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# Authenticity in the Country Music Industry

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**AUTHENTICITY IN THE COUNTRY MUSIC INDUSTRY**

By

Alyssa Johnson

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
Graduation with Honors from the  
South Carolina Honors College

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## Table of Contents

Thesis Summary.....	2
Introduction to the Study.....	3
Purpose.....	4
Problem.....	4
Research Method.....	5
Literature Review.....	6
Method.....	9
Research Questions.....	9
Artists Studied.....	10
Results and Discussion.....	11
The Country Music Industry.....	12
The Past.....	13
Spirituality.....	14
Artist Accessibility.....	16
The “Classic Country Life Story”.....	18
Two Types of Country Music.....	19
George Strait.....	19
Career of George Strait.....	20
Garth Brooks.....	22
Career of Garth Brooks.....	23
Authenticity and Commercialism.....	25
Why The Authenticity Idea Persists.....	28
Industry Implications.....	30
Future Research.....	31
Summary of Findings.....	32
Conclusion.....	33
References.....	35

## Thesis Summary

When researching the country music industry, it is impossible to avoid certain words—authenticity, sincerity, tradition—as a country music consumer, I have personally noticed these themes appearing frequently. As a consumer, I have been confused by the images that I’ve observed in country music scholarship and journalism based on tradition or authenticity (or, more often, the lack thereof). There is serious reverence for certain people, places, and things in country music. The Grand Ole Opry, the “legends” of the industry, and Nashville itself are treated with the utmost respect because of the roles that they’ve played in the development of country music. I have personally witnessed certain artists either being praised or criticized because of the way they do or do not stick to the status quo that those legends created. I have noticed that artists are perceived among my peers differently based on whether their music fits with the traditional images of country music or leans more toward the stylings of pop music. What is confusing, then, is that sometimes the same artist or work can be argued both ways, and there’s often not a real conclusion made.

As a student, I find this interesting, and wanted to find out more about the ideas of traditionalism and authenticity in the country music industry. Because of this, I chose to research and discuss the idea further in this thesis. The purpose of this study is to explore the background of the country music industry that created this idea of authenticity and to determine the role it plays in the consumption of country music by the average fan.

Throughout my research I found that many scholars have written that authenticity is of the utmost importance for a country artist. I found several factors that have helped to build up the idea that authenticity is key. Those factors were: country music is nostalgic and seeks out a connection with the past, listening to country music is a spiritual experience, country artists are

more accessible to their fans than other artists, and there is a certain life story that many country artists generally fit. Through the use of two country artists as main examples— George Strait and Garth Brooks—these artists represent both the traditional and the non-traditional, and I chose to study these artists in particular because of their impressive sales, chart, and award histories. This thesis explores the idea of authenticity and what true value it holds for consumers of country music.

### **Introduction to the Study**

The idea of country music appealing only to rural, working-class Americans no longer makes sense in the contemporary country music industry. According to data reported at the Billboard Country Music Summit (2011), the current country music audience no longer matches up with the rural images of the past. Greg Fuson, CMA market research director, says that the country music audience “may not be who you think they are.” The data presented at the Summit was based upon an Mediamark Research and Intelligence (MRI) survey of 25,000 Americans as well as surveys of 3,600 CMA Music Festival attendees. The research showed that 42% of the US population is a country music fan, which is about 95 million people. With such a large audience, country music now reaches individuals from all regions, income levels, and age ranges. As Fuson noted, country audiences currently look just like the average American, and need to be engaged because of the spending power that they hold. This expansion of country’s demographics has left an unsettled discussion on the importance of sticking to tradition in country music.

In the country music industry, authenticity is key. Or, at least, that’s what scholars such as Heather Maclachlan would have readers believe. In her writing, Maclachlan (2008) has said that authenticity is not just important, it is “the center of country music’s identity” (p. 184).

Musicians in this genre are held to higher standards than others, and have to stay focused on being “real” and “traditional” to hold their place in this genre. The idea of authenticity in this particular context refers to music that sticks to the foundation of country music: rural, working-class themes set to music that should not be too polished or “mainstream” sounding.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore some of the aspects of the country music industry that have contributed to the long-standing idea that authenticity is important, and evaluate the true value of authenticity to the country music consumer. The study will utilize the historical success of two of the world’s top country artists as examples and evaluate the factors that contributed to these artists’ success. The study intends to further explore ways in which the knowledge of the factors that drive the desire for authenticity and lead to success could be used by new artists and their management in order to attempt to create success in a formulaic way.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by four main research questions.

Research Question 1: In the history of modern country music, which artists have been most commercially successful?

Research Question 2: What do these successful artists have in common with each other and with the “classic country music life story” as presented by Heather Maclachlan?

Research Question 3: What aspects of the country music industry have contributed to the idea that authenticity is important for country artists?

Research Question 4: How does the success of country's top artists align (or not align) with the views on the importance of authenticity as widely presented in country music scholarship and journalism?

### **Problem and Significance**

A problem that exists in the country music industry in particular is that conflicting ideas are often presented about the merit (or lack thereof) of a certain piece of music or certain artist. According to Fillingim (2003), "images surrounding country music are sometimes incongruous, sometimes downright misleading" (p. 2). These conflicting images come from the artists themselves as well as the journalists and scholars who write about those artists. As Maclachlan (2008) pointed out, the exact same music can sometimes be praised by one source for being "authentic" and condemned by another for not being authentic enough. Many different country music scholars have addressed the idea of "good" versus "bad" country music, or music that is dedicated to the historical expectations of the genre versus a newer-sounding music that is influenced by other popular genres. Three scholars in particular have gone as far as giving divisive and definitive titles to the different types of music: Richard Peterson uses the terms "hard-core" and "soft-shell," Joli Jensen uses "down home" and "uptown," and Barbara Ching uses "hard country" and "mainstream" (as cited in Maclachlan, 2008, p. 198). Regardless of the terms, the general consensus is that one type is preferable to the other based on some inherent value that comes with the idea of authenticity. This study seeks to examine the scholarly definitions of the two apparently separate types of country music and to explore whether or not country audiences respond to these categorizations when they purchase and consume music.

