VOLUME XXV, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2025

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by Christopher Caldwell

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Daniel J. Mahoney: Godless Crusaders

Emmet Penney: The Most Valuable Stock in the World

William Voegeli: How Trump Wins

Sean McMeekin: In Search of Hitlers to Destroy

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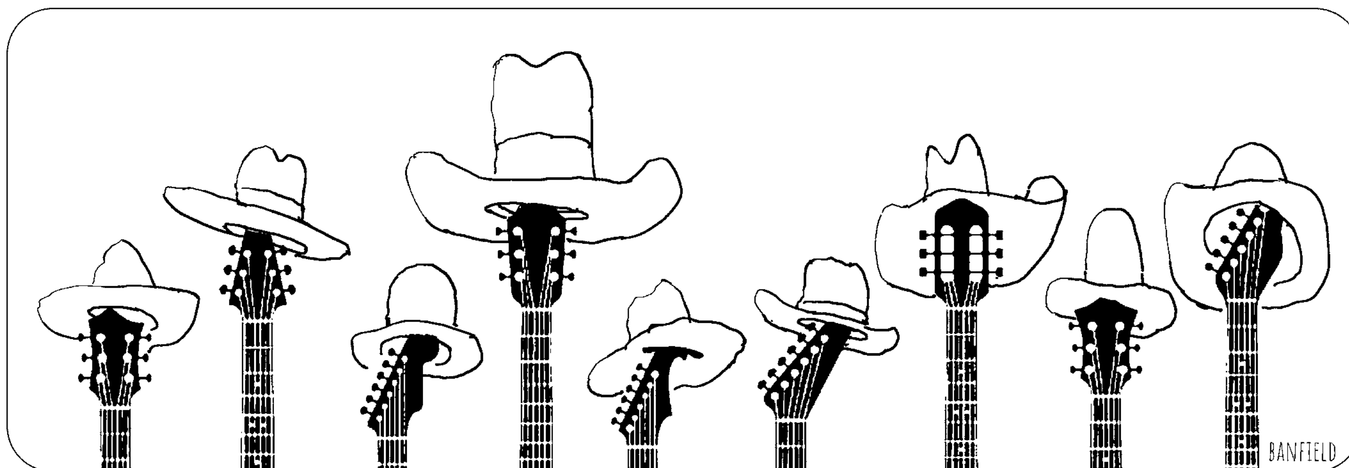
A Publication of the Claremont Institute
PRICE: $9.95
IN CANADA: $14.95

Essay by Scott Yenor

Murder on Music Row

George Strait's traditional country music.



When george strait broke into the country charts in April 1981, Blondie's "Rapture" was just ending its run at number one on the Billboard Hot 100. "Rapture" was something new, from a rock 'n' roll band committed to mixing various musical styles—pop, punk, disco, reggae, funk—into unheard-of combinations. The lyrics, presenting a surreal tale featuring a car-eating Martian and disconnected partygoers, were similarly outré. The song's stylistic mash-up—it was one of the first rap songs to chart on Billboard—and crossover appeal prefigured the direction much radio-friendly popular music would subsequently take.

Strait's minor 1981 hit, "Unwound," was none of these things. Its arrangements were firmly rooted in the traditional country sound; its relatable theme, about a cheating, regretful man looking to drown his sorrows in alcohol, is a country music staple. But Strait struck a chord among those tiring of 1970s rock 'n' roll excess and countrified pop songs. Crowned "The King of Country Music" for his steadfast adherence to tradition, both in his sound and subject matter, Strait found a receptive audience among the country music faithful while introducing classic country tunes to a new generation of fans. Blondie's "Rapture" comfortably fit into rock 'n' roll's transgressive, rebellious, youthful spirit, restlessly searching for the next new thing. Strait's music—soon to be dubbed "neo-traditional" country—focused instead on the everyday, enduring problems experienced by almost everyone at some point in life. In his choice of material and in his own compositions, Strait presents a kind of ideal man—stoical, but searching for love and marriage—as a (partial) answer to those problems.

Strait mostly shuns politics. His *œuvre* contains no protest songs à la Merle Haggard and nary a pro-American anthem in a genre famous for them. Strait's 44 number-ones (and his more than 80 top ten hits) focus instead on affairs of the heart. After his first number-one hit, "A Fire I Can't Put Out" (1982), nearly every song he released for more than a decade topped Billboard's country charts.

