Going Back to the Old Mainstream: No Depression, Robbie Fulks, and Alt. Country's Muddied Waters

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In 1972, when Doctor Hook and the Medicine Show sang "The Cover of the Rolling Stone," they cast rock critics as arbiters of stardom. By the time Cameron Crowe used this song in his 2000 film Almost Famous, it held little irony. Sex and drugs were good but they just couldn't compare to joining the magazine's anointed. Currently, some alternative country aspirant could sing the same tune about No Depression. The magazine, now in its eighth year, invariably uses its cover to showcase an alt.country artist. It has sponsored alt.country package tours (in which the editors indulge the fan’s dream of performing with their heroes); it produces a syndicated No Depression radio show; and it publishes a longstanding top 40 chart, all of which clearly mark participants and confer status in the genre. In short, No Depression presides at the gates of alt.country heaven. Its surprisingly gushy feature articles break no new ground in the field of music journalism, but at the same time the magazine may be the only one to ever play such a crucial role in the formation of a popular music genre. Rolling Stone and its ilk covered relatively well-established genres; No Depression helped establish alternative country as an alternative to mainstream, Nashville-produced "hot new country." At the same time, the way in which it has depicted the genre and its audience and the way this depiction has moved through the culture indicates that alt.country is in many ways not alternative at all. In particular, I will argue that No Depression uses a macho nostalgia to distinguish alt.country from both rock music and contemporary country music. While sociologists Richard A. Peterson and Bruce A. Beal note that
alt.country fans evince a generalized "antimodernist" politics, they do not emphasize the way the fight against modernity is associated with masculine valor and feminine corruption. Alt.country discourse separates the men, not only from the women, but also from the guys in cowboy hats, now a sartorial symbol of Nashville's domination rather than wild-west independence.

Communications scholar Jason Toynbee describes the formation of popular music genres as a "social process" which allows particular groups to validate their interests by investing the music with significance. In his words, a musical genre functions within a "deeply embedded discourse which states that the validity of a musical style will be measured by the extent to which it is an expression of grass-roots values and identity." Likewise, music critic and scholar Simon Frith notes that music genres also convey "ideological and social discourses. . . . It is genre rules which determine how musical forms are taken to convey meaning and value, which determine the aptness of different sorts of judgment, which determine the competence of different sorts of people to make assessments. It is through genres that we . . . bring together the aesthetic and the ethical." The question, then, is not only whose ethical and aesthetic values and whose identity No Depression and alternative country express, but also how. The techniques of literary analysis, which uncover recurring images and narrative patterns, can begin to answer those questions. To begin, I'll discuss four features of No Depression discourse: its coy enforcement of "genre rules," its emphasis on (perhaps unwitting) male bonding, its belief that authenticity lies in opposition to Nashville, and its self-conscious insistence on a nostalgic visual style. Finally, I will discuss the career of Robbie Fulks to argue that No Depression's portrayal of genre rules, masculinity, authenticity, and nostalgia shapes the experience and creation of other aspects of alt.country discourse, including the music itself.

If You Have to Ask . . .

No Depression's ironic subtitle, "alt.country . . . whatever that is," simultaneously seems to enfold and withhold the definition of alt.country. It flaunts a tastemaker's secret knowledge of genre rules even if it once indicated a sincere desire to leave the borders of alt.country unpatrolled. Volume I, no. 1 (Fall
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1995) announced itself as "the alternative country quarterly." One year later, the magazine became "the alt.country (whatever that is) bimonthly;" in May–June 2003, it called itself the "Try a little alt.country (whatever that is) bimonthly." In their introduction to a 1998 anthology of articles from the magazine, editors Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock claim that they use the phrase "alternative country" with "gentle sarcasm," they also complain that this tone "seems rarely to have translated." But five years later they stand by their inscrutability—and why not? By refusing to define alt.country, they preserve the right to decide who shines as an alt.country star. As Alden put it in a November–December 1997 editorial, "Peter and I have been telling interviewers ever since we started this magazine that... No Depression is and hopefully always will be a magazine guided by the music which engages its two editors. As in: Stuff we like." In their anthology introduction, they describe the stuff they like as "either too old, too loud, or too eccentric for country radio." No Depression, then, competes with country radio for taste-making power, and it's simply assumed that the stuff that No Depression editors like ought to play on country radio, and since it doesn't, they are entitled to alternatives. This sarcasm, gentle or no, indicates just how important maintaining an insider's knowledge is to the genre. If you have to ask more questions about the alternatives, their sarcasm suggests, we don't want you to know. You don't share the aesthetic and ethical values of the group and aren't "competent" (to further repeat Frith) to discern the self-evident merits of the old, loud, and eccentric. In short, No Depression doesn't define "alternative" beyond pointing to mainstream country radio's refusal to see things the No Depression way. On the other hand, the ungenerously sarcastic definition offered by "The Rock Snob's Dictionary" highlights the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the group identity under construction: "alt.country. Self-righteous rock country hybrid genre whose practitioners favor warbly, studiedly imperfect vocals, nubby flannel shirts, and a conviction that their take on country is more 'real' than the stuff coming out of Nashville... Also known as the No Depression movement."7