## **Literature Review**

The biographies reviewed for this study came from the artists' personal websites and industry publications (Billboard and Rolling Stone). Biographical details added to the background knowledge necessary to complete the study as well as served as a basis of comparison between the artists and to the presentation of country musicians in other literature. By utilizing biographies from the artists' own websites as well as other sources, the study was able to note some pieces of information that were either not presented at all by the artist or presented in a slightly different way from the other sources.

Several industry-specific publications were consulted: The Boot, Texas Monthly, Billboard, Rolling Stone, the Recording Industry Association of America, the Country Music Association, and Country Music Television all provided various information beneficial to the study. These industry-specific sources provided a deeper understanding of the ways that country music is talked about within the confines of the country music industry, and additionally provided some information that is not readily available from other sources. The types of literature reviewed from these publications included data, news and feature articles, and an album review.

Several scholarly writings were also consulted for this study. They are: "Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven" by Curtis W. Ellison, "The Greatest Rock Star Who Never Was: Garth Brooks, Chris Gaines, and Modern America" by Heather Maclachlan, "Taking Country Music Seriously" by Joli Jensen, and "Redneck Liberation: Country Music as Theology" by David Fillingim. Each of these sources provided knowledge both from the content of the work and by the presentation of the work as general knowledge as to how country music scholars speak on the subject of authenticity.

Additional materials consulted were a Nashville tourism website and a Nashville news story regarding the flooding of the Grand Ole Opry; these provided information about the Opry and the CMA Music Festival formerly known as Fan Fair.

### *Key themes in the literature*

The first key idea presented across the literature was the idea that authenticity is of importance in the country music industry, and the desire for authenticity is further strengthened by the particular culture of country music. The literature presented authenticity as the most important characteristic in the industry and as a goal that country artists should have. The literature also discussed the negative reactions that country audiences can have when the perception of authenticity is lost (Ellison, 1995; Jensen, 2002; Maclachlan, 2008).

Following the importance of authenticity is the idea that country music is divided into two types of music, with different scholars giving different names to the two types, but all implying that one type is more authentic than the other. The two types of country are split between traditional country music, which can be considered more authentic, versus non-traditional country, which can be considered less authentic (Jensen, 2002; Maclachlan, 2008).

Several aspects of country music culture were identified as themes across the literature. The discussion of these different cultural aspects have each contributed to the idea that authenticity is important. One of these key aspects is country music's ties to religion and spirituality. It is common for country music to have strong religious or spiritual connections through explicit references to God, faith, or spirituality both in lyrics and in artists' comments. Additionally, listening to music or attending concerts can even be considered a spiritual experience in itself (Ellison, 1995; Fillingim, 2003).

Another factor which has built up the idea that authenticity holds importance in country music is the genre's strong link to the past. Country music fans value the past, and the genre's origins (whether or not they truly know what these origins are), generally more than fans of other types of music. Country audiences and artists alike are nostalgic for the past. One of the key examples of country as a genre's reverence for the past is the Grand Ole Opry, which is one of country music's most treasured institutions. This iconic landmark was designed specifically to be reminiscent of the past, even transporting the center of the stage from the Opry's old location to its new location so that artists can stand upon the same ground as those who came before them. Country artists show their own nostalgia through lyrics which recall a better, simpler past, and allow for an emotional connection with country fans. Country audiences are likely to laud traditional artists because they fulfill this nostalgia for the past (Caldwell, 2010; Ellison, 1995; Jensen, 2002; Maclachlan, 2008).

The two additional cultural aspects identified in the study were a "classic life story" and the accessibility of artists to their fans. The "classic life story" includes being born in the rural USA to working class parents and experiencing difficulties in life. The existence of this life story serves as an example of the extent to which country artists must fit a specific mold in order to be considered authentic. It also serves as an easy way for an artist to fabricate authenticity; in order to fit the mold, an artist can simply tailor the facts of their life that they choose to share publicly or keep private (Maclachlan, 2008). The accessibility of artists to their fans again adds another layer to the mold an artist must fit in order to be considered authentic in country music. It is very common for country artists to maintain direct artist-to-fan relationships, to the point that it is almost an expectation. An example of the accessibility of country artists comes in the form of Fan Fair X at the CMA Music Festival in Nashville. At this festival, big-name country artists

sign autographs and perform in intimate settings, allowing fans to feel more connected to the artist (CMA Music Festival, 2016; Parton, 2015; Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp, 2016).

A final common idea presented across the literature was a discussion of commercialism. The literature discussed the commercial nature of the country music industry, both currently and historically. Historically, country music journalists and scholars have been more likely to criticize an artist who finds strong commercial success. The discussion also included both associations between commercialism and inauthenticity that arise during the discussion on traditional versus non-traditional music, and refutations of these associations (Ellison, 1995; Jensen, 2002; Maclachlan, 2008).

## **Method**

### **Research Method**

The research method utilized for this study was document review. Documents reviewed included biographies, musical reviews, industry publications, and scholarly journals. Sales figures, chart positions, and award history were also reviewed. According to the University of Portsmouth (2012), a major advantage of document review as a research method is that it provides access to information that would otherwise be unavailable. This is true in the case of this study, as it would be very difficult or impossible to obtain first-hand access to country artists such as George Strait or Garth Brooks. The University of Portsmouth (2012) also noted that document review is useful in research that covers long periods of time; this study explores long-term cultural aspects of the country music industry using information that was published up to twenty-one years ago.

