, music festivals, and award shows – has significant impact on a female artist’s career. The artists are tired of the inequality. Fans are tired of it as well. Change must occur from the inside out.

IV. A HISTORY OF WOMEN IN COUNTRY MUSIC

Country music would not be what it is today without the female artists who helped build it. Unfortunately, the sexist environment of country music has existed from the beginning. However, it has gotten much worse within the past few years. Women used to rule the top of the charts, and they deserve to have that chance again.

Since the birth of the country music genre, women have been significantly underrepresented in the mainstream. From 1925 to 1940, the Grand Ole Opry performance roster included 238 acts. Only 14 of these acts were female (Neal 33). Although it looks as if they have been wiped from the history of the origin of country music, women were involved in every aspect of the genre. However, because of gender roles during this time, most women were not ‘allowed’ to be commercial stars. Because of economic conditions, daily life was a big enough struggle for women, so having a music career on top of that was nearly impossible (Neal 32).

One of the founding groups of country music includes The Carter Family. Known as the “First Family of Country Music,” Sara Carter, her husband A.P., and her cousin Maybelle Carter not only recorded around 300 songs, but also created a legacy that affected country music forever (Neal 40). Their recordings of “Keep on the Sunny Side” and “Can the Circle Be Unbroken (Bye and Bye)” are two of the most iconic early country recordings. After A.P. and Sara got divorced and the original group broke up, Maybelle continued to perform with her daughters Helen, June, and Anita as “Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters” or simply as the Carter Family (Neal 41). After touring with Johnny Cash in the early ‘60s, the love affair between Johnny and June began. June herself earned several hits and won five Grammys (Recording Academy, “Artist - June

Carter Cash”). Even Johnny’s daughter Roseanne Cash earned several top ten hits in the ‘80s (Neal 41). Country music was heavily influenced by the women of this family.

In the next years, a new sub-genre of country music emerged: honky-tonk. Known by many as “The Queen of Country Music,” Kitty Wells was one of the biggest stars of this era (Pugh). When her husband Johnnie Wright took her out on tour, star Roy Acuff advised him against it, stating that “women can’t headline a country music show” (Pugh). Wells proved him wrong and opened the door for the next generation of female headlining superstars. Her 1952 smash hit “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” was a response to Hank Thompson’s “The Wild Side of Life,” which portrayed women as promiscuous (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, “Kitty Wells”). During a time where women were not known for speaking their minds, Wells’ retort was very controversial – yet very successful. The song sold over a million copies – a huge feat for *any* artist during this time, not just a female (Buchard). Wells became the first female country artist to have a single reach number one on the Billboard country chart. Furthermore, the song stayed in the number one position for six weeks (Burchard). It even crossed over to Billboard’s pop charts, hitting #27 (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, “Kitty Wells”). Wells created a new landscape to welcome the female perspective in country music. Her music proved that audiences were eager to hear female-empowered songs.

Wells’ success changed the country music industry forever. In the ‘60s, Patsy Cline came onto the scene and helped create the “Nashville Sound.” Her smash hit “Crazy” is the #1 jukebox hit of all time (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, “Patsy Cline”). She became the first solo female artist to be inducted into the Country

Music Hall of Fame. Cline was not marketed as someone's wife or mother, but instead claimed the spotlight for herself. Female fans were inspired by Cline's unapologetic persona (Neal 241).

Wells and Cline influenced other icons like Loretta Lynn. Lynn's hits like "You Ain't Woman Enough" and "Don't Come Home a-Drinkin' (with Lovin' on Your Mind)" were assertive, female-empowered songs that audiences loved. Lynn achieved 16 Number Ones and 51 Top Tens on Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart (Billboard, "Loretta Lynn – Chart History"). She was the first woman to receive the CMA Award for Entertainer of the Year. "Coal Miner's Daughter" is not only one of her biggest hits, but also the title of her 1976 autobiography. Becoming a best seller, the book inspired a hit movie in 1980 (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, "Loretta Lynn"). Sissy Spacek starred as Lynn, and she won an Academy Award for Best Actress for her portrayal of the country star (Recording Academy, "Artist - Loretta Lynn"). Known as one of the most iconic country artists of all time, Lynn has received three Grammy awards and 18 nominations. She received a Recording Academy Lifetime Achievement Award at the 2010 GRAMMYs (Recording Academy, "Artist - Loretta Lynn"). She also received the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors in 2003 (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, "Loretta Lynn").

