

The connotations of country music

[Art & Culture](#), [Music](#)



Introduction

Contrary to popular belief, country music is not as universally American as is often assumed. For many, in fact, the genre is almost taboo – those willing to publicly admit they enjoy country music are often ridiculed or written off, despite the continued presence of country music on Billboard charts. This tension is more insidious than it appears at first glance. While most trivialize this stigmatization, tracing it back to simple individual musical preference, it is in reality the byproduct of a rural and working-class connotation developed over decades. In short, it is a class issue.

The Sound of Whiteness

The phrase ‘country music’ itself is the direct result of 1920s American racism. Since societal expectations at the time prevented all blues-based music from being grouped together (a category which would have mixed white and black), distinct Southern musical styles were segregated into two brackets: ‘hillbilly’ and ‘race.’ That divide – while primarily racial – is also classist, and the intermingling of this tension with the era’s already prejudiced legal and social systems had an exceptionally clear outcome. Hillbilly music, the precursor to what we now call country, became the sound of whiteness.

Authenticity

Country musicians define themselves by demonstrating authenticity. To succeed in the genre you need to be relatable, real, and loyal to your roots. Country music is extremely thematically consistent, and we all know the buzzwords (trucks, beer, dirt – the list goes on). Pop country musicians are

often criticized for lacking this personal background, and their music is seen as less-than because it lacks that original meaning and value. Johnny Cash himself has accused today's country musicians of fraudulence, explaining that their music isn't worth as much because they didn't grow up picking cotton in the fields like he did.

Blue-Collar Class Music and Stigmatization

Ironically, this fixation on authenticity has also cemented the genre's position as the music of white, working-class America. Country music now almost exclusively represents a low, blue-collar class, and that's something that many do not want to associate themselves with. Admitting you enjoy country music means admitting you like something inherently and undeniably working class, an act that threatens your status as middle or upper class. "Country music's potency as a creator of classed taste and identity is evident in the derision and anxiety it arouses in the dominant culture," writes University of Michigan scholar Nadine Hubbs.

Conscious or not, that connotation is the primary reason many Americans avoid country music – not simple musical preference. Shania Twain, country crossover icon, proved this when she released different versions of her album *Up!* in 2002. One version featured traditional country instrumentation, including fiddle tracks and steel guitar. Another exchanged these elements for pop synth tracks. A third version targeted a more international audience with Bollywood influence. As a result of how it catered to what each market found listenable, the album went 11x platinum. While it is understandable that different demographics have different conceptions of what sounds good

or right, it is less understandable that they are willing to write off the same lyrics of the same popular song they enjoy in a different setting. The ‘musical preference’ rationale of country music’s stigmatization fails to explain this phenomenon.

Conclusion

An early industry decision to segregate Southern music, combined with self-imposed values that constrain the genre, have made country music the soundtrack of rural America. This connotation, intentionally or not, serves as a deterrent for a large percentage of the general population. Enjoying country music jeopardizes social status, a long-lasting consequence that haunts the genre’s popularity to this day.