## **Artists Studied**

The study utilized two examples of commercially successful country artists: George Strait and Garth Brooks. This study defines “commercial success” as having exceptional numbers of number one singles or albums sold. George Strait is a musician of interest because he has a total of 60 number one singles, the most number one songs ever, in any genre (Newman, 2015). According to Recording Industry Association of America data, his total albums sales have reached 69 million certified units, which makes him the 11<sup>th</sup>-top selling artist by albums in any genre. Every one of his studio albums has reached at least Gold status, and he has a total of 39 Gold, 33 Platinum, and 13 Multi-Platinum certified albums (Recording Industry Association of America, 2016). He has been awarded Country Music Association Awards, Academy of Country Music Awards, GRAMMY Awards, Billboard Music Awards, and American Music Awards; he was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2006, named “Artist of the Decade” by the Academy of Country Music in 2009, declared the “Milestone Award Winner” by the Academy of Country Music in 2015, named “Entertainer of the Year” by ACM in 1989, 1990, and 2014 as well as the Country Music Association in 1989, 1990, and 2013, received a National Medal of the Arts from President George W. Bush, and was crowned the Top Country Artist of the Past 25 Years by Billboard in 2010 (“Meet George,” 2016).

Garth Brooks is the second artist of interest for this study because he is the top selling solo artist of all time, with 136 million certified units sold. He has a total of 21 Gold, 21 Platinum, 15 Multi-Platinum, and 6 Diamond albums, putting him second only to the Beatles in total album sales when considering all artists. He is the fastest-selling album artist in history and the only solo artist to sell over 10 million units of 6 different albums (Recording Industry Association of America, 2016). He has had 25 number one singles on the country charts and has

spent more weeks at #1 on the album sales charts than any other artist since SoundScan entered into industry use. He has received Country Music Association Awards, Academy of Country Music Awards, GRAMMY Awards, and People's Choice Awards; he was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2012, named "Artist of the Decade" by the Academy of Country Music and the American Music Awards, and received an "Artist Achievement Award" from Billboard ("Garth 101," 2016).

These artists were selected as opposed to other popular country artists for two key reasons. First, each of these artists is uniquely successful in that they are record-holders in either album sales or number-one singles; therefore, these artists can be considered the "top" of the industry in terms of commercial success. Second, each of these artists represents one of the two types of country music to be discussed. These two artists are of interest above other artists because they are both classic, successful examples of one of the two types of music.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The following findings were found in regards to the study's initial research questions: Two top-selling country artists were chosen to represent the industry's most commercially successful artists: George Strait and Garth Brooks. These artists each had several factors of their life story as presented in various biographies that were in common with the "classic country life story" and each other. Including this life story, four characteristics of the country genre were identified as contributing factors in the discussion on authenticity: the common life story, the past, spirituality, and artist accessibility. It was determined that these artists' success stories both do, and do not, align with the commonly held views on authenticity. From these artists' examples, it appears that country audiences do not largely consider authenticity as a factor in their consumption behavior. They also lead to the idea that contemporary country artists should

not necessarily consider authenticity their main goal in positioning themselves in the industry, as there are niches for all types of music in the contemporary country music industry.

### **The Country Music Industry**

Maclachlan (2008) proposes 8 characteristics that are common among songs in the country genre. These characteristics are as follows: “(1) they are sung by artists without formal musical training, who claim to come from working-class, southern roots; (2) they are sung in a southern, “twangy” accent, using a nasal tone (as opposed to the cultivated bel canto sound taught in conservatories in Europe and North America); (3) they are accompanied by string instruments, especially the fiddle and/or steel guitar; (4) they are set in a verse-chorus-bridge form; (5) they feature lyrics that tell stories about ordinary life which are often funny or tragic; (6) they use regular meter and simple tonal harmonies (often just I-IV-V); (7) they are marked by a transparent texture, in order to ensure that words can be clearly understood at all times; and (8) they celebrate rural life and document the difficulties faced by working-class people” (Maclachlan, 2008, p. 197-198). These are the defining characteristics in country songs. This writing also serves as an example of what country music scholarship sometimes looks like: clear definitions of what country music is, which can then serve as a basis for criticizing pieces of music that may not fit into that definition.

Aside from strict thematic and stylistic definitions, there are several general characteristics of country music that make it a unique genre, and that contribute to the ways in which contemporary country artists may be perceived. First, country music as a genre cherishes an especially strong connection with the past. Second, the country music experience is a spiritual one. Third, country music culture cultivates a more open relationship between artists and fans than most genres. Lastly, country music scholars hold the idea that there is a certain “life story”

mold that country artists typically fit. All of these factors combined not only characterize the genre, but also contribute to the long-standing idea that authenticity (whether genuine or simply perceived by country audiences) should be the ultimate goal for a country musician.

### **The Past**

The first unique factor that contributes to the importance of authenticity in country music is the idea that country music shares a strong connection with the past. This idea is heavily perpetuated by one of country music audiences' favorite institutions, the Grand Ole Opry. As Curtis W. Ellison (1995) notes, the Grand Ole Opry is known as the "spiritual center of country music culture" (Ellison, 1995, p. 1) The Opry has purposefully reminded audiences of the past since its beginnings in 1925 through the intimate atmosphere of its performances, which are designed to be reminiscent of an old-time family playing music together and for one another. The Opry allows both fans and artists to feel a connection with the audiences and performances that have come before them (Ellison, 1995). Country music audiences particularly value the origins of the genre, which are thought to be "hills and hollers and hoedowns" (Jensen, 2002, p. 197). The Opry goes as far as to physically link artists to the past performances; as Leigh Caldwell (2010) writes, in 1974 when the Grand Ole Opry House was built, a six-foot wide circle was cut from the center of the stage of the old Opry location, the Ryman Auditorium, and placed into the stage of the new Opry. Despite the new location, Opry performers are still invited to stand on the exact same stage (at least in part) as all of the performers who came before them. In 2010 Nashville encountered massive flooding, and the entire Opry stage was underwater. The rest of the stage was replaced, but the historic circle was salvaged and placed back into the new stage. Something as simple as a small piece of a stage remains hallowed ground that must be saved to

country music fans and artists because of its connection to the past. The idea of the past is what gives the Opry its long-standing role as the center of country music culture.

