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A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$9.95

IN CANADA: \$14.95

Essay by Scott Yenor

THE FIRST LADIES OF COUNTRY MUSIC

Listening to Patsy, Tammy, Loretta, and Dolly.



WITH THE DEATH OF LORETTA LYNN in 2022, the first ladies of country music have mostly left the stage. The women who helped define the mid-century “Nashville Sound” have almost all passed on—only Dolly Parton remains. In their heyday, these singers presented a compelling and uniquely American depiction of how women can navigate their position in society and their relationships with the opposite sex.

Pop music both expresses and shapes popular values. Anyone listening to the radio in the 1960s and ’70s received a pretty comprehensive commentary about men, women, and all that might pass between them. And while much of rock ‘n’ roll encouraged boys and girls to traipse lightly through a series of casual encounters, country music explored the heartache and the rewards of love sincerely pursued. Among the ladies of the genre there emerged a distinctively American portrait of womanhood, juxtaposing female strength—especially in Loretta’s songs (in country music, most everyone is on a first-name basis)—with vulnerability, as seen best in Tammy Wynette’s heart-achers. Their lyrics were unromanticized and sometimes even unromantic. They were candid about what made a man attractive, and how his attractiveness could make married life challenging. All the same, in the last analysis these women still managed convincingly to extol the virtues of marriage

and fidelity. Their example can help provide an important counterweight to the extreme dysfunction of our modern sexual ethos.

Thinkin’ Like a Woman

AT THE FUNDAMENTAL LEVEL, THE women of classic country acknowledged—with a forthrightness that is now all but forbidden—how important love is to a woman’s happiness. The melancholy lyrics of Patsy Cline could never gain mainstream favor today, since they suggest that female happiness arises chiefly from love and marriage rather than career or partying. Her greatest hits depict lonely, regretful women who missed their chance at love. In “Crazy” (1961), a doo-woppy torch song written by Willie Nelson, the singer calls herself “crazy for feeling so lonely” after her man has left her “for somebody new.” Similarly, “I Fall to Pieces,” “Walkin’ After Midnight,” “You’re Stronger than Me,” and “She’s Got You”—all but one from 1961-62—are sung by lovelorn women.

It speaks volumes that Cline’s brand of loneliness has all but disappeared among female country singers. More women over 45 are unmarried today—both as a percentage and as an absolute number—than at any time in our history, and the number is climbing. Yet feminine loneliness and regret have declined as musical themes and in art generally. Either women sim-

ply do not mind their newfound solitude, or an entire domain of female experience is going unspoken and repressed. Rising rates of female depression and medication would suggest the latter: women have not lost their longing for love, just their outlets for expressing it. Today’s songs insist on celebrating women’s bravery while minimizing or ignoring their regrets. But does refusing to acknowledge vulnerabilities make one stronger, or weaker?

The first ladies of country music had the boldness to be frank about their longings and their disappointments. They were particularly open about how male strength and reserve ignite sexual attraction. Cline’s “Why Can’t He Be You” (1962) finds a woman turning cold at her drippy boyfriend who is always available, in contrast to her old alpha male. The new suitor sends “flowers, calls on the hour,” and “does all the things” the alpha “would never do.” Ultimately, though, her “mind and soul” are preoccupied by her ex. She is attracted to his aloof strength and his disinterest in fawning over her.

Tammy’s anguished songs apply Cline’s wisdom to marriage itself. Husbands want to accomplish things outside of their marriages. They can be emotionally distant. Men confuse providing with loving. Wives need more than their men often give them. How, then, should a wife live? Tammy provides a series of answers.

Maybe she will simply cheat. The husband in “Satin Sheets” (1974) is a good provider who



has supplied a “big long Cadillac” and “everything money can buy.” But his money “can’t hold [her] tight like [her lover] does on a long, long night.” In the end, though, Tammy’s heart was never really with the cheating characters in her songs. Though she understood what drove them to their desperate extremes, she knew they would have to face the terrible sting of regret. And so most of the time she counseled wifely patience and long-suffering—even if men often fail to appreciate those virtues.

