Sounding the American Heart: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Contemporary American Film

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“When you hear twin fiddles and a steel guitar, you’re listening to the sound of the American heart,” sings a young boy’s faltering voice in the opening frame of Christopher Cain’s Pure Country (1992). The words of this song (“Heartland”) assure us that while we listen to this music we “still know wrong from right.”¹ This opening sequence thus celebrates its viewers as it stakes a claim to both the film’s and country music’s power to unequivocally represent the best qualities (the “pure”) of the United States (the “country”). When placed in a history of the relationship between film and country music, Pure Country can be read as the most recent entry in a series of cinematic appropriations of this power. In fact, the film’s title indicates that it is about country music’s claim to cultural significance, and its plot challenges the problematic status assigned to country music by the previous quarter century of filmmaking.

To enter into these cultural politics, the film tells the story of a country superstar’s crisis of authenticity. Once the opening credits fade, we hear and see a grown man singing the same song in a huge arena, accompanied by multispectrum lights and a smoke machine. Although the song claims that songs about the heartland are also songs about the singer’s life, Dusty Wyatt (played by country music superstar George Strait) no longer lives there. Tired of the corruption of his odes to purity, he deserts his band in the middle of a tour, only to find that he is easily replaced by a lip-synching member of the road crew. This crisis, where he was the naive boy of the supplied by Strait’s son, George Jr., he cuts off his ponytail, absorbs and meets the cowgirl of his dreamedly unmediated experience, Dusty country music machine. Paradox up the privileges of stardom; all it Having earned them in the heart girl by jet and limousine to his fi to the girl on stage, and reconnect about all this. “Pure country,” the able only by the magnitude of its American supposedly wants: a dae—set to twin fiddles, a steel the movie started.

The first movies to feature made the soundtrack part of the by Gene Autry and Roy Ro “B” film era also featured “hillb¶ the Weaver Brothers and Elvis.² Cowboy and Burt Reynolds’s go by portraying a tight relationship blooded, happily-ever-after hero as early as Elia Kazan’s A Face in the country music—the supposed bet the very images that Pure Count argued that the search for authentic he and Morris Dickstein in its political agenda, particularly useful in films said the search for authenticity both he and Morris Dickstein not issue high on its political agenda, sixties and seventies. Picture Show (1971), Bob Rafelson Bonnie and Clyde (1967) and Alice Deliverance (1972) used country music fans to portray lonely American corruption. Indeed, it could be argued that the BBS production company created a “serious” film, and in this respect, it is
member of the road crew. This crisis inspires him to return to the place where he was the naive boy of the opening credits (the young voice was supplied by Strait’s son, George Jr.). He lights out for the heartland—where he cuts off his ponytail, absorbs some wisdom from his oracular granny, and meets the cowgirl of his dreams. Thanks to this immersion in supposedly unmediated experience, Dusty builds the strength to triumph over the country music machine. Paradoxically, his triumph doesn’t require giving up the privileges of stardom; all it requires is “deserving” those privileges. Having earned them in the heartland, Dusty whisks his Grandma and his girl by jet and limousine to his first performance as a new man, proposes to the girl on stage, and reconnects with his adoring audience by singing about all this. “Pure country,” then, is the American Dream made remarkable only by the magnitude of its achievement. Dusty Wyatt has what every American supposedly wants: a charming family, affluence, and basic decency—set to twin fiddles, a steel guitar, and fewer neon lights than when the movie started.

The first movies to feature country music and country stars similarly made the soundtrack part of the plot. Western settings and singing cowboys like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers come immediately to mind, and the “B” film era also featured “hillbilly” films with southern singers such as the Weaver Brothers and Elvy. More recent films such as 1980’s Urban Cowboy and Burt Reynolds’s good ol’ boy pageants celebrated the music by portraying a tight relationship between the soundtrack and the red-blooded, happily-ever-after hedonism of the plot. But beginning at least as early as Elia Kazan’s A Face in the Crowd (1957), “serious” directors used country music—the supposed bedrock of American authenticity—to sully the very images that Pure Country works to restore. Miles Orvell has argued that the search for authenticity is a constant in American culture, and both he and Morris Dickstein note that the sixties counterculture put this issue high on its political agenda. Kazan’s iconoclastic approach proved particularly useful in films aimed at the hip, authenticity-seeking audience of the sixties and seventies. Art films such as Bogdanovich’s The Last Picture Show (1971), Bob Rafelson’s Five Easy Pieces (1970), Arthur Penn’s Bonnie and Clyde (1967) and Alice’s Restaurant (1969), and John Boorman’s Deliverance (1972) use country music performance and/or country music fans to portray lonely American crowds, violence, fraud, and political corruption. Indeed, it could be argued that the films made in association with the BBS production company created the contemporary American “serious” film, and in this respect, it is crucial to note their reliance on country
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music. Many claustrophobic moments in Five Easy Pieces were accompanied by Tammy Wynette songs (although Jack Nicholson’s character is not ashamed to praise Vegas show music), and The Last Picture Show used Hank Williams songs to similar effect. So successfully has this shorthand conveyed its message that it can still be used to critique American politics and a smug, self-deceived American psyche: recent films such as Tim Robbins’s Bob Roberts (1992) and Barry Levinson’s Wag the Dog (1997) continue to link country music to prophecies of decay. The sound of “twin fiddles and a steel guitar” represents the kind of smug hokum that contrasts to the critical vision offered by these auteur-directors. For them, singing is deceiving but seeing is believing.

In contrast, when mainstream directors integrate country music into their narratives, they embrace the country sound. Seeing and hearing together inspire believing. But whatever their ambitions, filmmakers assume that country music bears a burden of a particularly American authenticity. A country soundtrack sounds the American heart, either affirming the purity of the “American way of life” or condemning a nation hypocritically mired in provincial materialism. In this essay I focus on four films about country music performers: Robert Altman’s Nashville (1975), Michael Apted’s Coal Miner’s Daughter (1981), Bruce Beresford’s Tender Mercies (1983), and Cain’s Pure Country. In these examples country songs fuel both the art film’s and mainstream film’s claims to representational power, although the one casts the music as enemy territory while the other casts it as the Heartland. Altman valorizes film’s ability to provoke critical scrutiny by using the soundtrack and his fictional stars and fans to portray patriotic corruption; in an equally arty film, Beresford offers his audience an aura of political purification by stressing the dangers inherent in performing country music anywhere but in the heart, invisible if not for the movie camera. Apted and Cain, in films that revisit the themes of Nashville and Tender Mercies, harness film to country music’s supposed power to emit the “sound of the American heart.” Although Apted is an Englishman and Beresford Australian, all these films stake a claim to authentic representation of value-laden American territory even as they require different sorts of audience response and construct different relations between plot and country soundtrack. Read as a series, however, all four films oppose country music to the cultural and political upheaval of the sixties, and for better or worse, all four films show (the) country’s “triumph” over this upheaval.