... You're Not One of Us ...

While women such as Lucinda Williams, Gillian Welch, and Emmylou Harris regularly grace the cover of No Depression, a glance at bylines on the articles
and signatures on the letters to the editors indicates that *No Depression* is a magazine written by men for men. In May–June 2003, for example, not a single major article was written by a woman; the September–October 1999 issue, more or less the midway point in the magazine’s current life span, also has none. Volume I, no. 1 (Fall 1995) features just one. Of the thirty-seven articles in the 1998 anthology, six were written by women. In this respect, *No Depression* differs little from mainstream country journalism. The semischolarly *Journal of Country Music* (published under the auspices of the Country Music Foundation) and the glossy bimonthly *Country Music* (soon to cease publication) share similar gender parity statistics. In fact, male dominance in itself is nothing new in the world of pop music journalism. As rock critic and communications scholar Kembrew McLeod has documented, rock criticism is also dominated by men who similarly valorize their own discernment by contrasting it to the supposedly corrupt commercialism of mainstream music.

Furthermore, *No Depression* rarely prints a negative review or critical profile, and in this respect, *The Alternative Country Bimonthly* doesn’t offer much of an alternative to the star-making machinery that is glossy commercial music journalism. Some *No Depression* profile articles I’ve read simply paraphrase liner notes in lieu of reporting, and it’s a short step from there to paraphrasing commercially inspired press kits. Other profiles are star-struck and stuck in the time-honored mode of domestic reportage described by Peter La Chapelle elsewhere in this volume. For example, in the July–August 2002 issue, novelist Silas House marvels at how beautiful and polite Kelly Willis was when he interviewed her. She let him sit in her backyard and offered him a drink! She’s a “deep thinker,” too. Her husband, Bruce Robison, songwriter for hot new country luminaries such as Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, happened to be at home during the interview, and House unironically enthuses about what a cute couple they make: “Robison is a tall and incredibly likable fellow. . . . [i]f alt.country had a prom, Willis and Robison might well be its king and queen.”

While *No Depression* mirrors mainstream rock and country magazines in its male-dominated writing staff and adolescent adulation, it is unique in its first-person zine-ish rantings and its coverage of local scenes. The editors regularly contribute reviews and features, and in particular, their opening column, “Hello Stranger,” links the magazine to its origins in youthful enthusiasm rather than careerist self-promotion. In the seven-year stretch of this column, Alden and Blackstock have told a sketchy story: first came disillusionment
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with the commercial co-optation of punk and grunge after which they "fell into country music" (November–December 1997); beginning in 1994, they participated in an AOL Internet discussion group on the band Uncle Tupelo which branched out into other artists. The board called itself "No Depression–Alternative Country." No Depression was the title of Uncle Tupelo's 1990 album, which included a cover version of the Carter Family's song of that name; the magazine, the editors explain, took its title from the Internet community, from Uncle Tupelo, and from the Carter Family. Those roots sprawl over a seventy-year time span, so should No Depression continue to thrive, Alden and Blackstock still have many chapters to tell about the No Depression story. They haven't yet said much about why punk frustration should lead to country as opposed to another popular music genre, or about why, at the same time, it really didn't, since they need an alternative to country, too, or about why, in particular, they often seek that alternative by looking backwards.14 The inspirational Carter Family song expressed religious faith in the future. "I'm going to where there's no depression" meant going to heaven. Is this phrase, too, now used with "gentle sarcasm?" Does No Depression discourse transcend economic and psychological gloom (as the song does), or does it, in a rigidly ironical fashion, affect deprivation and despair?15