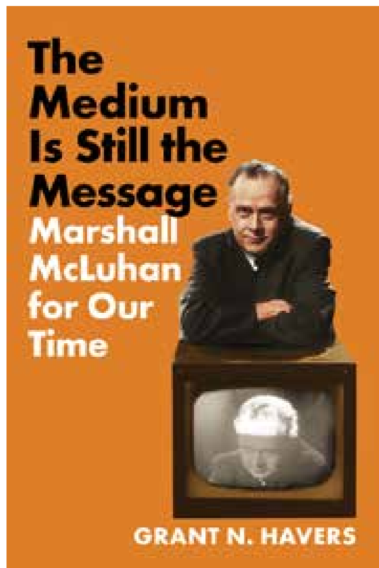
Strait began his leap from upstart to "King George" when country music faced dangers from within and without. Crossover hits were the rage in Nashville in the 1970s. The favored "countrypolitan" sound was more polished pop music than traditional country. Fiddles and steel guitars were muted, while keyboards, drums, and even horns dominated. Dolly Parton's "9 to 5" reached number one on both country and pop charts in 1980, as did "Islands in the Stream," her 1983 duet with Kenny Rogers. When Barbara Mandrell sang about being "Country When Country Wasn't Cool" in 1981, she referred to habits like putting peanuts in her Coke rather than to her musical arrangements. Ronnie Milsap, Eddie Rabbitt, Anne Murray, and others enjoyed crossover success while compromising, diluting, or updating the country sound. (All those terms were applied by critics.)

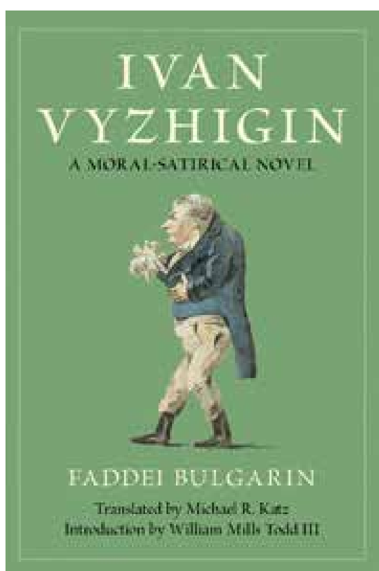
Country was losing its western, manly feel. Many popular male country singers of the 1970s, from Milsap and Don Williams to Dan Seals, sang about needy, desperate men. Milsap's "(I'm a) Stand by My Woman Man" (1976)—outdoing Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man" (1968)—depicts a domesticated, cloying wife-worshipper. Wynette's man apparently cheated; Milsap's woman, his wife and his friend, was simply perfect. Williams reached the top of the charts more than a dozen times with very smooth, very sappy songs depicting a needy man in need of a lover and a best friend. Seals's rodeo song, "Everything That Glitters (Is Not Gold)" (1986), depicted *a wife* who abandoned the family to live on the road.

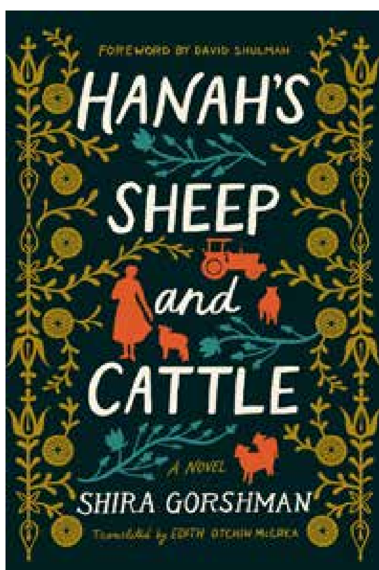
Without flash, Strait led a new breed of artists, who paired "neo" high production values with "traditional" arrangements and themes. Steel guitars, fiddles, and even banjos were prominent once again, as were country music's heartbreakers and traditional depictions of the unhappy man. When George Jones, enjoying a career revival in the 1980s, asked "Who's Gonna Fill Their Shoes?" (1985)—"their shoes" being those of country legends like Haggard, Jones himself, and older legends like Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell—the answer was obvious. Strait and his contemporaries (Randy Travis, Keith Whitley, and Alan Jackson) were eager to fill those shoes.

My wife and I have seen Strait in concert a handful of times, including when we were president and vice president, respectively,

READ SOMETHING DIFFERENT







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of the Cook County, Illinois George Strait Fan Club in the 1990s. His country music festival was a highlight of the Chicago summers. Up-and-coming acts usually started the show. One year it was the Dixie Chicks, who introduced "Wide Open Spaces" by expressing the hope that it might become the "anthem of your generation." King George, in contrast, played his music without pretentious pandering, almost without words at all. Tight-lipped stoicism was his trademark as a performer.

Some consider Strait a phony since he didn't live a troubled "country" life. Unlike Rogers and Joe Diffie (and many others), Strait has been married only once, to his wife, Norma. Unlike Jones, Whitley, and Travis (and many others), Strait never seems to have had drinking or drug problems; he shows up at his concerts. Still, he knows deep troubles. He tragically lost a 13-year-old daughter in a 1983 car accident as his career was taking off. Strait never sang about the loss. He leaves his fans with the impression that he is a good man, and a private one—an old school entertainer.