It Don’t Worry Me

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In these examples country songs integrate country music into the American identity. Seeing and hearing their ambitions, filmmakers assign to a particularly American auteur, the American heart, either a “blend of life” or condemning a nationalism. In this essay I focus on four films: Robert Altman’s *Nashville* (1975), *Pure Country* (1980), Bruce Beresford’s *Tender Mercies* (1983), and *It Don’t Worry Me.*

In *Nashville*—such as the rock trio Tom, Bill, and Mary, the hopeful star Winifred (who wants to be known as Albuquerque), an unnamed, ominous soldier who hovers around Barbara Jean, and Kenny, a charmless young man with a violin case—orbit the country music scene. Most ubiquitous is Opal, a pompous British documentarian (“from the BBC”) who misses the point of everything she sees, and who fails to see the climactic event—Kenny’s assassination of Barbara Jean at the Hal Phillip Walker rally.

Whereas *Pure Country* celebrates country music’s devotion to American values, *Nashville* mourns America’s enslavement to commercial interests. In scenes shot at the Grand Ol’ Opry, the documentary-style camera and Altman’s famed multitrack recording system give as much prominence to inane ads for Goo Goo clusters (a candy named from the Grand Ol’ Opry’s initials) as they do to the singers’ performances. The movie’s twenty-seven songs immediately provoked debate about whether Altman exposed the hollowness of country music or whether he and his Hollywood cohorts simply mimicked the music so poorly that they missed its message. For example, in the second of his two reviews of *Nashville,* the *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby claimed the film was “brilliantly scored,” while its music critic John Rockwell argued that “many of those who love country music will be bored or even annoyed with these songs.” Nearly two months later, the *Times* published yet another article praising *Nashville’s*...
music. The film's music arranger, Richard Baskin, insisted that "it was never our intention to parody or put anyone down," and he made a point of hiring professional Nashville sidemen to provide musical accompaniment. Altman himself later proved adept at handling country music when he wrote the lyrics to hard-core country singer John Anderson's 1983 number-one hit "Black Sheep." In short, while Nashville's songs weren't written to be chart-toppers, they evoke the readily recognizable sounds and themes of top-forty country.

Two musical themes prove especially crucial: the political and the sacred. The movie opens during a recording session for Haven Hamilton's attempt to cash in on the bicentennial: "We Must Be Doing Something Right to Last 200 Years." While his name evokes colonial-era ideals, his message condones more recent practice. What we've been doing, Hamilton sings, is gamely fighting wars to prove our rectitude: "It's up to us to pave the way with our blood and sweat and tears." Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness matter less to him; he twice interrupts the session, first to object to Opal's presence then to dismiss a long-haired piano player whom he asserts "doesn't belong in Nashville." In the next studio, Lin-

nea Reese and a black chorus are to believe in Jesus." The dogged interviews, however, undercuts the trust in God; one of the two themes are quickly reiterated: the campaign announcement attacking the unseen, wizard-of-Oz-like campaign "Spangled Banner" with an undersong that would make a light shine in a fender bender and traffic jam. Nashville's villains turn this event into a fiasco: (the foreigner) is thrown into a parking lot, wishes she had a cameraman to document "America," she asserts, "all those mangled bodies." In fact, neither the musical politics of late heard so far actually serves as a replacement for "the land of the free, don't worry" the fans who latch on to this one does. In contrast, the stars of Nashville's musical platitudes—southern Baptist, or Catholic—duty moments of worship, like the nation's various ideals rather than to express communities, and the night before, at the emptiness of her surrounding: "but I forgot how to pray." To introduce montage with Mary, waking from Tom that she loves him; the camera to a stained glass window depicting "Love songs turn out to be equal Sake of the Children" explains to his wife even though off-stage Haven's wife travels in Europe while he remains and his grown son, Buddy. Tom's intensity of his love for a woman
ard Baskin, insisted that “it was one down,” and he made a point to provide musical accompaniment for handling country music singer John Anderson’s 1983 Nashville’s songs weren’t readily recognizable sounds and were crucial: the political and the religious session for Haven Hamilton’s “We Must Be Doing Something evokes colonial-era ideals, his What we’ve been doing, Hamilton’s rectitude: “It’s up to us to and tears.” Life, liberty, and the he twice interrupts the session, smack a long-haired piano player nville.” In the next studio, Lin-nea Reese and a black chorus are recording a gospel number, “Do You Believe in Jesus.” The dogged interventionism described in Haven’s song, however, undercuts the trust in God evoked by the gospel group. These two themes are quickly reiterated and juxtaposed when we hear a campaign announcement attacking the national anthem. Hal Philip Walker, the unseen, wizard-of-Oz-like campaigner, proposes replacing “The Star-Spangled Banner” with an understandable, singable anthem, “something that would make a light shine in their faces.” We also witness a massive fender bender and traffic jam. No injuries are apparent, and the Nashvillians turn this event into a friendly neighborhood gathering; only Opal (the foreigner) is thrown into a panic by this stasis in the sizzling sun. She wishes she had a cameraman to document the carnage she imagines: “It’s America,” she asserts, “all those cars smashing into each other and all those mangled bodies.” In fact, neither the accident nor the candidate make any psychic impact on the internal audience.

As talk about the national anthem fades out, strains of “It Don’t Worry Me,” a haunting paean to irresponsibility, drown out even the traffic snarl. “You may say that I ain’t free, but it don’t worry me” turns out to be the replacement for “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Even if it “don’t worry” the fans who latch on to the song, it evidently does worry Altman. (Indeed, this turn of events is strangely prophetic of the “don’t worry, be happy” musical politics of later campaigns.) If any of the songs we’ve heard so far actually serves as a reflection on the lives of the characters, this one does. In contrast, the stars and would-be stars who so convincingly mouth Nashville’s musical platitudes blankly sing various hymns—gospel, southern Baptist, or Catholic—during a Sunday morning montage. Their moments of worship, like the national anthem, seem to pay lip service to various ideals rather than to express real parts of themselves or their communities, and the night before, at the Opry, Connie White, named to reveal the emptiness of her surroundings, admitted it: “I’d love to go to heaven but I forgot how to pray.” To introduce this emptiness, Altman begins the montage with Mary, waking from a Saturday night tryst, telling a sleeping Tom that she loves him; the camera dissolves from his unresponsive face to a stained glass window depicting Jesus.