In fact, commiserating with the downtrodden is an important theme in traditional country music, a.k.a. the white man's blues. Because of this association with the disgraced white south, No Depression's editors frequently feel compelled to defend themselves against charges of racism and conservatism. "I do not yet—or ever—imagine myself a conservative," Alden temporizes in his July–August 2001 opener. In January–February 2001, he argued that alt.country fandom in itself makes a political statement since it evades the "siren calls of mainstream society." In January–February 2002, No Depression started a regular feature called "Sittin' and Thinkin'," in which the editors "ask some of our finest writers to wrestle with the many ghosts who inhabit our music;" so far nearly half the essays, written by the usual crew, have dealt with the topic of African American influences on country music. In September–October 1996, they congratulated themselves for their cover photo of Hank Williams posing with blackface comedians Jam Up and Honey. They got few complaints, they say, so, as usual, they "have no idea what that means." In March–April 1999, as Alden attempts to answer roots-rocker Will Oldham's
charge that *No Depression* is about white people's music, he juxtaposed the accusation with a quotation from *Walden*: "Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?" Sanctioning embracing the arrogance that Thoreau wards off, Alden exonerated himself with the following proof of his miraculous vision: late one night, stopped at an intersection, he notices a black man in a neighboring lane.

We are both smiling to the music playing loudly in our cars. The beats come hard from his trunk... loud enough that I am reminded how far out of touch with contemporary hip-hop I have become. It is equally doubtful that he will recognize the Del McCoury band seeping through my doors but there is still an instant when our tired eyes meet and our lips barely smile.

He concludes by stating that even though he can't remember what the black man looked like, he still remembers the moment they shared. Whatever that is.

While charges of racism and conservatism clearly raise the editors' hipster hackles, they feel no compunction about the masculine bias that structures their discourse. The image of mainstream society as a seductively feminine "siren song" allows no evasive "whatever that is" answers to questions about how alt.country, mainstream’s opposite, defines its gender. Similarly, in May-June 1998, Grant Alden connects punk to country through a particular filial line: "one comes late to country music... drawn by its capacity to reveal the unvarnished truth, that joyous link between Hank Williams and Sid Vicious." Peter Blackstock opens the following issue (July-August 1998) with the claim that alt.country songs can be "pure and simple folk music, made and played by the people, for the people." The experience he describes to demonstrate this populism, however, wasn't for people like me.

It was purely for the college guys: a professor’s bachelor party where the groom’s friends, many meeting for the first time, sat in a circle with their guitars and learned that they all liked Wilco, Son Volt, Uncle Tupelo, Robert Earl Keen, and Townes Van Zant. Significantly, Blackstock claims that the shared music gave the men a "common language."
Circle sing-a-longs provide one example of *No Depression*’s “common language,” and record collecting, another bachelor pad practice, further solidifies the masculine domain of what Blackstock calls “this little corner of the underground.” As communications scholar Will Straw notes, the record collector tends to present himself as a hip male connoisseur, an image most widely disseminated in Nick Hornby’s 1995 novel *High Fidelity* (and the movie made from it), but this characterization is tacitly accepted in most discourse about popular music. Like rock criticism, the “homosocial interaction” engendered by such collecting reinforces the tastes of the men involved, creating and confirming “a shared universe of critical judgment”—not unlike the “genre rules” described by Frith and Toynbee.\(^{19}\) Indeed, so strong is the power of this image that even Hornby’s skewering of its adolescent machismo has not dislocated its pretensions to hipness. The music journalists and record geeks must have been sneering at pop songs, swooning over alternatives, haunting used record bins, making compilations, working on their endless taste-making systems of lists and ratings, and avoiding women while the rest of us were laughing at *High Fidelity*. For example, upon his arrival in Nashville, Alden boastfully bemoans the “record collecting geek” part of himself that has to haul so many heavy boxes of “vinyl” into his new apartment, located near a huge used record store where he hopes to acquire still more. In July–August 2001, he displays his connoisseurship in his description of his home office, “a room filled with books and records and art and photographs and compact discs and cassettes that crunch underfoot.” Gender conflicts subtly come into play here when Alden adds that his wife “will tell you I’m not a tidy fellow.”\(^{20}\) His discriminating eyes see “art” where she merely sees a mess.