During the 1980s through the mid-'90s (roughly through *Pure Country* and *Lead On*, his best albums), Strait specialized in heartbreakers: of his 25 number-ones before 1994, 17 were heartbreakers, songs of lost love in which it appears the man and woman were not married. But only one Strait heartbreaker (and four divorce songs) hit number one after 1994. From that point, twelve of Strait's number-one songs emphasize falling in love, steady marital love, and family life.

Stoicism with a Broken Heart

The stoical man is stigmatized in our era of the sensitive male. The men in Strait's songs can cry bitter tears, but more often they mind the cowboy and rodeo ethic. Strait's "Amarillo By Morning" (1982) and "I Can Still Make Cheyenne" (1996)—the first a rodeo song, the other about how life in the rodeo compromises love—are songs of the stiff upper lip. "Amarillo" is, arguably, Strait's signature song. Life in the rodeo has costs, he sings—a broken leg in Santa Fe, a lost saddle in Houston, a lost wife and a girlfriend elsewhere. Despite the injuries and his relative penury, the cowboy is free to follow his own path, though always applying to himself the rules of cowboy honor.

"Cheyenne" tells a story of a rodeo man calling home after failing to qualify for the finals. His lady has long loved the rodeo man, who kept her on the edge: "She never knew what his calls might bring / With a cowboy like him it could be anything." This time, however, he stayed away too long. She tells him not to bother coming home since she has found "somebody new and it sure ain't no rodeo man." He is sorry but does not argue or fret. He takes the rodeo over her. Manly ambition may not be confined to the household, which can be overly sentimental and despondent.

But Strait knows stoical men can be lonely, too. The fool in "Famous Last Words of a Fool" (1988) comforts himself with stoical truisms as he is breaking up with his woman: "I wouldn't miss her at all"; "I couldn't care less if she didn't care anymore"; "You won't break my heart"; "I'll easily find someone new." But his future is a sad, pitiful, lonely life. "Fool" puts a lie to the pretensions of "Cheyenne's" Olympian self-sufficiency. Strait's is a stoicism with a potentially breaking heart.

George Jones may have created the subgenre of man-in-denial songs with his early hit "She Thinks I Still Care" (1962). Strait's spin sees men of stoical resolve withering in reality. Stoical men present an image to the world, but they bristle in solitude. The man in "Ocean Front Property" (1987) lies to himself that he will not miss his woman and her memory will not haunt him because he does *not* need her. But he tells anyone who will listen that if they "buy that" line, he's got some oceanfront property for sale in Arizona and will give them the Golden Gate bridge too. In "Round About Way" (1998), people are impressed that the jilted man "took her leavin' well" and he "don't let her memory rule the night." Yet he still misses her "in a round about way"—like every night, when midnight rolls around.

The second half of Strait's career shows how a stoical man can achieve some balance. A man who travels from "West Virginia down to Tennessee" can always tell his woman that he is "Carrying Your Love with Me," as in the 1997 hit, always minding a chief purpose why a man lives on the road. He is poor, away from home with a half-filled suitcase. His strength lies not in stoical resolve, but in "holding on" to his obligations and sentiment: "You're right there in everything I do."

Stoicism teaches men to focus on what they can change, while accepting what they cannot. That disposition begs the question, in a sense, when it comes to love. A stoical man might never love, since love disturbs his above-the-fray serenity and compromises his pretension to independence. Could a stoical man change the mind of his woman in "Cheyenne" or reignite the old flame in "Round About Way"?

As admirable as it is, stoicism is ultimately not enough. "If You Ain't Lovin' (You Ain't Livin')" as Strait sings in a 1988 cover of Faron Young's classic.

Love and Pride

Stoical men can be bad boys or a bit distant. They are not simply friends with their ladies. Stoical distance taken too far can compromise community and romantic love—to the detriment of stoical resolve, as Strait realizes. Love songs and heartbreakers each resist independence, one successfully, the other unsuccessfully. Nor does Strait sing praises of physical attraction or describe how gorgeous women turn him on. Women can sparkle and shine, and he can say to them, as in his 1983 song "You Look So Good in Love." Love songs are for everyone—especially even the plain.

Strait's emphasis on marital love and perseverance hardly depends on a worshipful attitude toward women, as did so much of 1970s country music. Like the cheating vixen in "She'll Leave You with a Smile" (1997), the woman in "I've Come to Expect It from You" (1990) is ungrateful, fickle, and adulterous. The man objects: "I wouldn't treat a dog the way you treated me." As a result, there "won't be no more next time doin' [him] wrong." He's gone. Men cannot be so desperate as to tolerate faithlessness and disrespect.