Love songs turn out to be equally loveless. Haven Hamilton’s “For the Sake of the Children” explains to a mistress why the singer won’t leave his wife even though off-stage Haven lives just the opposite arrangement: his wife travels in Europe while he maintains a household with his mistress and his grown son, Buddy. Tom’s “I’m Easy” appears first to be about the intensity of his love for a woman but we quickly realize that it applies more
readily to his promiscuity and narcissism: his tape of the song plays endlessly in the disheveled room where he holds his trysts, and when he sings it in a bar, dedicating it to “someone special who might be here tonight,” at least four women in the audience think of themselves as the special someone. Barbara Jean’s theme song, “One, I Love You,” enumerates the sort of platitudes that eventually lead to her murder: “One, I love you / Two, I’m thinking of you / Three, I’ll never let you go, etc.” The would-be star Sueleen Gay distorts and diminishes Barbara Jean’s mathematical trope so pathetically that her message is badly misunderstood: “Let Me Be the One” and “I Never Get Enough” both abjectly promise devoted monogamy although Sueleen’s awkwardly explicit sexuality comes across more forcefully than her country purity. Thus the only showbiz breaks she can get require her to perform a striptease at a Hal Philip Walker fundraiser. Buddy Hamilton’s blandly sweet love song leads him to a similar humiliation. Shyly singing it at Opal’s coaxing, he halts mid-bar when she abandons him at the sight of a bigger celebrity. Connie White, Barbara Jean’s “replacement” at the Grand Ol’ Opry, shrinks Barbara Jean’s pure and simple love songs into numb complaints of ineloquence: “I’d like to tell you how I feel but I don’t know what to say.”

Even Barbara Jean cannot sustain a love song. When she appears at Walker’s rally, she launches into the simultaneously evocative and incoherent clichés of “My Idaho Home.” Here the flaws in her lyrical vision turn fatal. While she claims that her parents’ songs and laughter “would ring down the highways, on the beaches” (in Idaho?), she also hints at violence and rootlessness in her verse about her father’s army songs and whiskey. Mama came from Kansas, daddy obviously moved around some, and Barbara Jean lives way across the country in Nashville. The chorus, however, insists, “I still love mama and daddy best, and my Idaho home.” The contrast between the stated theme and the realities of family life, evidently, becomes too much for Kenny to bear, so he shoots her. Kenny has already experienced similar conflict: earlier we heard him arguing with his mother over the telephone, only saying that he loves her after she hangs up, expressing thereby a wish more than a true feeling. Altman makes us sense that the music itself is somehow responsible for this frustrated longing and murderous rage by frequently focusing on Kenny’s “holster”: the violin case that never leaves his side. Until this moment, we’ve believed he was an aspiring musician, and if anyone scared us, it was the soldier who stoically endures Tom’s taunts about Vietnam and Barbara Jean’s indifference.
his tape of the song plays end-holds his trysts, and when he sings special who might be here tonight," at of themselves as the special some-I Love You," enumerates the sort murder (One, I love you / Two, et you go, etc.). The would-be star Barbara Jean's mathematical trope -y misunderstood: "Let Me Be thejectly promise devoted monogamy exuality comes across more force-only showbiz breaks she can get al Philip Walker fundraiser. Buddy ads him to a similar humiliation. s mid-bar when she abandons him he White, Barbara Jean's "replace-barbara Jean's pure and simple love e: "I'd like to tell you how I feel love song. When she appears at nue simultaneously evocative and inco-re the flaws in her lyrical vision rents' songs and laughter "would (in Idaho?), she also hints at vio-her father's army songs and whis-vously moved around some, and ry in Nashville. The chorus, how-best, and my Idaho home." The realties of family life, evidently, so he shoots her.19 Kenny has al- we heard him arguing with his that he loves her after she hangs in a true feeling. Altman makes w responsible for this frustrated y focusing on Kenny's "holster": e. Until this moment, we've be-if anyone scared us, it was the sol-bout Vietnam and Barbara Jean's

Nashville's spokespersons, then, make just as likely assassination targets as overtly political figures, and its aspiring musicians are the assassins. In fact, early in the film, the camera establishes Nashville as one vast gunman as it focuses on an airport sign warning that "all persons entering concourse are screened for weapons." and several later conversations verify this statement.20 Haven's mistress carries a pistol even as she be-moans the assassinations of the Kennedys. As he rushes Barbara Jean off the stage, Haven Hamilton commands the crowd: "This isn't Dallas. . . . They can't do this to us here in Nashville." Nevertheless, the fact that he makes the remark indicates that a political assassination has taken place. Barbara Jean is a prisoner of a mythical American purity, and the pursuit of that mythical happiness kills her. The real impetus behind her music and her familial relations is exploitation, a fact she unwittingly reveals in a string of dotty and down-homey stage patter at a performance the day before the rally. Her "mama" bragged to a phonograph salesman that her little girl could sing. (The comparison with a machine is frightening, and Barbara Jean breaks down rapidly as she tells this story.) He promises to pay them if she learns the song on one of his records. "Ever since then I been workin'," she concludes as her husband helps her offstage. While she attributes a spontaneous harmony to her parents in "My Idaho Home," Barbara Jean knows that her singing has always been for sale. As a friend cynically warns Sueleen, who is eagerly expecting Barbara Jean to give a free performance in thanks for her homecoming ceremony, "she don't sing unless she gets paid." The one free performance she gives leads to her death. Haven, too, at the beginning of the film, was incensed to think that Opal could hear him sing "We Must Be Doing Something Right" without buying the record. They "ain't free"—we've known this since the aggres-sive sales pitch for the soundtrack that accompanies the opening credits—and it doesn't worry Hamilton but it destroys Barbara Jean. With her death, Altman disproves the operative premise of his country singers (and the Hollywood musical): the spontaneous expression of emotion in song.21 Instead, country music serves as the emblem of corruption. It's about this country but this country is all show business.

Haven already knows this; that's why his songs, even the ostensibly patriotic one, are all about grim determination, and that's why he survives. His theme song proclaims that "ain't no law says you must die, keep a' goin.'" His behavior after the assassination reinforces his stage persona. He orders someone to sing, so Albuquerque picks up Barbara Jean's fallen microphone and the gospel chorus we saw at the beginning accompanies
her—as if singing about Jesus or nihilism is all the same to them. In turn, at her bidding, the whole audience turns its attention away from the murderer to dazedly sing, "You may say that I ain't free, but it don't worry me." Ultimately, what replaces Barbara Jean is neither the Replacement Party's candidate nor Connie White but rather the desperate Albuquerque and her star-worthy ability to mimic and incite mimicry. The political implications are chilling: if there is such a thing as the vox populi, it only repeats what is sung to it. As the closing credits roll and the internal audience fades away, the song keeps playing, insinuating itself into the external audience's mind. The cynical salesmanship of the opening credits lulls the spectator into a critical smugness not so different from Haven Hamilton's self-righteous scorn for long hair, but the closing credits insist on our complicity. Stunned by the murder and mesmerized by the melody, we can easily assent to Nashville's insouciance. As screenwriter Joan Tewkesbury said in her interview with Byrne and Lopez, "the intention of the piece is for you to be a participant." The first time we heard this melody, the stalled cars resumed their merry ways, and something analogous can happen to us as the melody fades. We can either leave the theater fighting to get that song out of our heads, or we can sing along with the deadly chord of business, entertainment, and politics. Criticism, refusal, authenticity, individuality, all the elements of freedom and vitality belong only to the director and to the unhappy few willing to worry along with him.