*No Depression*’s unvarying table of contents similarly reflects the willful obscurity and contrived authenticity of the male music connoisseur. The magazine literally focuses on the margins in “A Place to Be,” a travel column which beams a spotlight on various backwater shrines such as the Carter Family home in Maces Springs, Virginia, or Buck Owens’s Crystal Palace in Bakersfield, California; the articles are usually written by visitors to these places rather than by residents. Likewise, each issue includes “Town & Country: Brief Regional Features,” consisting mostly of club-hopping accounts of
concerts in college towns such as Madison, Iowa City, or Gainesville. Cover stories and other profiles (listed in the table of contents as “Extended Cuts”) routinely engage in genealogical praise of country traditionalists. Stories on contemporary artists, nearly all of them somewhat obscure, often grow out of a conversation between record collectors: Blackstock opens his profile of Buddy Miller by confessing that he received a promotional copy of Miller’s debut but set it aside since he’d never heard of this artist. He only listened after a few of the members of the No Depression online community posted their own rave reviews of it.21 Likewise, Roy Kasten discovered Ray Wylie Hubbard on a compilation tape a friend gave him, and he uses this fact to start his article on the singer.22 Ultimately, record collecting takes pride of place in the pages of No Depression; reviews consume roughly a quarter of each issue with special sections devoted to the historical perspective provided by reissues, tributes, and compilations. A Summer 1996 letter to the editors from Mike McAfee of Evanston, Illinois, sums up well the defensive mix of record shopping and fraternity blackballing that alt.country shares with other genre-rule enforcers:

This is how much I value your publication: After reading about several artists and/or their recordings in the spring issue, I have acquired the following CDs [a list of 10]. . . . Speaking of Son Volt [an Uncle Tupelo offshoot], I was driving through a very rural part of America a few days ago and I heard “Drown” sandwiched between a Van Halen and AC/DC song. I think this is great for them as they deserve the recognition and the financial rewards that come with it (although they could care less about either of those), but part of it also bothers me because now we have to share them with the masses. Of course those lame stations wouldn’t dare play a song that had a fiddle or a steel guitar in them. By the way what the hell was I doing listening to that lame station? . . . [P]erhaps I was searching for a truer sound!

Even in McAfee’s heart of the heartland, radio stations threaten alt.country purity, but, as this letter so uncomfortably admits, once the music gets shared with the heartland’s masses, alt.country risks losing its identity.
... You Might Even Live in Nashville...

When *No Depression* and alternative country tell their stories, the mainstream-versus-alternative conflict often plays out as a battle of the sexes. Nashville, a capitalist siren, attempts to lure a sincere little Ulysses who just wants to make his own kind of music. In May–June 1997, Grant Alden recounts his move there. His quest was “to learn something about country’s past, and maybe to figure out how its present got so screwed up.” In the next issue, he was able to explain the screwed up part: Music City’s domestication. The music executives, he asserts, go home at five o’clock and don’t venture back out at night to catch the club acts. This observation proves that the *No Depression* brotherhood is “still having a conversation about something which deeply matters,” while the Nashville drones are simply doing their jobs and then dutifully going home to their wives. He concludes that “if the music no longer delights and inspires you enough to get off the couch a few nights each week, you’re in the wrong business.” The stable of freelance writers who do the *No Depression* profiles and record reviews adopt a similar “us-against-them” rhetoric to define their subjects. Profiling Elizabeth Cook in September–October 2002, Bill Friskics-Warren rails against “the narrow strictures of the Nashville hit mill.”