One cannot think of country music without thinking of Dolly Parton. The epitome of a strong woman, Parton rose out of a childhood of poverty in the mountains of East Tennessee. She also began her career alongside a man, as she was partnered with Porter Wagoner on *The Porter Wagoner Show*. However, her star began to shine brighter and

brighter, beginning to eclipse Wagoner's. She knew it was time to begin on her own – and she knew she was capable. Earning 25 Number Ones and 54 Top Ten hits on Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart (Billboard, "Dolly Parton – Chart History"), Parton is not only one of the most successful recording artists of all time, but also one of the most iconic figures in pop culture. She has received multiple number ones in other genres, crossing over to charts such as Billboard's Hot 100, Christian Airplay, Adult Contemporary, and Dance/Electronic Digital Song Sales (Billboard, "Dolly Parton – Chart History"). She is the subject of a popular podcast "Dolly Parton's America" and the inspiration for "Dolly Parton's Heartstrings," a 2019 Netflix series based on her songs (Zoladz). She has her fair share of acting experience as well, including her starring role in the 1980 blockbuster film *9 to 5*, 1989's *Steel Magnolias*, and *Joyful Noise* in 2012 (*biography.com*). She has produced and starred in multiple Christmas TV and movie specials. In 1987, Parton joined forces with powerhouses Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris to record their collaboration album *Trio*. They recorded a second album *Trio II* in 1999. The albums sold five million copies and earned three Grammys (Betts, "Dolly Parton, Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris to Release 'Trio' Box Set"). Named as one of the most successful collaborative music projects of all time, these powerful women proved that audiences were eager to hear music from female voices. Parton has received nine CMA Awards and 13 ACM Awards (Country Music Association, "Past Winners and Nominees;" Academy of Country Music). She has racked up nine Grammy Awards and a whopping 49 nominations (Recording Academy, "Artist - Dolly Parton"). She has received a Lifetime Achievement Award from both the GRAMMYs and the CMAs (*biography.com*). Aside from her multiple awards within the country music genre, Parton

has been recognized at many award ceremonies outside of music. These include her three Emmy nominations, six Golden Globe nominations, two Academy Award nominations, and Tony Award nomination (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, “Dolly Parton”). She was also awarded the Living Legend Award by the Library of Congress in 2004 for her “contributions to the United States’ cultural landscape” (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, “Dolly Parton”). She received the National Medal of Arts in 2005, the highest award given to artists by the U.S. government. Then, in 2006, she received the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, “Dolly Parton”). She also has received a Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame (IDMb). She owns her own theme park, Dollywood, in the mountains of East Tennessee. She created a free book gifting program for kids called Imagination Library. Her ‘look’ alone is one of the most iconic and recognizable images in our culture. Dolly’s classic storytelling songs like “Jolene” and “Coat of Many Colors” are integral to the genre of country music. Not to mention, she wrote one of the most iconic songs of all time, regardless of genre: “I Will Always Love You.” Country music – and America – was undoubtedly changed forever by Dolly Parton.

Tammy Wynette is another country icon from this era. She has won two ACM Awards, two GRAMMYs, and three CMA Awards. She achieved 20 Number One hits and 39 Top Tens on Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart (Billboard, “Tammy Wynette – Chart History”). Her hit “Stand By Your Man” is a standard of the country music genre. It sold more than two million copies, making it the best-selling single by a female country artist at the time (Pareles).

Barbara Mandrell was one of the most popular artists in the '70s and '80s. She achieved six Number Ones and 25 Top Tens on Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart (Billboard, "Barbara Mandrell – Chart History"). She won two GRAMMYs and was nominated 11 times (Recording Academy, "Artist - Barbara Mandrell"). She is the only female artist to win the CMA Award for Entertainer of the Year two years in a row, winning in 1980 and 1981 (Country Music Association, "Past Winners and Nominees"). She became the first woman to win the award twice. Taylor Swift is the only other woman who has won it twice since (Country Music Association, "Past Winners and Nominees"). Her song "I Was Country When Country Wasn't Cool" is an iconic country record. While acting as a sort of paradox within itself, the song bridged the gap between country and pop (Neal 312). Another version of the song was released featuring George Jones, providing an "endorsement of Mandrell by one of the most respected country patriarchs" (Neal 312).

The neo-traditionalist era of country music was the next to emerge. It brought us stars like The Judds and Reba McEntire. The Judds topped Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart 14 times, reaching the Top Ten 20 times (Billboard, "The Judds – Chart History"). The mother-daughter duo became popular for their family and nostalgia-themed music. Audiences were drawn to the old-time mountain music elements of their songs (Neal 339). Their hits included "Grandpa (Tell Me 'Bout the Good Old Days" and "Why Not Me." The duo won five GRAMMYs and earned nine nominations (Recording Academy, "Artist - The Judds").