So contagious is this entanglement that "It Don't Worry Me" did not even hit the airwaves as a country song. Tom, Bill, and Mary introduced it, and as rock singers they are eager to distinguish themselves from the Nashville crowd although they evidently must come to Nashville to do so. Triplette lures them to perform at the rally on this basis: they will be the only rock stars on the roster (and presumably they will sing "It Don't Worry Me"). Nevertheless, their song demonstrates the epidemic that Nashville represents. It doesn't matter who sings it; Nashville, the intersection of show business, politics, and everyday hopes, easily absorbs its competition—even, or especially—the supposedly countercultural forces represented by rock and folk stars. Only Linnea's beatific deaf children are immune to the failure of family, community, and politics that their fellow citizens experience. They strip a Carpenters' ditty of its commercial veneer, expressing a sincere wish "to teach the world to sing." Necessarily off key, they nevertheless seem to actually experience the emotional rush of the world depicted in country music. But, as Wim Wenders notes, they can't communicate this to us through music alone; listening to them requires looking at them. "Suddenly, there are no lies in the song that shows up the big lies around us." Opal claims she can't bear to hear "You're Looking at Country"

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ain't free, but it don't worry me." No wonder the dim Opal claims she can't bear to hear about them or see them.

**You're Looking at Country**

Michael Apted's *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1981), based on Loretta Lynn's autobiography, smoothly embodies (rather than exposes) country music's contradictory and particularly American rhetoric of patriotism, proud individuality, lonely struggle for success, and subsequent integration into a harmonious community. Every song we hear in the movie somehow links these themes to the "reality" of Loretta's life (although in the book, Lynn notes the fiction behind such an assumption: "Everyone says all my songs are about myself. That's not completely true, because if I did all the things I write about, I wouldn't be here, I'd be all worn out in some old people's home").

Nashville's queen of country music, Barbara Jean, also favored these themes although she failed to balance them so deftly. As a result, Lynn introduced her 1977 autobiography, *Coal Miner's Daughter* at least partly a rejection of Nashville's fragile homespun diva. "If you're wondering whether that character in the movie is me, it ain't. This book is me," she says in her preface. Thus the movie version of this book can be seen as a mainstream counterpoint to Altman's film; the European release title, *Nashville Lady*, makes the contrast particularly clear.

"If they really wanted me, why didn't they just ask me?" Lynn wondered about Altman's pro­duction team. Yet even the film *Coal Miner's Daughter* doesn't go that far toward authenticity; instead it gestures toward authenticity by having Sissy Spacek mimic Lynn so well that she sings Lynn's songs for the sound­track. Spacek, in fact, won an Oscar for her portrayal of the rags-to-rustic stardom saga that both informs and ironizes Loretta Lynn's country music performances. The film, then, laid claim to "pure country" by portraying a tripartite "reality": Lynn's experiences, the songs that grew out of them, and the replication of the songs that Lynn had recorded as much as fifteen years earlier. When Spacek sang Lynn's 1971 hit "(If You're Lookin' at Me) You're Lookin' at Country," the film audience was supposed to assent to the "old-fashioned" values that the song espoused and that the film portrayed ("I'll show you around if you show me a wedding band," for example). In contrast, in *Nashville*, the nostalgic clichés of Barbara Jean's "Idaho Home" seemed to bear no special resonance for her oddly unmoved audience. If
Anything is assented to in Nashville's last scene, it is the violent dismantling of "pure country's" ideals, but when you look at Sissy Spacek playing Loretta Lynn, "you're lookin' at country."

While this film does not engage political and religious issues so directly as Nashville, it clearly links country music to traditional American values. Roger Angell's review in the New Yorker, echoed by several other critics, sums up the effect:

Coal Miner's Daughter didn't make me feel exactly patriotic, but I did realize somewhere in the middle of it that an Oxford don or a Castilian winemaker would probably not share the joy I felt while watching Sissy Spacek astride a mule on a steep, wintry-looking Kentucky hillside...or when I saw the fringed, shiny-white, narrow cut satin cowboy shirts worn by the backup guitar-pickers at the Ryman Auditorium...A possessive, homebred pleasure comes to you often when you see this movie, and you smile in the dark, almost embarrassed because you have been affected so simply.28

The title and title track praise the work ethic and love demonstrated by Lynn's parents, and the opening scenes in the movie beautifully evoke the coal miner's happy family and Appalachian community. There, sing-

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17 Sissy Spacek as Loretta Lynn in Coal Miner's Daughter. [Author's collection]
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achian community. There, sing-

ing happens as part of Loretta's daily life, a natural expression of talent and femininity. We first hear her singing to comfort a young sibling; later she does the same for her own children (the first four were born before she was eighteen). Loretta's husband Doolittle, as enchanted by her voice as her children are, gives her a guitar as an anniversary gift. Soon after, he arranges for her first public appearances and recording session. To ensure that she sounds her very best in the studio, he surrounds her with her children. A little later, he makes sure that Loretta really wants a life in the limelight, cannily forcing her to shout her decision over the roar of a tractor. Unlike Barbara Jean's simultaneously overbearing and effete husband/manager, Doolittle Lynn knows how to bring out the best in Loretta. The movie critics routinely reminded the public to make the comparison. Stanley Kauffmann, for example, began his review in the New Republic by praising the portrayal of Lynn's childhood and early married life, and he concluded by professing that the movie "means a lot more to me than the bloated Nashville, with its strain to be an All-American metaphor."29

Although Doolittle displays a hard-drinking streak of chauvinism, Loretta successfully scolds him in her hit songs such as "Don't Come Home A-drinking (with Lovin' on Your Mind)" and "Your Squaw Is on the Warpath Tonight"; as her career flourishes, he matures into a responsible, sensitive husband and father. Her superstardom merely gives her the means to improve on this domestic bliss; she can afford a large ranch where she lives the American dream with her husband and large brood. They continue to fight, even as the movie draws to a close, but these fights keep the irony of Loretta's wealth and fame from drowning out the travails of housewifery that she sings about. Importantly, these scenes are not drawn from the book; there Lynn alludes to her tempestuous relationship with her husband as well as her gratitude for his psychological acumen but she gives few concrete details. The movie thus sharpens the contrast between the supposedly "real" Lynn and the slanderously fictional Barbara Jean. We never actually see Altman's Barbara Jean experience the family happiness that she sings about; her offstage scenes show her as bullied and brainwashed by her husband.