A nearly identical epithet appears later in the same issue in the same writer’s review of Allison Moorer’s new record. Her songs, he exults, “are just too rawboned and personal” to mesh with “the hegemony of Nashville’s niche-obsessed hit mill.” Some alt.country artists have their ritual Nashville bashing song, too, and it’s here that perhaps the enemy comes most clearly into view. As *No Depression* cover boy Robbie Fulks put it in his notorious song, “Fuck This Town,” Nashville doesn’t produce country music; it’s “soft rock feminist crap” usually sung by “a faggot in a hat.” Indeed, for the past decade, commercial country radio, especially the hot new country format, appeals particularly to women. Fulks feminizes the city even more overtly in the record compilation he imagines in his ironic liner notes to his ironically titled *The Very Best of Robbie Fulks*. The song “White Man’s Bourbon” comes from *Nashville, We Will Slice Your Putrid Cunt to Ribbons*. As opposed to the feminine new country, there’s the macho alt.

Fulks makes a good case study of an alternative, whatever that is. Indeed, in Alden’s cryptic story about his fall into country music (November–December
1997), Fulks shines the blinding light on the road to Nashville. Unhappily "pumping the star-making machine of grunge from an editorial desk in Seattle," Alden noticed "the first two Diesel Only compilations and the first offering from Bloodshot. Enter [Bloodshot artist] Robbie Fulks." In Kevin Roe's Summer 1996 coverage of Fulks's career, *No Depression* evinces the desperate discursive groping for an enemy to be an alternative to, taking special delight in citing Fulks's radio-unready lyrics. The first Fulks song cited, "She Took a Lot of Pills (and Died)," is described as "not your typical happy-go lucky Hollywood starlet suicide tale." I guess the guys know which typical songs Roe's talking about, they must be playing all the time somewhere, but once again, I'd have to ask. This profile also cites the gruesome and graphic list of pig parts that Fulks sings about in "The Scrapple Song" and goes on to devote nearly half the article to discussing the as-yet unreleased "Fuck This Town." Fulks next graced the cover of the September–October 1997 issue; that photo is captioned with a line from the anti-Nashville ditty, and on the inside, Bill Friskics-Warren devotes a full page article to the song. Linda Ray's extensive profile of Fulks in this issue revisits these songs, too.

Like Alden and Blackstock, Fulks is an inscrutable master of sarcasm although he probably wouldn't claim to be gentle. He further resembles *No Depression* 's editors in his own aspirations to literary journalism. He maintains an ostentatiously literate web site with many personal essays about his life as a beleaguered alt.country artist (the "My Day" section of www.RobbieFulks.com). For example, as he describes the vicissitudes of producing Dallas Wayne's CD *Big Thinkin*', he compares himself to a major American writer (and a woman at that!): "Willa Cather advised sacrificing twelve long stories to one good short story; today the altar is bloody with eight-bar oblations." While art may be the angel he wrestles with most intensely, women bedevil him more frequently. Fulks displays such hyperbolic misogyny that he could easily plead irony if he didn't constantly cultivate this sour grapevine. A sepia photo of a weathered country bumpkin about to attack a woman with an axe graces the cover of his debut album, *Country Love Songs*—implying that the juxtaposition of those two words, "country" and "love," means "hate." As if to confirm that suspicion, on his web site he boasts of writing a scabrous song called "Hating Women" in reaction to the Music City gurus who constantly counseled him to "say
something nice about women” (although he is not man enough to print the lyrics). He reiterates his complaints in his over-the-top profile of 1950s country diva Jean Shepard in the *Journal of Country Music*. Even as he purports to praise her as a daring pioneer, he resents the gate crashing: “Today, fifty years after Jean first stepped behind a vocal mike . . . , the male voice in country is in danger of drowning in the estrogen tide, being reduced to a timid whisper of appeasement beneath the stampede of sexy vinyl boots.”