The past plays another role in country music: it allows journalists and scholars grounds to praise, or not praise, contemporary musicians. According to Jensen (2002), “the past is always present in country music coverage” (Jensen, 2002, p. 184) She notes that the past is always brought up in regards to whether or not music is deemed worthy of praise, particularly during the strong period of country music popularity in the 1990s. Journalists of the time claimed that 1990s country music was either successful or not based on the fact that it was, or was not, similar to previous country music. This leads to the idea that many journalists and scholars have perpetuated: country music has two types, good or bad, classified in part based on their association with the past. Country music that sticks to tradition and sounds like past country music is good, country music that sounds new is bad. The idea of the past and tradition are so important that they can be the sole basis for dismissal of a forward-thinking artist.

### **Spirituality**

Another factor that contributes to the desire for authenticity in country music is its spiritual ties. John Michael Spencer has coined the term “theomusicology” in reference to his studies of music, and believes that all popular music is in fact theological in nature because it serves as an avenue for audiences to explore the same types of questions that religion seeks to answer (as cited in Fillingim, 2003, p. 3). According to Spencer (as cited in Fillingim, 2003), popular music is simply another avenue that audiences may use to explore some possible answers to big questions such as the meaning of life. Listening to music that explores these questions may be a similar experience to listening to a sermon on the subject in an explicitly religious setting.

This idea that music can be theological has been further explored within the context of country music. Ellison (1995) believes that participating in a country concert is a spiritual experience because of a concert's close resemblances to church services. There is a sense of community among the audience at a country show, built up by the fact that the audience usually sings along together with the artist much like a church congregation sings along together during services. Additionally, country artists are reminiscent of preachers when they make theological statements both in their song lyrics and in their comments or speeches to the audience in between songs. In addition to these parallels between church services and concerts, there are often explicit references to God in country music lyrics, which allows this music to become not only entertainment, but also an extension of an already-important religious faith for some audience members (Ellison, 1995).

Country music furthers its ties to spirituality through explicit religious references in popular songs (Fillingim, 2003). With these popular artists and songs referencing their own faith in God, listening to these artists and songs then becomes not only entertainment, but an extension of their audiences' own religious practices. Similar to listening to a preacher give a church service, a fan can praise God by singing along to their favorite country songs. In December 2015, Rolling Stone published a list of the "25 Best Country Songs of 2015." Of these 25 popular songs, eight contain outright references to faith, God, or religion in their lyrics. Interestingly, four of these eight sets of lyrics refer to the relationship between music and faith, or depict music as a form of faith. The first four of the eight songs include simple references: (1) "I love that little white church, out on 109/It's where I hit my knees and I thank the Lord for this life of mine" from LoCash's "I Love This Life," (2) "It's hard to be a good wife and a good mom and a good Christian" from Carrie Underwood's "Smoke Break," (3) "I'll pray till Jesus rolls away the

stone” from Dierks Bentley’s “Riser,” and (4) “You thought God was an architect, now you know/He’s something like a pipe bomb ready to blow” from Jason Isbell’s “24 Frames.” Each of these songs references church, God, or Christianity explicitly; this allows audience members to deepen their connection or sense of community to these songs, the artists, and their fellow listeners by association with another community that is important to them: their religious community.

The second group of songs not only referenced spirituality, but even further referenced the relationship between music and spirituality: (1) “Can I get a hallelujah/Can I get an amen/Feels like the Holy Ghost running through ya/When I play the highway FM/I find my soul revival/Singing every single verse/Yeah I guess that’s my church” from Maren Morris’s “My Church,” (2) “The believer/That music can save a soul” from Charles Kelley’s “The Driver,” (3) “Baptized by rock and roll” from Keith Urban’s “John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16,” and (4) “I lost religion, found my soul in the blues” from Eric Church’s “Mr. Misunderstood.” These lyrics don’t just simply relate music to spirituality, they actually present music as a form of spiritual practice in and of itself. If listening to country music is a form of spirituality, then of course its listeners want to have an authentic experience. Religious followers hold their practices with the utmost respect and reverence; this representation of music as a similarly spiritual practice then places musicians in a position as revered, spiritual figures. In order for a musician to live up to this sacred role, then, they need to be perceived as good, trustworthy, and authentic.

### **Artist Accessibility**

Despite their elevation to sacred spiritual status, Maclachlan (2008) points out that country music stars are generally more accessible to their fans than most other celebrities. There are several examples of this accessibility, but one of the most notable and large-scale examples is

Fan Fair. Fan Fair started as an annual event in Nashville in 1972 with inaugural performances from Dolly Parton, Roy Acuff, Loretta Lynn, Minnie Pearl, and more. Fan Fair, which has since evolved into the CMA Music Festival, or CMA Fest, as of 2004 (which includes a portion of the festival titled Fan Fair X) has always been known as a celebration of impressive country music performances as well as a chance for country fans to gather in Nashville and get up-close and personal with the artists; Fan Fair includes autograph sessions, the Fan Fair Softball Tournament now known as the Celebrity Softball Tournament, and other intimate interactions such as small-scale performances from big-name artists. One of the most famous Fan Fair autograph sessions took place in 1996 when Garth Brooks signed autographs for 23 straight hours to ensure that all of the fans who wanted to meet him had the chance to get his autograph (“CMA Music Festival,” 2016; Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp., 2016). In 2015, performers at CMA Fest included Jason Aldean, The Band Perry, Dierks Bentley, Luke Bryan, Eric Church, Brett Eldredge, Florida Georgia Line, Sam Hunt, Alan Jackson, Lady Antebellum, Little Big Town, Neal McCoy, The Oak Ridge Boys, Brad Paisley, Rascal Flatts, Thomas Rhett, Darius Rucker, Cole Swindell, Keith Urban, Wynonna & The Big Noise, and the Zac Brown Band (Parton, 2015). Every performer at CMA Fest does so free of any performance fees, so that all ticket proceeds may be donated to Keep the Music Playing, a charity that supports music education in schools (“CMA Music Festival,” 2016; Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp., 2016). This is an annual event that brings country fans from all over the world to Nashville because it presents a unique opportunity for fans to see all of the biggest names in the genre over one long weekend. This is an opportunity that is relatively unique to country music fans; other festivals exist, but CMA Fest is notable because of the amount of big-name performers included in the event as well as the opportunity to interact with these artists intimately, for no additional charge above the