In “He Loves Me All the Way” (1970), Tammy as wife sings of a loyal husband who “needs some time away from me.” His divided soul bothers her: he needs independence and a public life, but also the love of his wife. She is envious of his independence when she is “thinkin’ like a woman,” but oh so satisfied when they turn from thinking to lovemaking. Like the estranged alpha in Cline’s song, Tammy’s husband attracts her precisely because he is ambitious and dedicated to something outside himself. Being a good wife can mean swallowing some pride—or taking pride in having a husband whom she respects.

The Cheatin’ Kind

A GOOD WIFE IS INDEED VULNERABLE and often, in her own eyes, ignored. That’s the bargain of attraction: would she rather be doted upon and spoiled by a weakling who lets her rule? The manly ideal of classic country music was one of detachment and courage. Male singers celebrated ambition, self-respect, and always a little bit of good old horsing around. Merle Haggard’s odes to the working man, for instance, combined a cussed independence with a sense of duty to family. Meanwhile, gunfighter songs and trail ballads from outlaw songsters like Marty Robbins encouraged men to love honor and danger. Women wanted the ambitious and driven trailblazers—which is what Nashville’s male singers encouraged the men in their audiences to be.

But a man needs loving, sympathy, and encouragement to maintain that masculine sense of purpose. Private sympathy nurtures public ambition in many men, who then leave the private sphere behind to do great things. A man’s woman must need him, just as he needs her. In this mutual dependence, both men and women take a serious gamble—they give up some part of themselves in return for a deep and enduring connection. They become vulnerable to one another. And the pang of that vulnerability is felt most sharply when the agreement is betrayed. This is the emotional dynamic that motivates cheating songs, a country staple.

Everyone knows that infidelity is wrong—but should it lead to a break-up? For the first

ladies of country, that was perhaps the most painful question of all. But they faced it head-on. Though they recognized their men were not angels, they knew that women, too, were fallen. Husbands do wrong and cheat. Wives may partly be to blame—or not. Both must cope and mend. And so a good, strong woman need not show a cheater to the door. The first ladies of country did not excuse infidelity, but they often met husbandly cheating with enduring loyalty, pride, and defiance.

One way to make peace with male wandering is to blame the other woman: that was the idea behind Loretta’s “Fist City” (1968), “You Ain’t Woman Enough (To Take My Man)” (1966), and “Woman of the World (Leave My World Alone)” (1969). Feminism has made it unthinkable even to suggest that seductresses might bear some blame for a man’s infidelity. But classic country went even further, encouraging wives themselves to make a little extra effort to keep their man interested. Following this advice, the first ladies advised women to help hold marriage together by keeping their

In marriage, both men and women give up some part of themselves in return for deep and enduring connection. They become vulnerable to each other.

men engaged and attached. Tammy champions this approach in “The Ways to Love a Man” (1969), “Woman to Woman” (1974), and “Good Lovin’” (1971), all of which recognize that it “takes a whole lotta woman” to keep a home together. Wynette, married five times—including her epic match to the great country singer George Jones—was no stranger to failed marriages. But even the extra-spunky Loretta, married to the same man all her life, knew it was prudent “To Make a Man (Feel Like a Man)” (1969).

In turn, the male artists of the time sang appreciation for womanly patience and long-suffering. Glen Campbell’s “Dreams of the Everyday Housewife” (1968) is a nod to the regrets of a woman “who gave up the good life for me.” In “My Woman, My Woman, My Wife” (1970), Marty Robbins praises his wife as “the foundation” he “leans on” in a life filled with disappointments. Robbins celebrates his wife’s sacrificial love, even as her youthful looks fade with the daily effort of raising a family.

The various tensions and complexities of marital dissatisfaction are beautifully navigated in one of the greatest country songs of the era, Tammy’s “Stand by Your Man” (1968). The lyrics are full of ambiguities about what the guy is actually doing. The singer’s man has “good times” seeking fame and fortune, but he is also dependent on his wife to be “proud of him” and connect him to the community. Tammy urges wives to “show the world you love him” even when the world turns against him. A man’s need for emotional support does not match his ability to give it or even to recognize his dependence on it. The solution, for Tammy, is a resolution to “stand by your man” in spite of it all.

A Change Comin’ On

IF DOMESTIC LIFE WAS ALWAYS AT RISK of coming apart, still these first ladies of country were profoundly sensitive to the joys of staying together. Loretta’s signature song, “Coal Miner’s Daughter” (1970), chronicles her beginnings in a cabin on a hill in Kentucky’s Butcher Hollow, where her poor family worked hard and loved one another. Similarly, in “Coat of Many Colors” (1971), Dolly commemorates a jacket her mama sewed together from rags: others might laugh at her threadbare coat, but she cherishes the maternal love it signifies. In the same spirit, Loretta laments “They Don’t Make ‘em Like My Daddy Anymore” (1974).