Reba McEntire is another one-name icon. There is only one 'Reba.' She has achieved more than 50 top-ten singles and has had more Number One country albums

than any other female artist (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, “Reba McEntire”). She has sold more than 56 million albums worldwide (Country Music Association, “About the CMA Awards”). Like Dolly, Reba has found crossover musical success and TV success. While she has achieved 24 Number Ones on Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart, she has also reached the top position on the Billboard 200, Hot Christian Songs, Top Christian Albums, Christian Digital Song Sales, and Top Holiday Albums charts (Billboard, “Reba McEntire – Chart History”). She had her own hit TV comedy series, *Reba*, from 2001 to 2007, starred on Broadway as the title role in the 2001 revival of *Annie Get Your Gun*, and appeared in multiple films in the 1990s and 2000s (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, “Reba McEntire”). From her hits in the ‘90s like “Fancy” and “Does He Love You”, to 2010 and 2011’s “Consider Me Gone” and “Turn On the Radio,” McEntire has remained in the mainstream – and at the top of the charts – for many decades. She received another number one hit this year as a featured artist on “Be a Light” alongside Thomas Rhett, Keith Urban, Hillary Scott, and Chris Tomlin. McEntire hosted the CMA Awards alongside Carrie Underwood and Dolly Parton in 2019 and is set to host the 2020 ceremony alongside Darius Rucker. She has won six CMA Awards, including Entertainer of the Year (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”). She has hosted the ACM Awards 16 times, and she has won 16 ACM Awards (CBS). McEntire has also received three GRAMMY Awards and 16 nominations (Recording Academy, “Artist - Reba McEntire”). Known as an extraordinary musician, actress, businesswoman, and cultural icon, McEntire was granted a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1998. She also received the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors in 2018 for her “lifetime of contributions to American culture”

(Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, “Reba McEntire”). Reba has remained in the forefront of the industry since the ‘70s, proving that her music is important and desired by listeners. She does not believe the notion that ‘women don’t want to hear women,’ stating, “I’m trying to sing songs for women, to say for them what they can’t say for themselves” (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, “Reba McEntire”).

While country radio has never been an equal playing field, women still were represented more heavily in the 1990s and 2000s than they are today. These female artists released some of the most popular and iconic albums and songs of the country music genre.

Shania Twain is one of the best-selling musical artists of all time – of any genre. She has sold over 100 million records worldwide, making her the best-selling female artist in country music history (Martin). She is the only female of any genre to achieve three consecutive RIAA Certified Diamond albums; furthermore, her album “Come On Over” is the number one certified album by a female artist in program history at 20X multi-Platinum (RIAA, “Gold & Platinum Turns 60!”). Twain is one of the biggest cases of country-pop crossover success. She has had seven Number Ones and 16 Top Ten hits on Billboard’s Country Airplay chart and three Number Ones and seven Top Ten hits on the Adult Contemporary chart (Billboard, “Shania Twain - Chart History”). She was crowned Entertainer of the Year at the CMAs and ACMs in 1999 (CMA Awards, Academy of Country Music). Twain has won five GRAMMY Awards and has been nominated 18 times (Recording Academy, “Artist - Shania Twain”). She has won six Billboard Awards, four of which were all-gender categories. She also won all-genre Female Artist of the Year in 1998, defeating pop icons like Janet Jackson and Celine

Dion (Billboard, “Winners Database – Billboard Music Awards”). She received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2011 (Konc). Aside from her chart success and accolades, her iconic persona is famous in our culture. The phrase “let’s go girls” has become practically a slogan for Twain; it’s almost immediately associated with “Man, I Feel Like a Woman!” Her music videos feature some iconic looks, including the infamous all-leopard outfit. Twain’s influence on country music and pop culture is still prominent today. Since her 2002 release *UP!*, Twain released her first studio album in 15 years in 2017, titled *NOW*. It debuted at Number One on the Billboard Top 200 album chart, making it the first female country album to top the chart in over three years (Aderoju and Flanagan). In 2019, Twain made her return to the American Music Awards stage for the first time since 2003. She closed the show with a medley of some of her biggest hits, including “Still the One,” “Any Man of Mine,” “That Don’t Impress Me Much,” and “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” Every member in the audience was on their feet, with superstars like Taylor Swift and Post Malone singing and dancing along (Aderoju and Flanagan). Shania is a one-of-a-kind legend who brought country music to a broader audience – and continues to do so.