When he graced the cover of this journal, the profile opened with a description of Fulks in Shania Twain drag, performing her “Man, I Feel Like a Woman.”
Fulks’s encyclopedic repertoire mirrors No Depression’s interest in displaying a mastery over country music history. His “White Man’s Bourbon,” an outtake intended for Country Love Songs, explains how to feel like a man (and manages to offend all around). The singer claims to be on a hunting trip in Namibia when he spies an enticing “Zulu maid” whom he seduces with his flask. He goes on to advise his audience, presumably men, to use the same technique, since without this liquid enticement, the white male anatomy would only provoke laughter. “From Dakar to Durbin, it’s the white man’s bourbon make a Black girl holler for more,” he concludes. As he defends himself against the “sensitive souls at the [recording] session” who “objected to being publicly associated with such a thing,” Fulks explains it as a sort of country music research project, his “modest contribution to the canon of amour exotique” and cites predecessors such as “Ubangi Stomp” and “Brown Sugar.” In fact, he planned Country Love Songs as a scholarly project, hoping to include “all the kinds of songs people don’t do in country music any more—the food song, the death song, the Latin rhythm song, the xenophobic song.” Fulks’s 2001 release, 13 Hillbilly Giants, similarly draws its inspiration from his record collection and extends his didactic aspirations. A sort of Hornby-style compilation tape, the disc features covers of forgotten songs by Bill Anderson, Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton, Wynn Stewart, and more obscure country artists from the past. Fulks wants to “offer my audience, many of whom don’t listen to much country, a piece of the treasure map I’ve been haphazardly assembling for the last dozen years.” On his website, he writes a brief critical biography of each so-called giant, replete with references to the Journal of Country Music and other exhaustive compendia of historical information. In order to expand his fans’ record collections, he also gives internet links to sellers who stock disks by the thirteen giants who have anything in print.

While the record-collector’s mastery and the Nashville-hater’s misogyny link Fulks to No Depression’s favorite subjects, Fulks approaches political questions quite differently.

Whereas No Depression stays silent on gender issues even as it asserts its political and racial liberalism, Fulks plays the role of the embattled patriarch. His 1997 album South Mouth draws its name from a Florence King column in the National Review: “South Mouth: or Why Liberals Hate Dixie.” While King
uses the term to excoriate “liberal” criticism of the South, the definition she gives seems to describe a disease that afflicts Fulks himself: “South Mouth, a recurring infection that causes its sufferers to spout criticism, drip invective, ooze sanctimony, and chew rugs.” I’m not sure how *No Depression* would defend Fulks from charges of conservatism: reading the *National Review* for Florence King’s “deathless coinages” strikes me as akin to reading *Playboy* for its interviews with great novelists. Indeed, on the cover of *South Mouth*, Fulks portrays himself as a sort of new believer, a liberal undergoing a cure: a crude portrait features a gruesome padlock piercing Fulks’s mouth. There is no title track so the disc almost certainly takes its name from this drawing. Fulks makes a similar disavowal in “Bloodshot’s Turning 5,” the snide ditty he wrote for his label’s fifth anniversary compilation. Liberalism simply fits alt.country’s marketing plan, he implies. Bloodshot, he sings, took “the twang of a steel guitar [and] a little trendy left-wing jive” to create its niche.

... During the 21st Century ...

Even as the term “alt.country” handily captures the high-tech lingo of the internet, the panache of alternative rock, and all sorts of symbolic slaps at the bourgeoisie, it also conveys nostalgia for the good alt days when red-blooded he-men sang as they pleased. Thus, in its visuals, *No Depression* (and many alt.country album covers) hearkens back to the 1930s and ’40s. On their website, the *No Depression* editors specifically counsel potential contributors to observe this retro style. In September–October 2002, they claim that modern-day computer-created graphics obscure the words, while they “approached this [publishing] enterprise with a radically retrograde philosophy: words are good.” Their design preference indicates their refusal of “the mainstream of American magazine publishing wisdom;” instead, they prefer older models of wisdom. As we know, they particularly like the “common language” of college guys with guitars.Similarly, on their homepage, the images that direct surfers to the relevant sections all depict men involved in publishing, except for a comely secretary who evidently handles subscription gruntwork. Still, from their first cover to their most recent, they claim, they have drawn inspiration
from the September 1937 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Their 1998 anthology was festooned with retro clip art such as old tractors, cowboy boots, and portable record players. David Goodman, whose *Modern Twang: Alternative Country Guide and Directory* was designed by the same designer and featured similar “Americana icons,” explained to interviewer Renee Dechert that these images were chosen because alt.country “is a pretty male dominated genre so the icons are weighted heavily toward ‘guy things.’” The division of labor implied by the icons, with women in the home and gardens and men on the range, at the record players, and writing music criticism, must be one of the alternatives to today’s mainstream country.
Even though Homes and Gardens Were Better in the Good Alt. Days