But the world was changing, and the families of the American heartland would have to steel themselves to hold on. Songs about poor but close-knit families fell out of favor as economic developments made life bitterly difficult for the lower middle classes. Similarly, the ethos of sticking it out through marital difficulties barely survived the sexual revolution. The possibility of divorce, in particular, offered an apparently easy way out. But for Tammy, the reality of divorce and separation was a sorrow that only reinforced the ideal of an enduring marriage. Her “D-I-V-O-R-C-E” (1968) and “Bedtime Story” (1972) acknowledge the pain associated with enduring love lost.

For her part, Loretta recognized that modern feminism might change everything. In a spirited song called “The Pill” (1975), she shows how birth control destroyed the old archetype of the dependent woman and defiant wife. No longer must women stay home while men carouse and have fun. Gone is the need to wait apprehensively for “one more on the way.” The singer’s old maternity clothes go in the garbage—replaced with seductive “miniskirts, hot pants, and a few little fancy frills.” The lyrics compare mothers



to overused incubators and to caged chickens destined for the oven. The housewife's steadfast sacrifices and fierce devotion come to look like quaint foolishness or victimhood in her children's eyes. The close-knit family of Butcher Hollow cannot survive the attitudes associated with the pill.

No song of Loretta's attracted more controversy than "The Pill." Some country stations refused to play it. Loretta, who had four kids before turning 20, and then had two more, told *Playgirl* magazine that "The Pill" nearly got her banned from the Grand Ole Opry. Radio and the Opry, concerned more or less with supporting listeners in the hard work of marriage, tried to maintain some control over what American music taught. It was ultimately a losing effort.

After the pill and women's lib, it became impossible to defend marriage and family life without challenging modern feminism. In a nod to the old wisdom about marriage and love, female country singers would continue to intimate that men might not buy the cow if they got the milk for free. The post-feminism world of lonely women and strained relations was a favorite theme of Barbara Mandrell, whose "Sleeping Single in a Double Bed" (1978) topped the charts.

The tragedy now concerned the nature of marriage, not the different needs of men and women that made marriage beautiful and nec-

essary. Once divorce became a popular option, marriage had to be founded on romance or else be discarded. If the fire went out at home, women could cheat and leave—but so might men. Mandrell's "Married, But Not to Each Other" (1976) and "One of a Kind, A Pair of Fools" (1983) practically celebrated extramarital affairs. Country began to lose sight of the heartache and loneliness that divorce usually brings.

Today, bubble gum country-pop glorifies the independent woman and lays the fault exclusively on men if they fail to find their women sexy. Since Tammy, pop music has come to portray divorce as a means of female empowerment rather than personal tragedy: the last top ten song by a female singer bemoaning divorce—Reba McEntire's "Consider Me Gone" (2009)—was from President Obama's first term. Distinguishing break-up songs from divorce songs has become trickier, since there are rarely children in the songs anymore. The old mixture of vulnerability, independence, and faithfulness has broken down into its elements. More recent country celebrates female strength through vacuous feminist clichés about girl power, gushes sentimentally over idealized visions of domestic bliss, or indulges in banal clichés about cheating and drinking. The corresponding male ideal is a kind of hypersensitive pushover that the real-life women of golden-era country would have disdained.

Today, our manliest musical genre mostly celebrates wimps.

There is no longer a national songbook to elevate men and women above their characteristic vices toward complicated, enchanting, difficult lives together. Nothing is more needful today than female artists who can capture the genuine tensions within the souls of America's mothers and women: the lack of good men, the regrets of childlessness and lost love, the problems of prioritizing careerism over family. A really honest modern country singer—a really honest pop artist of any kind—would acknowledge the role that women and men have *both* played in creating our present morass.

A healthy culture relies in part on music to train the souls of its people. We are only a few deep, sincere artists away from a breakthrough. But any really great singer would have to defy some of our literati's harshest taboos and sing openly about how the sexual revolution has failed women and men. If such a singer were to come along, the old wisdom of country's first ladies could find new life and melody again.

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