The Dixie Chicks are one of the most influential groups in country music history – and one of the most controversial. Composed of lead singer Natalie Maines and multi-instrumentalist sisters Emily Strayer and Martie Maguire, the trio has won 10 CMA Awards, including the Horizon Award in 1998 and Entertainer of the Year in 2000. Furthermore, each of their wins were in all-gender categories, victorious over male superstars like George Jones, Kenny Chesney, Tim McGraw, and Alabama (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”). They have won 12 GRAMMYs and

earned 19 nominations (Recording Academy, “Artist - Dixie Chicks”). They had achieved six Number Ones and 14 Top Tens on Billboard’s Country Airplay chart up until 2003, when Maines made a derogatory remark towards President Bush at a concert in London, immediately alienating many country fans and radio stations. The group was on the top of the country world and the charts one day, and the next they were the subjects of “death threats, radio bans, boycotts, and bulldozed CDs” (Hines). Amid the backlash, The Chicks laid low for a few years. In 2006, they returned with a world tour and a new album release, *Taking the Long Way* (Brittanica). Although they were exiled by most of the country community, the group received the top three honors at the 2007 Grammy Awards. Winning all-genre Album, Song, and Record of the Year, The Chicks became the first all-female group to win in any of those categories (Brittanica). In 2020, they released their first album of new material in 14 years, *Gaslighter*, selling 84,000 units in its first week (Asker, “The Chicks’ ‘Gaslighter’ Ignites at No. 1 on Top Country Albums Chart”). The album became their fifth No. 1 on Billboard’s Top Country Albums chart, passing the record for the most No. 1 albums on this chart, previously held by The Judd’s total of four.

The 1980s, 1990s and 2000s featured much more girl power than we hear on radio today. While there is not enough space nor time to discuss each and every one of the influential female artists during these times, other women like Patty Loveless, Martina McBride, Faith Hill, Trisha Yearwood, and Sara Evans – just to name a few – were incredibly vital to the genre of country music. Combined, these artists have 29 Number One hits and 72 Top Tens on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart (Billboard, “Faith Hill – Chart History;” “Martina McBride – Chart History;” “Patty Loveless –

Chart History;” “Sara Evans – Chart History;” “Trisha Yearwood – Chart History;”), 10 Grammy Awards, and 71 Grammy nominations (Recording Academy, “Artist - Faith Hill;” “Artist - Martina McBride;” “Artist - Patty Loveless;” “Artist - Trisha Yearwood”). Their songs flooded the radio airwaves during their time. I grew up hearing their voices on my radio, wanting to sing songs just like them. These female legends, and many more, influenced the next generation of country artists.

Then, there is Taylor Swift. Now one of the biggest global superstars of the music industry, Swift was once a young girl dreaming of being a country singer. Despite her shift to the pop genre in 2014, Taylor Swift made her mark in the country world. Her sophomore album *Fearless* is recognized as the Most Awarded Album in the history of country music, as it is the only album in history to win the award for all-genre Album of the Year and Country Album of the Year at the GRAMMYs, plus Country Album of the Year at the CMA Awards, ACM Awards, and American Music Awards (PR Newswire). She is the youngest artist in history to win the award for Entertainer of the Year at the CMA Awards. Sadly, she is the latest female artist to win this award – and her win was in 2011 (Country Music Association, “Past Winners and Nominees”). Swift’s first two studio albums spent 24 weeks at No. 1 on Billboard’s Top Country Albums chart. She held this record since her debut until Luke Combs broke it in 2020 (Nicholson, “Luke Combs Breaks Album Chart Record Set By Taylor Swift”). Each of her country albums has been certified Platinum by the RIAA, including her Christmas album. *Fearless* achieved the certification of 10x Diamond (RIAA, “Gold & Platinum”). During her career as a country artist, Swift achieved seven Number One hits on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart (Billboard, “Taylor Swift – Chart History”) and won six GRAMMY

Awards (Recording Academy, “Artist - Taylor Swift”). While these are just a few of her accolades, Swift has held many more records, awards, and achievements as a country artist and in her pop endeavors. Regardless of personal opinion, one cannot deny the success of Taylor Swift and the doors that she opened for young female artists.