Likewise, the corruptions of show business leave Loretta's pure country soul untainted. While Nashville's Barbara Jean and Connie White engage in nasty rivalry, Loretta and Patsy Cline (Beverly D'Angelo) become best friends. Barbara Jean and her husband collude to maintain a rustic public image, but Doolittle and Loretta never think about such things. A key scene created for the movie imagines an awkward radio interview in order to demonstrate Loretta's unmediated naturalness. She describes for
the disc jockey how she and her husband have been traveling the southern countryside, stopping at all the country radio stations they pass, and "getting horny" in the car in between stops. Earlier, Doolittle told her that bologna sandwiches, the mainstay of their traveling diet, had this effect, but he refused to answer her questions about what that meant. Since they talked and laughed a lot in the car, she concluded that getting horny meant engaging in such banter. Without waiting for her explanation, the station manager gets furious about her "dumb hillbilly act" and swears never to play any of her records. Once he's out of earshot, however, the disc jockey tells her not to worry. Since her first record now stands at number fourteen on the Billboard charts, she'll have no trouble getting it played. Loretta responds with a puzzled look; evidently she's never heard of Billboard. "That really isn't an act, is it?", the jockey proclaims. In the book, Lynn characterizes her encounters with the media somewhat differently: "It ain't easy being serious on these talk shows, if the hosts just want to make fun of your language or hear hillbilly stories." 30

Nevertheless, Lynn experiences pressures similar to those that crush Barbara Jean. Success entails such constant contact with fans that Loretta loses touch with the sources of her inspiration. In the last part of Coal Miner's Daughter, Lynn, too, suffers breakdowns; a slow-paced touring montage shows her abusing prescription drugs in lonely hotel rooms while Doolittle bathes the children and watches her on television. Appropriately, even though she begins each show with "Lookin' at Country," she begins to forget the words to her songs. Even more appropriately, the song that gives her the most trouble is "One's on the Way." In theory, the lyrics contrast Loretta's life of wifely drudgery with the glamorous doings of "Liz" (Elizabeth Taylor) and "Jackie" (Onassis), but in fact they suggest an unconscious and evidently uncomfortable similarity. 31 For Loretta to remain completely natural and untainted by show business, she must be able to live these words but to succeed in show business, she can't live the life of a rural housewife. It is interesting to note that this last part of the film was often singled out for criticism amidst the otherwise lavish praise. No one, even film critics, wants to hear that the dream comes with a price. Kaufmann complained that "it's probably all true, but it's certainly all trite"; Angell called it "tedious." Lynn's audience, however, still loves her when she's down, and in spite of a briefly sketched on-stage breakdown, she triumphantly returns to the stage after some family time back on the ranch.

The movie doesn't deal with assassination although Barbara Jean's assassination was the climax of Nashville, and in her book, Lynn claims to have been tormented by death throughout. Lynn introducing the autobiographer. Earlier scenes from the movie recurring images suggest that Loretta comes from the same source: her and "coal miner's daughter." The presenting reality by repeating this theater thinking they'd seen a glaze announce that Sissy Spacek and songs, and that this was "filmedennessee." In place of Altman's death, Miner's Daughter, we seem to be of history that begins in a charming ends at the top. To judge from all good Americans should believe Daughter," proclaimed Newsweek" destruction. It's a celebration of yet it never feels like puffery." 32 The title song, inspires the audience to ing the unpalatable options—doing Nashville.

Apted's conservative technique the critics, Loretta always got he came along and garbled it. Her in song, her audience buys her - recorder respond with the same with noise and visual stimuli, of Spacek/Lynn sings, all eyes and ears are hearing and seeing country. In words, confirms the premise of seeing is, too. Altman notorious sound system, thereby picking up noise. According to Altman, "it's stead, it's a lot like noise in the " takes place, although we have combof soundproof booths and dark vo Award, and all the commentary is dox. Again, Roger Angell's comm the avowedly urban and eastern Spacek . . . is pure country and a p
she is singing. She does all her own vocal work . . . and displays a musical presence . . . that holds the entire picture together." No one seemed to sense any irony in praising the acting in a story which was largely about the struggle to keep from acting.

Likewise, the narrowing of Lynn's message attracted little attention: the film version of her story avoided any suggestion of unresolved political issues in the rags-to-riches story, yet in her book, she openly discusses her commitment to Native Americans, women, and coal miners. In 1975, her jubilant song "The Pill" provoked great controversy and was pulled from many radio stations, because, as Lynn notes, "the men who run the radio stations were scared to death. It's like a challenge to the man's way of thinking." Putting her coal-mining pride into practice, she tried to start college trust funds for the children of coal miners who died in a mining accident. Although legal difficulties kept her from maintaining the trust, she makes a point of explaining the necessity of removing the structural barriers to class mobility (rather than simply giving money): "I wanted the money to help people to break that way of living that keeps them poor and uneducated, that forces men to work in dog-hole mines and women to have too many babies and not know how to deal with lawyers and slippery little government officials." In short, Lynn is proud to be a coal miner's daughter not only because she made it to the top from this lowly beginning, but also because she is now in a position to question the forces that keep coal miners, women, and "hillbillies" in their place. These "worries," which aren't fully assuaged by song, make another important distinction between Lynn's vision of herself and Altman's vision of Barbara Jean; yet ironically, the movie version of Coal Miner's Daughter obliterates it.

**It Hurts to Face Reality**

Two years later, Tender Mercies confronted the ironies of Coal Miner's Daughter by driving its hero, the (fictional) washed-up country singer Mac Sledge, off the stage and the bottle and into family, hard work, and religion. Robert Duvall won an Oscar for his portrayal of Sledge. Like Spacek, he did his own singing, and like Altman's actors, he wrote several songs on the soundtrack. The hyperbolically bleak setting—what Curtis Ellison aptly calls "rural post-Vietnam Texas"—is the isolated Mariposa motel, run by pretty Rosa Lee, a young widow. Mac Sledge and an unidentified friend are staying there, engaging in drunken brawls. When his friend abandons him, he asks Rosa Lee if she will let him work off his bill. She agrees, demanding only that he not drink on the job. He quickly falls in love with her, they marry and maintain the motel with her young son (Sonny). But if Mac can dream, his musical talent can demonstrate this point very subtly. The first song we hear is a key song. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The first song we hear is a key song. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtly. The audience, too, like the film, live every line. Certainly, Mac's song, "If I Can Dream," is the emotional peak of the film. It demonstrates this point very subtle.
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They marry and maintain the motel together, and he begins to bond with

her young son (Sonny). But if Mac is to sustain this small-scale Ameri-

can dream, his musical talent can be of no use to him. The sound track
demonstrates this point very subtly through the repetition and variation of
key songs. The first song we hear (by Lefty Frizzell) provides an alcoholic's
explanation for his state: "it hurts to face reality," and this refrain recurs
at emotionally charged moments throughout the film, particularly when
Mac is tempted to resume drinking. His new "reality," however, renders
country music almost irrelevant: "I've decided to leave here forever," Mac
sings as he begins to teach Sonny how to play the guitar. He turns quickly
to Rosa Lee to add a reassuring "not really" lest she take the line to heart.
The audience, too, like the film itself, must assume that country singers
live every line. Certainly, Mac's second wife, the hysterical Dixie Scott, wall-
ows in stereotypical country bathos, and ultimately the film will make her
pay for her commitment to this career. Thus the rest of the movie is about
facing not so much reality as embracing an American ideal by renouncing
country performance (and alcohol with it). A newspaper reporter uncovers
Mac's identity and thereby reveals it to the whole community. "Were you
really Mac Sledge?" a local matron asks. "I guess I was," he replies. His
baptism literally brings the curtain down on the hard drinking, hell raising,
and country singing phase of his life: the basin is surrounded by stagy red
velvet curtains that close as the preacher helps him submerge.