The unprecedented success of the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack validated *No Depression*'s perspective on alternatives to commercial country music since the magazine had featured such soundtrack standouts as Gillian Welch, Allison Krauss, Ralph Stanley, and even producer T. Bone Burnett long before the film was released. The confluence of the film's and the magazine's musical preferences not only brought alt.country a new level of recognition, it also solidified the nostalgic perspective inherent to *No Depression* and thus to alt.country. In the story *O Brother* tells, white men can be officially pardoned for their crimes, they emerge safely from skirmishes with sirens, and they pretend to be black when it advances their careers. Politicians embrace integration for the same reason. But mostly, the music confirms men's place in the ruling order. The Soggy Bottom Boys become part of the governor's "Brain Trust." Similarly, in the pages of *No Depression*, Capra-esque heroes armed with guitars and grim determination fight Nashville's feminized and profit-driven innovation, exchange fleeting smiles with black men at the crossroads, and rightfully assume positions of power. Because *No Depression* portrays the battle through images of the past and the enemy as a woman, victory, too, implicitly lies in a return to the better homes and gardens of the good old days rather than the embrace of a new (and inevitably more diverse) cultural order. It seems that for those who already know what alternative country is, there was relatively little depression in the days before hot new country, before the civil rights movement in the South, and before the second wave of feminism gave women alternatives to improving homes and gardens.

At the same time, the success of *O Brother* highlights the paradox of alt.country's quest for authentic musical expression. In theory, authenticity, like alt.country itself, requires no definition. Authenticity simply is what it is. But, the story goes, Nashville has so corrupted the audience for country music that only a select fraternity resist the siren and know good music when they hear it (or read about it). Hence, in the paradoxical discourse of alt.country, the authentic figures as an artistic ideal, depicted in staged photographs and retro imagery rather than in the experiences of people who work and wander through the dislocations of the here and now—the very people who favored
country music back when it was presumably real enough to need no alternative. Hence, in the July–August 2001 issue, Alden worries over the fact that you can hear the O Brother soundtrack playing while you shop in a middle-America emporium like Target. In his online essays, Fulks is even more unrestrained in his disdain for life as it is lived in the boondocks. On the way to a tax audit, necessity forces him to stop at a strip mall for lunch. Since the restaurant teems with “glassy-eyed office drones, potbellied bozos with pagers on their Dockers, anhedonic single moms, and desperate pink-collar climbers,” Fulks pronounces that “my wife and I will have our sandwiches to go.”

Fulks does not exempt his fans from his scorn, either. While he complains about Nashville’s attempt to saturate a “moron market” with its tuneful feminism, he also denounces the alternative crowd. On his web site, he describes his audience at a particular show in Houston as “a heterogeneous lot. There are hillbilly anarchist types, a big table of refugees from some consultants’ convention, a handful of gorgeous, smartly dressed young women . . . and quite a few others arrayed in soothing earth tones who look to have had sexual fantasies about Mother Maybelle Carter. . . . And, on the other side of the humanoid spectrum, the five drunk young uber-hicks.” One Fulks song labels his audience “Roots Rock Weirdoes” who will only be happy when every band consists of “four white guys.” The singer fears the cultural agenda of these wannabes who affect a black accent even as they worship a “fat dead cracker king” and poison the air with three-chord songs and “self-regard.” He further underscores (and mocks) the retrograde sensibility in the song’s fade-out, adopting the voice of a crazed Viennese psychoanalyst who insists that “I prefer your earlier verk [work].” This song, he jokes in his Best of liner notes, first appeared on a “limited-release 45” entitled I Loathe My Fans.