Carrie Underwood and Miranda Lambert debuted around 2005 and since then have remained to be country’s female frontrunners. Their combined nine GRAMMY Awards, 19 Billboard Hot Country Songs No. 1s, and 20 CMA Awards prove that they are worthy of the title of Country’s Queens. Their hits like Carrie’s “Before He Cheats” and Miranda’s “House That Built Me” are vital to the genre of country music. However, their radio airplay has lessened over the last decade in comparison to their success from the 2000s-2010s. When Lambert’s song “Bluebird” hit No. 1 in July 2020, it became her first No. 1 on the Billboard Country Airplay chart in eight years since “Over You” in 2012. It was also her first No. 1 on the Mediabase chart since “Automatic” in 2014 (Owen). Lambert released plenty of material within these gap years, yet none of them were able to reach the top of the radio airplay charts. Audiences obviously are eager to hear Underwood and Lambert’s material, as we can see with the success of their 2014 duet “Somethin’ Bad.” The song reached No. 1 on Billboard’s Hot Country Songs chart, becoming the first country duet by solo women to do so in more than two decades (Trust). Miranda Lambert and Carrie Underwood are two of country’s biggest household names, and the genre would not be the same without them.

There are many other notable female country artists I have yet to name. That is precisely my point – that there is and have been many female artists making great country music. The genre was built by iconic female voices, many of whom were popular enough

to cross over to the pop world. The success of these women proves that there is and always has been a desire to hear female voices. Country music would not be what it is today without female artists. The female artists of the past shaped the genre and opened doors for the women after them. It is unjust for female artists to be shut out of the genre they had a direct hand in creating.

V. ALBUM AND TOUR SUCCESSES

The women of country have proven that their music not only deserves to be heard by audiences, but it is *desired* by audiences. In this chapter, I will discuss the success of recent album releases and tours by female country artists.

Maren Morris released her sophomore album *GIRL* in March of 2019. She shattered the record for the largest streaming week of all time for a country studio album by a female artist, receiving 24 million streams in its first week of release (Nicholson, “Maren Morris’ ‘GIRL’ Breaks Streaming Record, Debuts at No. 1”). Miranda Lambert’s 2019 release *Wildcard* entered *Billboard’s* Top Country Album Chart at No. 1, becoming her seventh total and consecutive to reach the top (Billboard, “Miranda Lambert Ties No. 1 Record On Top Country Albums Chart, Hootie & The Blowfish Debut”). Ingrid Andress’s March 2020 debut album *Lady Like* set a record for the highest streaming numbers for a debut female country artist (Willman). Kacey Musgraves’s Album of the Year win at the 61st Annual Grammy Awards for *Golden Hour* was a surprising upset, as she was up against some of the most popular mainstream artists, including Cardi B, Drake, and Post Malone (Recording Academy, “Award Winners & Nominees Album of the Year”). The only other country artists to win this most coveted award were Glen Campbell in 1968, The [Dixie] Chicks in 2006, and Taylor Swift in 2009 (Recording Academy, “Award Winners & Nominees Album of the Year”). After her exciting win, Musgraves’s album streams and sales went through the roof. As of September 17, 2020, *Golden Hour* has sold 343,659 copies and has been streamed over 840,000,000 times (Nielsen). These numbers make it clear that audiences enjoy music by female artists, and the notion that “people don’t want to hear women” is proven false.

Gabby Barrett's "I Hope" has proven itself to be one of the most popular songs of 2020 so far. Reaching No. 1 on the Billboard Hot Country Songs Chart, Barrett's song is the first debut solo single since Carrie Underwood's "Jesus, Take the Wheel" to top the chart (Music Mayhem Magazine). Additionally, "I Hope" replaced Maren Morris's "The Bones" at the top of the charts, making it the first time in nine years that two solo female artists topped the chart back-to-back (Billboard, "Gabby Barrett Scores Historic No. 1 on Country Streaming Songs Chart With 'I Hope'"). Barrett makes history yet again, as her song also became the first debut single by a female artist to reach Number One on Billboard's Country Streaming Songs chart (Asker, "Gabby Barrett Scores Historic No. 1 on Country Streaming Songs Chart With 'I Hope'"). In only seven months, "I Hope" reached 200 million on-demand streams (ABC News Radio). It was certified 3x Multi-Platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) on September 15, 2020 (Music Mayhem Magazine). This certification signifies that the song has sold 3 million units in the US, with each unit equal to one paid download or 150 streams (Music Mayhem Magazine). Barrett's highly anticipated debut album *Goldmine* was released June 19, 2020. *Goldmine* broke the record for the most first-week debut streams for *any* country artist (regardless of gender) in history, receiving more than 16.1 million on-demand streams in its first week (Nicholson, "Weekly Register: Gabby Barrett's 'I Hope' Continues Streaming Songs Reign, 'Goldmine' Debuts in Top 5").