At other times, men are to blame. Strait's heartbreakers show that the choice facing most men is not between marriage and deep friendship with other men, but between relations with a woman and loneliness. Men must have standards and pride, of course, but love means compromising even on these goods. Strait deals with the tension between love and pride through a slate of songs where lonely men wonder if their former ladies are lonely too. From "Let's Fall to Pieces Together" (1983) to "What's Going on in Your World" (1989), Strait simply wants to know if the ladies are happy. If they are not, then mutual neediness could prompt each to try again. Love stands out as a great good in a cold and heartless world.

If break-up songs are a staple of Strait's early career, his later years found him more often singing about divorce. The difference is telling. Strait sang of heartbreak when marriage was more the norm, but of the pains of divorce when marriage was less so. He encouraged people to try harder in his first stage, and made sticking it out more attractive in the second. "Today My World Slipped Away," a 1997 cover of a Vern Gosdin song, shows the tragedy of divorce. "I gave you all I had," he sings, but "You still made your getaway." The broken-hearted man hits his knees in church. Isolated from community, his plans buried, he worries about ever making a new start. In 2006's "Give It Away," a wife demands that her soon-to-be ex simply give away the picture from their honeymoon, her diamond ring, and the four-poster bed, so eager is she to simply erase the fighting of their marriage.

Revitalizing Traditions

Laws supporting marriage and family life—limits on divorce, for example—build a pro-family culture. Whatever the laws, a country concerned about supporting the family must ultimately have the poets on its side. Love and marriage are great themes of popular music. Earnest, gushy songs about always loving a beloved are everywhere. So are fun-loving celebrations of couples that stick it out. Most are forgettable. Strait's career is notable for the relative absence of such songs during his first decade as a star.

> Strait leaves his fans with the impression that he is a good man, and a private one—an old school entertainer.

The 1992 movie *Pure Country* marks a turning point in Strait's career. In it, Strait makes his acting debut playing "Dusty" Chandler, a country star disenchanted with the lights, glitz, and volume of the contemporary country scene. Perhaps Strait had in mind Garth Brooks, whose career launched in the late 1980s, as the avatar of an excessively commercialized country package. A disillusioned Dusty returns to his roots in local honky-tonks and meets Harley Tucker (Isabel Glasser), an aspiring rodeo queen and a good-hearted woman. Strait's sappiest love song, "I Cross My Heart," makes the film's denouement. Many used it as their wedding song back when my wife and I tied the knot. The film's script is wooden; its acting, iffy; its plot, formulaic. But I still can't take my eyes off it. *Pure Country* is beloved mostly for the wholesomeness of Dusty's character and the closing scene in which he pledges his love to Harley in front of a Las Vegas crowd, a love affair made in Lubbock.

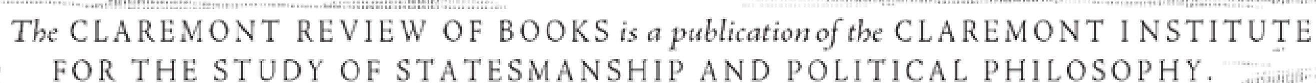
Like *Pure Country*, Strait's career starts with good-time and break-up songs, but ends with enduring love. Rarely did Strait go for sappiness in his songs of marital love. Unless the theme was divorce, he kept marriage light. From songs about falling in love in "The Big One" (1994) and "Blue Clear Sky" (1996) to classics like "Check Yes or No" (1995), which depicts a childhood crush that becomes a lifelong love, and "Write This Down" (1999), which seeks to assure a woman of a man's steady, persistent love, Strait came in time to celebrate love with a happy ending. "It Just Comes Natural," released in 2006, is about how a good man finds it easy to love a good woman.

The battle for the soul of country music did not end with Strait's shared neo-traditional triumphs. In 2000, Strait and Alan Jackson released "Murder on Music Row," a lament about how pop arrangements still threaten country music's traditional sounds and subjects. Despite the decades-long popularity of neo-traditionalism, country greats like Haggard and Jones could hardly get any radio play by the 1990s:

> For the steel guitars no longer cry, and
> the fiddles barely play.
> But drums and rock 'n' roll guitars are
> mixed up in your face.
> Ol' Hank wouldn't have a chance on
> today's radio
> Since they committed murder down on
> Music Row.

What happened to country music since 2010—a mish-mash of pop and even rap arrangements reminiscent of Blondie—could easily have happened earlier. Revitalizing traditions and inspiring a generation of traditionalists are among Strait's great legacies. The stoical heartbreakers of Strait's early career catapulted him to fame; the reality of love and the dignity of marriage drove his later years. Across both periods his arrangements and subject matter remained traditional country, his performances shorn of unnecessary updates or pandering. Strait's range is narrow and deep. His normality anchors his career, which will now be honored by President Trump at the Kennedy Center later this year. If traditional country music survives today in emulators and on streaming services, it is largely thanks to singers like King George.

Scott Yenor is associate professor of political science at Boise State University and senior director of state coalitions at the Claremont Institute.



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