festival's ticket price. CMA Fest, and in particular Fan Fair X, is a key example of the ways in which country music fans have greater access to the celebrities within their genre than other music fans might. This access to the celebrities leads to the idea that they are, in fact, "real people," and adds another layer to the authenticity that country audiences perceive. Because it is so common for a country artist to be accessible, and an authentic, "real person," it is even more expected of country artists to live up to this image.

### **The "Classic Country Life Story"**

According to Maclachlan (2008), there is a "classic country life story" that most country artists loosely fit. The story goes: "born in the rural USA to poor or at least working-class parents (the exception being people whose parents are Johnny Cash or Hank Williams), became involved in music performance and songwriting while very young, worked at some kind of manual labor prior to getting the big break in country music, and continued to experience difficulty (such as marital discord or substance abuse) even after becoming a star. The account will usually include references to faith in God" (Maclachlan, 2008, p. 199) This life story presents the idea of the traditional and historical country artist, and adds another layer to the mold that a contemporary artist must fit into in order to be classified as a "good" country artist. The idea that there is a typical life story in country music is one way that authenticity is easily fabricated within the genre. If there is a "right" life story, then there is a very simple way for artists to establish themselves as the authentic country type; they simply must present the facts of their own life in a way that more or less fits the description. This study will examine two highly successful artists, and discuss the ways in which they do or do not fit into this classic life story.

## **Two Types of Country Music**

As discussed above, country music scholars have typically categorized country music into just two types, and clearly favor one over the other. The two types of music can most simply be called “good” or “bad,” where the good music represents that which is traditional, and the bad music represents that which is in any way innovative, mainstream, or sometimes just too obviously commercial. This study seeks to examine one of each type of artist: George Strait who is traditional, and Garth Brooks who is not. These artists specifically were chosen to study because George Strait has had more number one singles than any other artist, while Garth Brooks has had more number one albums than any other artist, making them each an example of a commercially successful artist within their categorization.

### **George Strait**

George Harvey Strait was born on May 18, 1952 in Poteet, Texas to a teacher and rancher. His interest in music came to light when he was a teenager; he joined a garage band, playing rock and roll music. He spent part of his time in town, and the weekends outside of town on the family ranch (Billboard, n.d.b). Right away it’s obvious that Strait seems to fit into the “classic life story”—he was born in the rural USA, had working-class parents, became involved in performance while young, and worked manual labor on the ranch.

One aspect of the “classic life story” that George Strait does not fit is the idea of marital discord. He married his wife Norma in December of 1971 and is still happily married to her today. He has shown similar loyalty in his relationship with his band; Strait joined the Ace in the Hole band as the lead singer while he was in college at Southwest Texas State University and no other band has played for him since 1975 when he left the United States Army (“Meet George,”

2016). As Newman (2015) writes, Strait has also remained on the same record label, MCA Nashville, since he signed his first recording contract.

Newman (2015) calls George Strait's attitude "laid-back, though never sloppy." In her praise of his "Cold Beer Conversation" album, Newman notes that Strait's music "reeks of authenticity" further underscoring the idea that Strait holds true to a traditional and authentic style of country music. She goes on to speak of the simplicity in his style by saying that "It's never been Strait's style to come in with a wrecking ball when a hammer will do." This simplicity in his musical stylings is an extension of the simplicity with which he portrays his own life: a laid-back rancher from Texas.

As noted in his biography published by Billboard, George Strait is the most traditional of any of the country artists who became largely popular in the 1980s. His musical style resembles both the honky tonk and Western swing traditions; about his influences, Billboard notes that "Strait didn't refashion the genres; instead, he revitalized them" (Billboard, n.d.b). The most notable factor here is that he did not attempt to modernize or simply to draw from these traditions within the context of a more modern musical style; instead, he operated within their original boundaries. For this reason, Strait is widely considered to be one of the "hard-core," "down home," or "hard country" artists. Strait's success utilizing this particular style led the way for a new crop of traditionalist country artists to emerge after him, changing the course of the genre because of his wide influence (Fillingim, 2003).

### **Career of George Strait**

The Ace in the Hole band recorded for an independent record label in Dallas in the 1970s, but didn't see much success. Strait had trouble making a name for himself in the Nashville music industry because he hadn't built strong connections yet. That changed in 1979

when he befriended a club owner, Erv Woosley, who happened to be a former MCA Records employee. Woosley invited his MCA connections to Texas to watch Strait perform, and they were convinced to sign him to MCA in 1980 (Billboard, n.d.b).

In 1981 Strait's very first single, "Unwound" broke into the Top Ten. By 1982, he had his first number one single with "Fool Hearted Memory" (Billboard, n.d.b). Since then, he has added another 59 singles to his collection of number ones, for a total of 60. 44 of these songs topped the Billboard chart and an additional 16 come from the Mediabase chart (Spong, 2014a). This makes him the top artist, of any genre, in terms of most number one singles ("Meet George," 2016).