Nevertheless, in order to make life easier for his new family, Mac
secretly tries to sell Dixie some new songs. Although she is already rich
from singing his earlier songs, she cannot forgive him for his drunken
abuse. (He admits that he once tried to kill her.) She sends her manager to
tell him that the new songs are bad. The manager later returns and offers
to buy the songs himself, but now Mac refuses to sell. Instead, he gives
the songs to a struggling community band and even sings them on their
first record. Dixie also refuses to let Mac see their daughter, although she
secretly pays him a visit at the motel. The daughter then elopes with a shift-
less musician (much like Mac in his earlier days) and is killed in an accident
caused by his drunken driving. Mac learns this just as his new record is
playing on the radio; he turns it off, and this is the last time we hear Mac
sing in public. When Mac pays Dixie a visit in her tacky mansion, she is
at once righteous and inconsolable, claiming that she gave her daughter
everything she ever wanted. Her devotion to country music, we are to con-
clude, contributes more to their child's ruin than Mac's alcoholism, abuse,
and absence. Mac thus leaves her to her lavish misery while he returns to
Rosa Lee's motel. The easy irony of the dingy motel's name (Mariposa is
Spanish for butterfly) now becomes a symbol that Mac’s metamorphosis is complete.

Mac is baptized with Sonny, and in many ways Tender Mercies is about the bond between these two. These bonds, in turn, both articulate and sublimate the political issues that a country soundtrack so often negotiates. Sonny’s biological father died mysteriously in Vietnam, and the boy’s questions about his father raise issues that the Reagan era worked to bury: the fate of the counterculture protest movement. Sonny repeats to Rosa Lee the schoolyard taunts that say his father died for nothing, that all soldiers did in Vietnam was learn to take dope, etc. She has little to say in reply except that his father was a good boy who would have been a good man. Mac, as a full-grown man and replacement father, somehow redeems and replaces that dead boy. In the film’s final moments, Mac expresses his frustration over the injustices suffered by those close to him: Why did his daughter die while he survived his drunken escapades? Why did Sonny’s father die? Likewise, Sonny questions Rosa Lee about his father’s death just before the closing scene. Unfortunately, she can’t give him the answers he seeks, so instead she encourages him to look at the present Mac bought him—a football. As the camera pulls away from the man and the boy tossing this ball, an almost absurdly American symbol of violence contained by domestic bliss, we hear one of Mac’s new songs, this time being sung by a lighter (uncredited) voice: “you’re the good things that I threw away, coming back to me every day.” The changed voice is crucial to the resolution. Mac can experience these emotions but he cannot sing about them in public: that way lies the domestic tragedy of drunken deaths, broken homes, and, somehow, the senseless turmoil of war and social conflict. These things no longer worry Mac and Sonny, and likewise, the film, with its relentless use of the long shot, assures us that they’ll stay peacefully in their desolate place, working hard and staying out of trouble. The Nation’s Robert Hatch duly noted that Beresford “leads his hero into temptation but delivers him from evil, and the audience I was in seemed dazed by the euphoria of witnessing a miracle.”

Like Nashville, this film resolves the dilemma of the country soundtrack by substituting film for country music. Thus country music’s association with both the pro-Vietnam conservatism of the sixties and the corruptions of mass-media-fueled greed is both demonstrated and evaded by the purity of the film itself. Country music is not silenced—Dixie and the unnamed final singer are still out there singing Mac’s songs—but it is gracefully maligned. The audience can admire the film—the cinematography, Duvall’s acting, and especially the story—without having anything to do with country music. They can applaud the still feel enlightened. In fact, very this film had anything to say about country music. Stanley Kauffmann concludes the movie is about country music than story... Motels and gimmicks. John Simon, in the than Kauffmann, entitling his review, makes a point of severing the film from the too, makes a point of severing the film from the country soundtrack: “the tell premise of auterism in his plot suggests that the viewer will see wounds heal, the filmmaker and the audience”

Pure Country

Restoring the cinematic bond between the role and the director, and a director could never do in their country music film, his songs can convey country precepted but movie stars included. The few critics who didn’t miss the full resonance of this film, the superstar he is supposed to be Dusty his quest, like Loretta, couldn’t possibly be acting. (Does he rage against the machine, he reveals, when it was about the music, continues, the “fans ... don’t trust media serve only to inflame the lip-synching double seeks star status and newspaper writers eagerly however, silently exculpates its
symbol that Mac's metamorphosis many ways Tender Mercies is about ands, in turn, both articulate and antry soundtrack so often negoti- seriously in Vietnam, and the boy's at the Reagan era worked to bury: movement. Sonny repeats to Rosa other died for nothing, that all solidope, etc. She has little to say in Joy who would have been a good soldement father, somehow redeems final moments, Mac expresses his y those close to him: Why did his ken escapes? Why did Sonny's Rosa Lee about his father's death ely, she can't give him the answers to look at the present Mac bought ry from the man and the boy toss-can symbol of violence contained new songs, this time being sung the good things that I threw away, aged voice is crucial to the resolu- but he cannot sing about them gedy of drunken deaths, broken rmoil of war and social conflict. onny, and likewise, the film, with-es us that they'll stay peacefully in aying out of trouble. The Nation's leads his hero into temptation once I was in seemed dazed by the

Restoring the cinematic bond between country music and the audience is the point of Pure Country. In this movie, a renunciation like Mac Sledge's or a death like Barbara Jean's would be impossible. Likewise, even though the movie is about a fictional country star, a movie star could not logically play the role, and a director could not take center stage as Altman and Beresford do in their country music films. In Pure Country, only the singer and his songs can convey country purity. Any other form of mediation, film excepted but movie stars included, incites the corrupting powers of sophistication. The few critics who bothered to review this unpretentious film, however, did not compare it to previous films about country performers, thus missing the full resonance of the story and its accompanying songs. Instead, they focused on star George Strait's lack of acting ability. The New York Times's Janet Maslin, for example, claims that Strait "never seems the superstar he is supposed to be." Of course, Strait is a superstar, and as Dusty his quest, like Loretta Lynn's, is to make people believe that he couldn't possibly be acting. (Doesn't the name "Strait" say it all?) As Dusty rages against the machine, he reminds his entourage that "in the early days, when it was about the music, we did it because we loved it." Now, he continues, the "fans . . . don't trust us, and I'd like to get their trust back." The media serve only to inflame the situation: once Dusty's blindly ambitious lip-synching double seeks stardom in his own right, television reporters and newspaper writers eagerly inflate his story into scandal. The cinema, however, silently exculpates itself by its alliance with country purity. Both
the first song we hear ("Heartland") and the last one ("I Cross My Heart") are about telling the truth. The difference lies not only in the experiences Dusty has had in between singing them; it is the camera that proves to us that he has learned from them. If we hadn't seen what had gone on before, we wouldn't believe what we are hearing now. The camera lingers on Dusty's stolid face, showing us that he is no longer blowing smoke, that he is now who and what his songs say he is. Even the fact that this defining moment happens at the glitzy Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas, so unlike the dingy Mariappas motel of Tender Mercies, is unironically announced: the closing credits thank the Mirage Hotel. The country star and his songs thus triumph over the massive and malicious interests of show business, proving—at least until the next picture show goes on—that his country, no matter what “you may say,” is still the land of the free.