Maren Morris is currently having a great year, as her song "The Bones" has also been a record-breaker. Morris's song was certified 3x Multi-Platinum by the RIAA on September 17, 2020 (RIAA, "Gold & Platinum – RIAA"). "The Bones" ruled the Number One position on Billboard's Hot Country Chart for 19 weeks, smashing the

previous record for the longest leading Number One by a solo female since Taylor Swift held the title in October 2012 for “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together,” which spent ten weeks at the top position (Asker, “Maren Morris’ ‘The Bones’ Passes Taylor Swift Hit to Break Record at No. 1 on Hot Country Songs Chart”). Morris’s song has received tremendous pop crossover success as well. It is the first song to have reached Number One on the Adult Contemporary, Adult Pop Songs, and Country Airplay charts in over a decade, since Lady A’s “Need You Now.” “The Bones” is just the third song to achieve these three rankings at once, joining “Need You Now” and Faith Hill’s “Breathe” (Asker, “Maren Morris’ ‘The Bones’ Passes Taylor Swift Hit to Break Record at No. 1 on Hot Country Songs Chart”).

In 2019, country legend Tanya Tucker released her first full-length studio album in over a decade, *While I’m Living* (Shapiro). The album peaked at number two on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart (Billboard, “Tanya Tucker – Chart History”). *While I’m Living* won Best Country Album at the 62nd Annual Grammy Awards. Her single “Bring My Flowers Now” won Best Country Song and was also nominated for Best Country Solo Performance and all-genre Song of the Year (Recording Academy, “Artist - Tanya Tucker”).

These are just a few of the recent album successes from the women of country music. Female artists have also achieved successes in touring in recent years.

Kacey Musgraves’s album success for *Golden Hour* translated into major tour success. She added 17 new dates to her sold-out “Oh, What a World: Tour II” due to overwhelming demand, including Nashville’s Bridgestone Arena (Live Nation). After *those* tickets sold out immediately, Musgraves decided to completely rearrange her stage

setup in order to open additional seating, which also sold out. As if she hadn't already proved that people desire to hear country music by female artists, Musgraves broke the record for the largest attendance for any female artist from *any genre* at Bridgestone, with 18,373 fans in attendance (Whitaker, "Kacey Musgraves Sets New Record at Tour-Closing Nashville Show"). Oh, but *no one* wants to hear females, apparently.

Kelsea Ballerini's first headlining tour, the "Miss Me More Tour" sold out the first three dates, including her hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee (Ballerini). Maren Morris also had tremendous success for her first headlining tour, "GIRL: The World Tour." Almost all of the tickets for the U.S. dates sold out a week before her *GIRL* album had even been released. After adding a second show to her Nashville stop at Ascend Amphitheater, tickets almost sold out completely in one day (Thompson, "Maren Morris Hints at Extending Tour After Almost Selling Out Second Nashville Show").

Carrie Underwood used her power as one of country music's biggest superstars to help her fellow female artists on her 2019 "Cry Pretty 360 Tour." Underwood brought along Maddie and Tae and Runaway June, both all-female groups. With a whopping 64 tour dates, the tour averaged 11,022 fans per show (Frankenberg).

Miranda Lambert did the same in 2019 on her "Roadside Bars and Pink Guitars Tour." This girl-power lineup included Maren Morris, Elle King, Caylee Hammack, Tenille Townes, Ashley McBryde, and Lambert's bandmates Angaleena Presley and Ashley Monroe of the Pistol Annies. Lambert admitted that the all-female tour wasn't a conscious decision at first: "It was just, who are you loving and what's cool right now?" (Betts, "Miranda Lambert Covers 'Fooled Around and Fell in Love' With Maren Morris, Elle King") She said, "When we looked at this lineup...every single one of them knows

who she is; they're all out making the music that comes from that" (Gleason). She argues that audiences, especially female audiences, crave this authenticity:

In the world we're living in, people are looking for anything that's authentic and real. At a Miranda show, 80% of the audience is filled with screaming women, right as radio is saying, 'Women don't want to listen to women.' No, they want to sing along at the top of their lungs. I don't understand what that phrase means, or where it came from. It makes no sense. Only we can understand each other, understand the issues and stuff that happens to women, because it is different.

(Gleason)

During the tour, the female powerhouses recorded a cover of Elvin Bishop's 1975 hit 'Fooled Around and Fell in Love" (Betts, "Miranda Lambert Covers 'Fooled Around and Fell in Love' With Maren Morris, Elle King"). Their collaboration won the 2020 ACM Award for Musical Event of the Year, victorious over smash hits like Dan + Shay's collaboration with Justin Bieber "10,000 Hours" and Lil Nas X and Billy Ray Cyrus's "Old Town Road" (Leimkeuhler, "ACM Awards: Miranda Lambert-led 'Fooled Around and Fell In Love' wins Music Event of the Year").