While Strait may not have written many of his hits, he did have a hand in selecting them, which songwriter Dean Dillon praises as an important skill and one of the reasons his career has been so sustainable (Spong, 2014b). According to Strait's own website, another reason that his career has been sustained over several decades is that "you know what you're going to get—Straight ahead country music" ("Meet George," 2016). This has proven true in that Strait has largely maintained the same style over the course of his career. Billboard notes that Strait was one of the only country stars popular in the 1980s who were able to successfully transition into the country music boom of the 1990s; they note that while Strait made his sound "a little slicker" during the 90s, the changes were only slight. Another decade later, in 2001, Strait released 'The Road Less Traveled' which is noted by Billboard as the most experimental he has gotten with an album due to the vocal processing involved which was "about as country as a pair of stiletto-healed cowboy boots" (Billboard, n.d.b). What is interesting about Strait's experimentation with production on this album is the way that it was received; critical reception welcomed the change on the grounds that it proved that Strait was still hungry, still interested, and still invested in the

process of making music despite having sold so many albums already (Billboard, n.d.b). This seems to conflict with the idea that George Strait is successful because of his strict adherence to tradition.

### **Garth Brooks**

Garth Brooks was born Troyal Garth Brooks in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1962 (The Boot, 2016). His mother was a singer, his father a draftsman (Rolling Stone, n.d.). He attended Oklahoma State University and holds degrees in advertising and business administration (The Boot, 2016; Bio, n.d.). He began performing as part of a band in high school, and continued performing in bars while attending Oklahoma State. Brooks made his move to Nashville in 1987; this was his second time moving to Nashville to try to break into the country music industry after an unsuccessful attempt in 1985. A Capitol Records talent scout saw Brooks perform at a club in Nashville and signed him; his debut album was released in 1989 (Rolling Stone, n.d.). Brooks was married first to his high school sweetheart, divorced, and later married fellow country singer Trisha Yearwood. In 2000, Brooks retired with the intention of spending time with his children and returning to performance when his children were grown (Rolling Stone, n.d.). Brooks also fits the “classic country life story” fairly well: born in the rural USA with a working-class parent, became involved in musical performance while young, and experienced marital discord including divorce.

Brooks was heavily criticized in the 1990s for being “crassly commercial” (Maclachlan, 2008, p. 204) Many critics believed that Brooks was purely a business man who put on a country persona because he knew there was money to be made in country music (Maclachlan, 2008). In 1997 Jimmy Bowen, a Nashville executive, wrote that Brooks was an “egotistical” artist and a “ruthless negotiator” and who did not stop until he had signed an unprecedented record deal.

Nicolas Davidoff accused him of being “a yuppie with a lariat,” meaning that he was not a real country artist, just someone pretending to be one for his own gain (as cited in Maclachlan, 2008, p. 204).

Garth Brooks has been influenced by many musical styles, particularly incorporating the “arena rock dramatics” into his performance style (Billboard, n.d.a). Because of these non-traditional influences, Brooks is considered to be a classic example of a soft-shell country artist. Brooks’ style varies from the traditional country artist more so in terms of music than in terms of lyrics. Lyrically, Brooks stays fairly true to typical country music themes—most often, the cowboy trope. Three of his album titles reflect the cowboy theme: “Ropin’ the Wind,” “Fresh Horses,” and “The Chase” and all of his albums include at least one cowboy-themed song (Maclachlan, 2008).

### **Career of Garth Brooks**

According to Billboard, the lack of traditionalism that makes Garth Brooks the target of such negative criticism by country journalists and scholars is exactly what makes him so important to the genre; he was able to move country music further into the spotlight and broaden the country audience with his mass appeal. Brooks’ own website notes that one of the things he is well-known for is his ability to consistently break attendance records at concert venues because of his wide audience. Ellison (1995) attended concert performances from 75 different country artists, and from his observations believes that of those 75 performers, Garth Brooks definitively received the most fan appreciation from his audience. So, not only is Brooks widely popular, but also deeply popular among those broad audiences.

One particular moment in Garth Brooks’ career often goes unmentioned, and is noticeably absent from the summary of Brooks’ achievements presented on his website: the

Chris Gaines experiment. In September 1999, Brooks released a rock album under the persona of Chris Gaines. According to his Billboard biography, Brooks' primary motivation in creating the Chris Gaines persona was to promote the fictional singer, who he intended to portray later in a film. He even appeared on Saturday Night Live after the album's release as both himself and Gaines, with Garth Brooks as the show's host and Chris Gaines as the show's musical guest (Maclachlan, 2008). Chris Gaines had an entirely different look and sound than Garth Brooks, and was decidedly not a country musician. When questioned, Brooks said "Chris is a character. Garth is simply who I am" (Maclachlan, 2008, p. 202). However, country audiences were not satisfied with this claim. Brooks' country audiences, conditioned to expect the utmost in authenticity from their beloved artists, felt that the Chris Gaines persona also called Garth Brooks' own sincerity into question: was Garth Brooks simply a carefully crafted persona as well? This question led Brooks' audience to feel widely hurt. In fact, Wal-Mart reflected the popular opinion in their marketing for the next Garth Brooks album released post-Chris Gaines; their advertisements for "The Magic of Christmas" read: "If you're a Garth fan who felt betrayed by Chris Gaines, The Magic of Christmas will have you dancing around the tree singing, 'Come home Garth—all is forgiven'" (as cited in Maclachlan, 2008, p. 206) This idea that Brooks' fans needed to forgive him for his experimentation again underscores the heightened scrutiny that a country artist faces to be authentic. This exemplifies the idea that country musicians are generally expected to be all country or nothing in order to be accepted by country audiences, who appear to value sincerity and tradition above all else. After the failure of Chris Gaines the film about the fictional singer was never made, Garth Brooks split from his wife, and soon began to ease his way into a retirement from recording and performing music which he has since come out of (Billboard, n.d.a).