What gives worry, though, is the hollowness of this message. Freedom, for Dusty and his fans (both internal and external) seems to lie in apolitical affirmation rather than questioning. Dusty's shorn ponytail most obviously represents his severance from show business hipness, but it's also a rejected vestige of the counterculture. His name, too, conveys a cinematic reminder of the counterculture: he's "Dusty" to his fans, but at home in the heartland, he's Wyatt. The name may echo that of western hero Wyatt Earp, but Wyatt was also the name of Easy Rider's Captain America, "the man" who, according to the movie's advertising slogan, "went looking for America but couldn't find it." This Wyatt, however, heads straight to it. Evidently, all he ever wanted was to sing love songs to his wife, and the audience loves him for it. Indeed, by the time Pure Country hit the movie theaters, there was a vast audience making Dusty's equation between "twin fiddles and a steel guitar" and "the American heart." According to journalist Bruce Feiler, "by 1993, 42 percent of Americans were listening to country radio every week, twice the number of a decade earlier." He adds that "country fans . . . were more educated than either adult contemporary or rock audiences. . . . They were also wealthier." He describes himself as a convert to the music, too, noting that Nashville "had become . . . a new patron city for the American dream. . . . Just as rock 'n' roll foreshadowed many of the changes in gender and race relations that followed in the sixties, country music in the nineties—with its themes of family and renewal—became the clearest reflection of many of the conservative ideals that were just beginning to surface in American life." In this light, Pure Country, severed from its links with other films about country performers, is just another movie about the remarkably American desire to have it all and feel good about it. Placed in the context of contemporar\-

Notes

1 I want to thank Allison Graham Robertson Wojcik for their help:
2 See Wade Austin, "The Real Beveren French (Jackson: University
d the last one ("I Cross My Heart") since lies not only in the experiences we hadn't seen what had gone on before. The camera lingers on—no longer blowing smoke, that is. Even the fact that this d'cirage Hotel in Las Vegas, so unlike Mercies, is unironically announced: "The country star and his songs delicious interests of show business, the show goes on—that his country, the land of the free.

ownership of this message. Freedom, (and external) seems to lie in apolitical Dusty's shorn ponytail most obviously business hipness, but it's also a dis name, too, conveys a cinematic Dusty" to his fans, but at home in y echo that of western hero Wyatt Easy Rider's Captain America, "the advertising slogan, "went looking for att, however, heads straight to it. ing love songs to his wife, and the same time Pure Country hit the movie Dusty's equation between "twin American heart." According to journal of Americans were listening to number of a decade earlier." He adds stated than either adult contempo lao wealthier." He describes himg that Nashville "had become... am... Just as rock 'n' roll forever and race relations that followed theties—with its themes of family action of many of the conservative e in American life." In this light, h other films about country people are remarkably American desire in the context of contempoary films about country performers, however, it's a story that cuts country music loose from both the cinematic worries that Altman and Beresford confront us with and the dilemmas of stardom that undermined the ending of Coal Miner's Daughter.

The paradoxes of screening country music show how the music's authenticity is actually negotiable territory which the American cinema can invade to construct its own grounds for representation. An art film like Altman's Nashville questions whether there is such a thing as pure country music, thereby tacitly constructing its own authority through a critique of an easily duped mass society. On a smaller scale, Beresford's Tender Mercies points to a similar conclusion: to redeem a country and a family floundering after the protest movement and the Vietnam War, country music, the opiate of some pretty nasty people, must be transcended, and Tender Mercies flatters its audience into just such a state of cinematic transcendence. Mainstream films such as Apted's Coal Miner's Daughter and Cain's Pure Country celebrate country music's animating (and equally paradoxical) notion of unmediated performance through triumphant explorations of how such a notion can be portrayed as an American ideal. And while Pure Country epitomizes such triumph, it is too soon yet to imagine that the bond between film and country music is now sealed. No film has yet to portray the country music that is associated precisely with worrying about freedom. Indeed, it is this strain of country music that American film, whether it strives for mass appeal or critical cachet, relentlessly suppresses. Lynn's life story, had it included her commitments to women, coal miners, and Native Americans, would be quite a different movie, as would Altman's Nashville or Cain's Pure Country had they sounded the complexities of a singer like Merle Haggard, who, no matter how jingoistic, sees himself as a voice of "the working man." In other words, it can be argued that "authentic" country music has yet to be screened, but it is the very negotiation of these claims to authenticity that keeps the music and the movies playing.

Notes

I want to thank Allison Graham, Kevin Hagopian, Arthur Knight, and Pamela Robertson Wojcik for their helpful insights and suggestions.

1 "Heartland," written by Stephen Hartley Dorff and John Bettis.
7 In his Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995), Curtis W. Ellison discusses these films without considering them in any particular political context and without paying particular attention to the songs. Instead, his interest is analyzing stories of what he calls "personal salvation." Nevertheless, I am indebted to his analysis.
8 Benjamin DeMott provides a good summary in his "Superflick," Atlantic 236 (October 1975): "Nashville. . . . looks like becoming a cultural episodio, an event on the order of Woodstock, Hair, or the birth of streaking, about which all at once everybody on earth decides to gable. It took off overnight from the entertainment sections to the Op-Ed page. . . . And before the box office ever opened, Nashville generated controversy. Pauline Kael broke a release date to cheer the show in The New Yorker; making other journalists natter about breaches of reviewiyer ethics" (101). Kael's premature review, "Coming: Nashville," New Yorker (3 March 1975) opened with remarkable praise: "I've never before seen a movie I loved in quite this way: I sat there smiling at the screen, in complete happiness" (79).
10 F. Anthony Macklin, "Nashville: America's Voices," Film Heritage 11:1 (1975), juxtaposes remarkably look-alike photos of Connie White/Karen Black and Tammy Wynette and Ronnie Blakley/Barbara Jean and Loretta Lynn (8-9). Karen Black is easy to associate with Wynette after her role as a would-be Wynette in Five Easy Pieces. However, according to Keysar and How Did She Get to Nashville? (p. 10), Blakley grew "angry. . . . after that of Miss Lynn."
11 In contrast, Michael Wood, "Nashville," Saturday Review 24 (April 1975), claims the movie itself, only in her their he she who, with this criticism; he claims to Opal. "to watch me when I do there. She was me, us, the outside what the hell is going on. I don't what does." Joseph Germis, "For Nashville (Long Island), June 1975, 9A.
16 In contrast, Keyssar argues that Altman's Nashville, like most movies where music is power and politics, is a critique of media in Robert Altman's Nashville, that "the five-day structure of Nashville represents a climax of peace and hope in America, entertainment, and death." Robert Self, American Screen (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Pierian Press, 1992).
18 Connie replaces Barbara Jean after that of Miss Lynn. Similarly, Robert Self, in American Screen (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Pierian Press, 1992), notes that "Kenny's tale of the virgin bride who remains invisible, and the virgin bride who is easy to associate with Wynette after her role as a would-be Wynette in Five Easy Pieces. However, according to Keysar and How Did She Get to Nashville? (p. 10), Blakley grew "angry. . . . after that of Miss Lynn."
Five Easy Pieces. However, according to Judy Klemesrud in "Who Is Ronnie Blakley and How Did She Get to Nashville?" (New York Times, 22 June 1975, sec 2, p. 19), Blakley grew "angry . . . at the suggestion that her character is patterned after that of Miss Lynn.”