This data proves that a large audience exists who craves and enjoys country music by female artists. In a time where women are still not given equal opportunities, many female artists are continuing to break ground and records with their music and tours. If these women are able to achieve such high streaming numbers and ticket sales and prestigious awards *without* equal opportunities as the men, imagine what they can achieve *with* more opportunities.

VI. GROUPS CALLING FOR CHANGE

While the sexism in country music exists, many groups combating this issue exist as well. This inequality has been a problem since the birth of the genre but has become more prevalent and more exposed to the public eye in recent years. Many groups, campaigns, and organizations have formed to fight for the women of country music.

Country Music Television, better known as CMT, is not only a launching pad for the careers of new artists, but also a huge advocate for the women of country music. In 2013, CMT launched the Next Women of Country campaign. The campaign is “a yearlong multi-platform initiative showcasing the rising generation of signed and unsigned female artists” (CMT, “CMT Launches Next Women of Country Campaign”). CMT senior vice president of music strategy Leslie Fram stated, “Women are the cornerstone of country music. We want to recognize, support and expose the next wave of authentic female artists, signed or independent, who are writing, recording and making it happen on their own in a crowded, male-dominated format” (CMT, “CMT Launches Next Women of Country Campaign”). The campaign has inducted 75 female artists into its roster, disproving the notion that “there are just not as many female artists.” The roster includes stars like Kacey Musgraves in the class of 2014, Kelsea Ballerini in the class of 2015, and Maren Morris and Carly Pearce in the class of 2016 (CMT, “CMT Reveals Next Women of Country Class of 2020”). I had the opportunity to speak with Fram about her efforts in supporting the women of country music. When asked about her goals with the Next Women of Country campaign, she replied, “We hope that our support is part of

telling their stories through our exposure on linear television and all of our digital platforms.”

Alongside the campaign, CMT launched the annual Next Women of Country Tour in 2015 – the network’s first ladies-only tour. Each year, the tour has featured all-female lineups. Headliners have included stars like Jennifer Nettles of the duo Sugarland in 2016, Martina McBride in 2017, Sara Evans in 2018, and Tanya Tucker in 2020. Support acts have included new up-and-comers such as Lindsay Ell and Lauren Alaina (CMT Press). When I asked Fram about the Next Women of Country Tours, she raved about their successes. She explained further, “We can judge this [success] by the amazing ticket sales and sold-out shows. It’s rewarding to hear the feedback from the artists, as well as they have all commented on ‘women supporting women...’ It is also a testament to the fans who are showing up, buying tickets and merch and singing along to every song!” She also revealed to me that these tours are, in many cases, the first for some of the emerging female acts. CMT is providing an incredible opportunity for female artists through this initiative.

CMT also airs an annual Artists of the Year ceremony. In 2018 the show was dedicated to the women of country music, honoring the solo female stars of the genre: Carrie Underwood, Miranda Lambert, Kelsea Ballerini, and Maren Morris. In addition, the women of country’s leading male-female groups were honored as well: Little Big Town’s Kimberly Schlapman and Karen Fairchild, and Lady A’s Hillary Scott. Loretta Lynn was honored with an Artist of the Lifetime Award. Each of the women collaborated with other artists to celebrate girl power, with performances including other female legends like Martina McBride, Sheryl Crow, and Alison Krauss (Ladd). Little Big

Town's Karen Fairchild used her acceptance speech as an opportunity to shout out her fellow females. Reading a list of 35 women in the genre off of her phone, Fairchild stated, "I just wanna say, in case anyone's watching that [these women] are there for you to support and play on the radio if you want to" (Stefano, "Karen Fairchild Uses 2018 CMT Artists of the Year Speech as a Call to Play More Women"). Her statement was met with cheers and a standing ovation from the crowd. It seems as if this audience wants to hear more women on their country radio stations. I was excited to get the opportunity to discuss this event with Leslie Fram as well. She revealed, "I am proud to say that CMT was the first network to really step up in celebrating women of country with a major award show." When asked about the public reaction to the broadcast, she stated that ratings were the highest ever for the 'Artists of the Year' franchise, and that the fan response was "overwhelmingly positive." Fram informed me that this program also highlighted women behind the scenes in the music industry, such as managers, publishers, and publicists, through a partnership with #SeeHerHearHer.