## **Authenticity and Commercialism**

George Strait created a new traditionalist movement, only to be followed by Garth Brooks who threw tradition to the wind and created music and performances that would appeal to the masses. These two artists took opposing approaches to their positioning within country music, yet they have achieved a very similar status as successful figures. Both have impressive resumes of sales, chart positions, and awards; both continue to be adored by large fan bases. Country music journalists have divided the industry into “good” and “bad,” traditionalist and authentic versus non-traditionalist and inauthentic, yet these two artists have achieved nearly the same ends by entirely different means.

The examples provided by these artists both do and do not seem to line up with the proposed views on authenticity (that authenticity should be an artist’s main goal). George Strait’s authentic and traditional image allowed him to succeed, while Garth Brooks’ inauthentic and non-traditional image also led to massive success. If, as the scholars have proposed, country music audiences truly valued tradition and authenticity above all else, it seems that Garth Brooks should have been a failure, especially after the Chris Gaines debacle. Fillingim (2003) sums up the conflicting imagery most effectively: “Imagine sitting on the porch of Grandma’s log cabin wired to the web for Reba’s live on-line chat and music video broadcast” (Fillingim, 2009, p. 2). As he notes, artists in country music claim to be the guardians of the genre’s “pure, simple, down-home roots” through their work, which also includes “elaborate stage and video productions in the context of a multi-billion dollar industry utilizing state of the art technologies in recording, producing, and merchandizing their products” (Fillingim, 2003, p. 2) It’s a conflicting narrative at best, outright hypocritical at worst. The point Fillingim (2003) makes is that even a country artist with the best intentions to preserve country music’s traditions can’t

function within the modern music industry without buying in, in at least some ways, to the industry's inherent commercialism. Even the most traditional artist utilizes technologies that are too modern to possibly also be traditional.

Often times a traditionalist approach is as carefully crafted an operation as a non-traditionalist approach. George Strait, for example, had a team of professionals who designed his down-home style. Strait's success, especially his early success, must in part be attributed to his songwriters. Strait's career took off in the 1980s, but he didn't have a songwriting credit on one of his albums until 2011's "Here For a Good Time." For more than thirty years, Strait's number one hits, which were largely responsible for his traditionalist perception, were crafted for him by professional writers ("Meet George," 2016). It is interesting, then, that reviewers mention that Strait's music "reeks of authenticity" (Newman, 2015) when it is, in fact, a commercial production. One writer in particular, Dean Dillon, has written fifty-five of Strait's songs. He co-wrote Strait's first single and has been a major part of the George Strait production ever since. In John Spong's Texas Monthly profile (2014), Dillon notes that, "Back in those days, man, you didn't pitch songs to an unknown artist. You just didn't" (Spong, 2014b). However, Dillon saw promise in Strait's singing voice, and thought that he and his co-writer should pitch the songs they had been working on to him, "just to see" what might happen. Dillon wanted to be a performer himself, and at one point during his regular meetings with Strait, held back some of his material that he intended to use on his own album. Strait knew of one of those songs, and mentioned that he liked it. Dillon intended to keep the song for himself, until George Strait promised that he would make it a number one hit if he gave it to him instead. And, that day, Dillon gave up the song and his own career as a performer (Spong, 2014b). George Strait may be perceived as a simple rancher, but he is also a businessman.

The most illogical discussion of country music occurs when commercialism is both vilified and confused with inauthenticity. As Maclachlan (2008) noted, scholars who discuss country music are typically suspicious of artists who find commercial success because they focus their appreciation on the working-class nature of the genre. Country musicians who do not hide their commercialism are made out as villains, while in fact every popular country artist is the center of a unique business enterprise. So, while it doesn't make sense to say that an artist with commercial motivations is inherently worse than another artist, that is a narrative that legitimately appears within the country music industry. Non-traditional country music often has a broader mass appeal, since it incorporates influences from other styles of music. This can lead to greater commercial success, which then allows for the piece of work to be labeled as both inauthentic and too commercial; this can then lead audiences to believe that there is an inherent connection between commercialism and inauthenticity.

Garth Brooks is a prime example; Brooks has been criticized time and time again by country music journalists for being inauthentic or overly commercial, and therefore his music classified as "bad," yet his approach to creating his music was undeniably effective on country music audiences. This calls into question the motivation that country artists have—or should have—when defining their position within the industry. A traditionalist approach may please the scholars, but does that ultimately matter? The simple fact that cannot be ignored is that country music is, always has been, and always will be, a business. The most basic goal for an artist is not to be praised in a scholarly journal; the goal is to sell albums, concert tickets, and other merchandise to the country audience. Brooks may have been harshly criticized, but he remains the industry's top-selling artist. Brooks' commercial success has been cited as a contributing factor to his perceived inauthenticity, meanwhile George Strait's similar commercial success is

considered a result of his reputation of authenticity. These artists exemplify the idea that commercial success cannot rightfully and logically be tied to an artist's authenticity, or lack thereof.

Commercialism, while perceived negatively, persists in every aspect of the country industry. Even the sacred center of country music, The Grand Ole Opry, is inherently commercial. Today, it stands as one of Nashville's many country music-centered tourist attractions. Even at its inception, the Opry was created specifically to draw on the "hills and hollers and hoedowns" origins (which, as Jensen (2002) notes, are only the audiences' imagined origins of the genre). As Ellison (1995) writes, the Opry was based upon a "broadcasting strategy and marketing concept" by George D. Hay, and indeed was not an organic incarnation of the original country musicians (Ellison, 1995, p. 9). The Opry is, and always was, a business enterprise. Does the commercial nature of the Opry make it less valuable as a tradition? Are artists naïve to feel such honor upon standing on the Opry circle? Are audiences being fooled into thinking they are experiencing a connection with country music's past? To put it simply, no. The fact that the Grand Ole Opry is a business does not lessen the important role that it has played in the career of many country artists or as a symbol for country audiences. The Opry, like all country artists, is able to be commercial because audiences believe it has value, and therefore continue to engage the industry financially. A particular album's growing sales do not work to decrease the album's authentic value; authenticity and commercialism are not, have never been, and will never be mutually exclusive.