In contrast, Michael Wood, "Nashville revisited: The Two Altmans,” American Review 24 (April 1976), claims that Opal “is making the same remarks as the movie itself, only in her they hollowness is revealed” (104). Altman may agree with this criticism; he claims to have instructed Geraldine Chaplin, who played Opal, “to watch me when I do my con job and then do her own take off from there. She was me, us, the outsiders who came into Nashville without knowing what the hell is going on. I don’t know anything more about Nashville than she does.” Joseph Germis, “For Nashville a Battle to Survive Early Raves,” Newsday (Long Island), June 1975, 9A.


In contrast, Keyssar argues that the churches are “a place where, even in Nashville where music is power and money, the democratization of song occurs” (156). Similarly, Robert Self, in “Invention and Death: The Commodities of Media in Robert Altman’s Nashville” (Journal of Popular Film 5 [1976]) suggests that “the five-day structure of Nashville centers around Sunday which may represent a climax of peace and hope, or even the still center around which swirls the politics, entertainment, and death in the film” (285).


Connie replaces Barbara Jean just as Hal Philip Walker is running for the Replacement Party; in fact, when Bill, of Bill, Tom, and Mary arrives in Nashville, he notices a Connie White poster with a Hal Philip Walker sticker plastered over it: "Wait a minute. Hal Philip Walker looks exactly like Connie White," he quips. Subliminally, at least, Connie White, the bitchy bearer of the truth, seems to recognize this random link with the Replacement Party since she tells the children in her audience that any one of them could grow up to be president.

Keyssar notes that “Kenny’s target is at once the woman who remains dedicated to her parents, the virgin bride who stands as a sacrificial victim to the power that remains invisible, and the nation that raises its banners high” (171). Altman, however, says “we didn’t say this guy was alone. Maybe Connie White hired him. I don’t know” (Byrne and Lopez, 23).

Self, “Invention and Death,” 277–78.

For discussions of Nashville as a Hollywood musical, see Rick Altman, The
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22 As Feuer puts it, “Just in case we don’t identify with the crowd in the film, Robert Altman continues the music on the soundtrack long after the images have ended” (Feuer, The Hollywood Musical, 112).


24 Kurt Vonnegut’s enthusiastic review in Vogue 165 (June 1975) underscored just this quality: “I used to think that our machines would kill all of us by and by. I now suspect that we may be rescued or at least refreshed by one of them, which is the motion-picture camera. Most of what has been done with that device so far has been as silly as a penny arcade. But now Robert Altman has used the camera to produce a ribbon of acetate which . . . projects . . . a shadow play of what we have truly become and where we might look for greater wisdom” (103). Wim Wenders, Emotion Pictures (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), 89.

25 Ibid., 15.

26 Roger Angell, “Butcher Holler and Hollyweird,” New Yorker, 17 March 1980, 91. In his The Invention of Appalachia (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), anthropologist Allen W. Batteau argues that “in Coal Miner’s Daughter, the special power that the Children of Nature bring to the centers of civilization (whether New York or Nashville) restates one of the most powerful stories of American society: the individual hero rejuvenating decadent civilization” (197).

27 In spite of the disparaging comments in this review, Kauffmann’s review of Nashville, in the New Republic, 28 June 1975, was favorable.

28 Lynn, Coal Miner’s Daughter, 182.

29 Although the movie doesn’t mention the fact, Loretta did not write this song. It was written by Shel Silverstein, who also wrote Johnny Cash’s smash “A Boy Named Sue.”

30 Ibid., 15.

31 David Ansen, in “Cinderella Story,” Newsweek, 10 March 1980, 88–89.


33 Angell “Butcher Holler and Hollyweird,” 92; likewise, Ansen praised Spacek’s “virtuoso performance that never calls attention to its virtuosity. . . . Spacek even does all her own singing” (“Cinderella Story,” 88).

34 Equally ironic is the fact the Ronee Blakley had trouble getting roles after her academy-award-nominated performance as Barbara Jean. Both she and Altman ascribed this difficulty to the fact that people assumed she wasn’t acting when she portrayed Barbara Jean. See Klemesrud, “Who Is Ronee Blakely,” 19, and Bruce Williamson, “Playboy Interview: Robert Altman,” Playboy 23 (August 1975): 65.

35 See Mary Bufwack, “Coal Miner’s Daughter, Honeysuckle Rose, The Night the Lights Went out in Georgia: Taking the Cla for another critique of the middle

36 Lynn, Coal Miner’s Daughter, 90.

37 Bayless, and Don McHan.

38 Lynn, Coal Miner’s Daughter, 182.


40 As Ellison puts it, “the movie ends such questions” (ibid., 134).

41 As Stanley Kauffmann notes in “the distancing of the camera . . . Robert Hatch, “Films,” The Nation

42 Pauline Kael was a rare national: calling it “junk.” “Gents


47 Bruce Feiler, Dreaming Out Loud: the Changing Face of Nashville (New York: Warner

48 Ibid., 18.

49 Thus, in Wag the Dog, only M aporarily sing such patriotic trity music, see Barbara Ching. T

identify with the crowd in the film, the soundtrack long after the images (cal, 112).

Vogue 165 (June 1975) underscored just machines would kill all of us by and by. I at least refreshed by one of them, which what has been done with that device so. But now Robert Altman has used the which... projects... a shadow play of might look for greater wisdom" (103). a: Faber & Faber, 1989), 89.

Miner’s Daughter (New York: Warner


for another critique of the middle-class perspective of this film.

38 Lynn, Coal Miner’s Daughter, 90. “The Pill” was written by Lorene Allen, T. D. Bayless, and Don McHan.

39 Lynn, Coal Miner’s Daughter, 182.

40 Ellison, Country Music Culture, 132.

41 As Ellison puts it, “the movie ends with an image of domesticity transcending such questions” (ibid., 134).

42 As Stanley Kauffmann notes in “Tender Mercies,” New Republic, 11 April 1983, “the distancing of the camera... is the tonal signature of this film” (25).


44 Pauline Kael was a rare national critic to give the film a negative review, actually calling it “junk.” “Gents and Hicks,” New Yorker, 16 May 1983, 120.


50 Ibid., 38.