While Fulks may have led No Depression’s editors to alt.country, No Depression led him to the dreaded mainstream. It turns out that David Geffen, of Joni Mitchell’s “Free Man in Paris” and original operator of the “starmaking machinery behind the popular song,” wanted to send Fulks down his assembly line. Geffen’s representatives were reading the alternative ’zine to do their scouting, and the brief No Depression profile of Fulks in Summer 1996 inspired them to offer alt.country’s hero an alternative to dissing the mainstream. Paradoxically, Linda Ray’s subsequent cover story trumpets this turn of events in its subtitle, a banner that spans two pages: “Robbie Fulks bids
adieu to Bloodshot and gets ready for the big leagues.” The big leagues weren’t yet ready for Fulks, though. Shortly after Geffen Records released *Let’s Kill Saturday Night* (1998), the label was bought and all but the top-selling artists released from their contracts. Fulks returned to Bloodshot but he’s chafing at the limitations of their formula. Paradoxically, the Geffen executives let him do what he wanted, he says, and the songs on *Let’s Kill Saturday Night* indicate that Fulks sometimes likes to sound like a pop singer. For that matter, even *The Very Best of Robbie Fulks* has a tear-soaked cover of John Denver’s “Leavin’ on a Jet Plane” and a jingly ode to pop singer Susanna Hoffs, “That Bangle Girl.” *Couples in Trouble*, Fulks’s 2001 release, resolutely abandons country song scholarship and Fulks’s assertively offensive earlier verk. Heartbreak, rather than genre rules, holds this album together.

**Conclusion**

“I’m Going to Where There’s No Depression”

While *No Depression* long ago settled into a preference for earlier work, I keep listening to Fulks in the hope that his quick wit and high-powered alienation can craft something new. Even as he engages in the forms of connoisseurship he detests in his fans, he seems to want to break free of the “aesthetic and ethical” dictates of “genre rules.” He characterizes alt.country musicians as “a bunch of thirtysomethings who sound exactly like old country stars except that they can’t write songs and can’t really sing the songs they can’t write.” Alt.country’s particular credos, he repeatedly implies, have infected him with “South Mouth.” In a moment of self-loathing, just before he plays a show in the city of the Siren, he notes his symptoms:

I guess because it’s Nashville and it’s me, I can’t stop slamming contemporary country music between songs. . . . How easy to go around tearing down, tearing down, tearing down; how superior and discerning one must be to jeer at mass-market entertainment; how very canny of oneself to secure a small but comfortable niche in the roots-cracker-fringe-roadhouse-Western-Beat firmament with crude ideological invective rather than honest musical labor.
Even more searing is the moment when Fulks calls himself a "hat whore." Given the chance to pose for a GQ fashion spread featuring alt.country stars, Fulks can't summon the courage to reject a cowboy hat the stylists want him to wear. He posts his shame on the worldwide web: "let's be perfectly honest, and I don't care how shallow it sounds: I am thrilled to be in GQ." As he does an interview with a GQ staffwriter, Fulks again finds himself fulminating against Nashville, offering witty epigrams and "pithy concoction[s] . . . that should play pretty well in the august pages of GQ." When one of his heroes, Buck Owens, rewrote "The Cover of the Rolling Stone" as "The Cover of the Music City News" (1974), he celebrated his exclusion from the critically anointed elite. It's too late for Fulks to offer up "The Cover of No Depression," but he needs a similar aesthetic populism. Like Owens on Hee Haw, Fulks has cast himself as the incurable rustic, too rude even for Nashville. As his stories reveal, he repeatedly falls from the sublime to the ridiculous. Even his No Depression canonization saps his power, subjecting him to the "left-wing jive" of alt.country's entrepreneurs. In fact, his most objectionable songs, whether I like them or not, portray a simultaneously comic and violent impotence. White men have nothing but bourbon to offer: like his hard-country predecessors Hank Williams and Buck Owens, Fulks self-consciously burlesques the role of the powerful white man while No Depression offers its readers a fantasy of regaining the old mainstream. Fulks's anguished genre-rule bending allows him to say almost anything. It seems quite possible that one day he'll say something new—whatever that would be. Alt.country's taste-makers could once again be struck from their high horses, but at this point, only their slogans flirt with innovation and authenticity. Their media send another message.