In January of 2020, CMT announced their Equal Play campaign – pledging to give men and women 50/50 airplay on their platforms. When asked about the genesis of this campaign, Fram discussed CMT's previous work with the Next Women of Country campaign and tours. She went on to say, "First and foremost, we wanted to see what more CMT could do on our own platforms...We control and program our own video hours on CMT and CMT Music and decided an equal play format; 50/50 male/female was the right thing to do!" The network has proven itself to be a leader in the initiative to boost the careers of women in country music. Fram explained, "Our hope is that other partners will follow with creating more opportunities for female artists and creators."

Bobby Bones, host of the nationally syndicated *The Bobby Bones Show*, is one of country's most popular radio DJs. Throughout his career, Bones has been an advocate for the women of country music. In 2018, he utilized his position to support female artists by creating "Women of iHeart Country," an hour-long, weekend radio show that focuses exclusively on female country artists (Inside Radio). Broadcasted on 125 iHeartMedia country stations, the show features music from "both established female artists and promising up-and-comers, with weekly guest appearances by other iHeart female on-air personalities" (Inside Radio). Rising star Lauren Alaina spoke her appreciation for Bobby's support: "Bobby has changed our format for the better in so many ways. He has been a champion for so many people who really need someone in their corner. I am so thankful to be one of those people. I am so excited for his 'Women of iHeartCountry' show" (Inside Radio).

Song Suffragettes is a weekly female singer-songwriter showcase held at the Listening Room Café in Nashville. Their motto, "Let the Girls Play," speaks for itself. When speaking of the origin of the showcase, founder Todd Cassetty said, "We thought, if we create a female-only weekly show where a lot of these women can come, play their songs, try them out, see what their responses are, meet like-minded creatives, they would benefit, and hopefully the community as a whole would benefit" (PBS). It seems, his goals for the showcase have been met. *Song Suffragettes* has become one of Nashville's top destinations to hear up-and-coming songwriters. Tickets are sold out almost every week, as the showcase frequently posts on social media. The Suffragettes have created multiple music videos, including an original song "Time's Up," a message about the mistreatment of women in society inspired by the #MeToo movement. The powerful

music video received over 155,000 views on YouTube. Proceeds from the downloads of the song went towards the Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, which supports victims of sexual harassment and assault (Dukes). A few months after the release, The Suffragettes wrote a \$10,000 check to the fund (Laffer). The Suffragettes have also covered and created music videos for Keith Urban's "Female" and Taylor Swift's "The Man," receiving national attention through outlets like Rolling Stone Magazine and the Today Show (Moss).

Change the Conversation is a coalition founded by Leslie Fram, Beverly Keel, and Tracy Gershon. Their mission is to "raise awareness and create change so that more female voices will be heard in country music" (Change the Conversation). While commissioning research to dispel the myth that women don't want to hear women, the group provides support for female artists and executives through mentoring opportunities, artist development, and industry conferences and panels (Change the Conversation). Leslie Fram stated, "Our mission is to, honestly, not have this conversation, but we have a long way to go in resolving gender imbalance."

Women Of Music Action Network, or WOMAN Nashville, is another coalition formed to create change in the industry's sexist environment. Their motto "Women Want More" informs that women want more marketshare, opportunities, resources, and equality (WOMAN Nashville). WOMAN Nashville works to expose the gender bias of the industry while supporting the female artists that are working to get their music heard. Their website states, "There isn't a lack of females wanting to make it in country music. What we lack is a significant number of people and places that are willing to play them"

(WOMAN Nashville). The coalition works to encourage members of the industry to take action, providing direct opportunities to create change from the inside out.

These are just a few of the individuals and organizations that are actively fighting this gender inequality in country music. The female artists are *there*, the fans eager to hear their music are *there*, and the groups supporting these women are *there*. The industry needs to listen.

VII. CONCLUSION

Female artists are vital to the country music genre. The myth that ‘women don’t want to hear women’ is unfounded when previous examples of successful female artists, albums, and songs are presented. Data also demonstrates that listeners crave more female voices on country radio. 10 percent of radio airplay from an entire *decade* is not enough. All-male festival lineups are not acceptable. All-male winning streaks at award ceremonies are not adequate. If one were the looking at the country music genre from the outside in, one might conclude that there are simply not as many women participating in the genre, or that women ‘just need to make better music.’ The industry has created a false narrative of what country music is and whom it represents. There *are* many female artists making great country music, just like there are male artists making great country music. Women are not asking for special treatment, they are asking for an equal playing field where they do not face obstacles that are placed simply because of their gender. Taylor Swift’s 2019 pop anthem “The Man” said it best: “I’m so sick of running as fast as I can, wondering if I’d get there quicker if I was a man.”

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