### **Why The Authenticity Idea Persists**

If authenticity doesn't really make a difference in a country artist's success, and someone who has been called inauthentic like Garth Brooks can become the top-selling artist of all time,

why does the idea of its importance persist? Firstly, as Maclachlan (2008) points out, audiences seek authenticity as a form of nostalgia; the idea of a better, simpler past is a major theme in the country music industry and traditionalist music seems to allow audiences to have a connection with this past, or at least show their reverence toward it. In the same way that a person might upgrade a material possession but keep the old one for sentimentality's sake, country audiences might listen largely to contemporary music but prefer to keep traditionalist country music on their playlists for its nostalgic value.

Beyond the nostalgia, simplifying country music into “good” and “bad” categories provides a basis for discussion. As Jensen (2002) points out, “The music we enjoy is simultaneously meaning and product, just as we are simultaneously audience and market” (Jensen, 2002, p. 196). The country music audience is also a market, and the country music artist is also a product. Audiences across the board struggle with these ideas, and in general do not have simple ways to discuss these facts. The “commodification of culture,” as Jensen (2002) calls it, is a complex subject. As a result, audiences use these ideas of good and bad, authentic and not, as a way to make sense of this commodification. There may not be any truth to the idea that one style of music is more real, or authentic, than another, but it gives audience terms by which to talk about their culture. These concepts of mainstream and authentic “require each other because they construct each other” (Jensen, 2002, p. 199). Without discounting one style of music, there are fewer simple grounds upon which to praise the other.

Beyond being a basis for discussion, Jensen (2002) notes a few other ways that this idea of authenticity benefits the country industry: (1) journalists have a dramatic narrative to continuously draw upon and also get to imagine themselves as an important record-keeper, or even a defender of the true, good music; (2) audiences can position themselves as someone with

better taste than the average consumer; (3) performers are able to blame “the system” whether they find success or failure: if they pursue non-traditional music and find success, it was because that’s how the system is set up, and if they pursue authentic music and fail, it’s because the system is keeping them down; (4) the genre as a whole cherishes an identity that is based upon struggle, and this decision that artists must face to pursue authentic music or find commercial success through less authentic music is a constant tale of struggle.

While pitting traditional and non-traditional music against each other is a valid means of discussion, pitting authenticity against commercialism is not. Commercial motivations or commercial success do not automatically invalidate a work’s authenticity. As Maclachlan (2008) wrote, “When we tell various versions of how the Forces of Commerce threaten the Forces of Authenticity, we miss the chance to figure out why we so eagerly dance with the devil, every day. We disdain the mass media while participating in them, even if it is the “alternative” or “authentic” sound or music or venue or media that we so cherish” (Maclachlan, 2008, p. 198-199). Regardless of whether an artist is traditional or non-traditional, they must have participated in the commercial music business to have reached the mass country audiences. By defining “authentic” as non-commercial, every successful artist in the genre’s history would automatically be classified as non-authentic, which can’t logically be true.

### **Industry Implications**

Each of the factors discussed above that have created the importance of authenticity in country music—the nostalgia associated with the past, the spiritual connections, the accessibility of artists, and the country life story—are all both deeply engrained and still relevant ideas in the realm of country music. Because of this, there is no foreseeable future in which authenticity will not be a topic of discussion in this industry. However, with a greater understanding of the fact

that authenticity and commercialism are not mutually exclusive, there is more room for both traditional and non-traditional artists to succeed in the country genre. If an artist is not discounted for their success, perhaps then more artists will be encouraged to experiment stylistically and further engage the modern day country audience.

Industry honors such as membership to the Country Music Hall of Fame and awards presented by the Country Music Association and Academy of Country Music continue to go to both traditional and non-traditional artists. At the 2015 CMA Awards, “Male Vocalist of the Year,” the ceremony’s top honor for a male vocalist, went to Chris Stapleton, who is an obviously traditional country artist. Just five months later at the 2016 ACM Awards, “Entertainer of the Year,” that ceremony’s top honor, went to Jason Aldean who is an obviously non-traditional country artist. With 95 million country music fans in America, there is a niche for both of these, and all in-between types of music, to find a receptive audience.

### **Future Research**

This study would benefit from future research into specific consumer behavior by country audiences. It would be helpful to survey country music audiences to obtain the audiences’ impressions and perceptions about certain artists. It would also be helpful to know whether or not those impressions change how they consume music by that artist (for example: radio only, radio and music purchases, concert ticket purchases under \$20, under \$50, under \$100, or over \$100, etc). Future research would also be helpful in determining whether there is historical evidence of cyclical preferences; that is, whether or not being a traditional country artist goes in and out of fashion.

## Summary of Findings

In regards to Research Question 1, the most successful artists in country, George Strait and Garth Brooks were identified as two of the most successful artists in contemporary country music. George Strait has charted sixty number-one singles, the most of any artist in any genre. Garth Brooks has sold 136 million+ albums, the most of any solo artist in any genre. These artists were selected to be studied in part because of these impressive accomplishments.

In regards to what these artists have in common with each other and the “classic life story” mold (Question 2), George Strait and Garth Brooks both loosely fit the “classic life story” in several ways, and therefore have several things in common with one another, such as being raised in the rural USA with working class parents. In terms of their careers, both artists tried once unsuccessfully to move to Nashville but failed because of a lack of connections within the industry. Upon finding a key connection, both artists gained traction very quickly and found unprecedented success either with singles or album sales.

Research Question 3 sought to determine the aspects of country culture that have built up the idea that authenticity is important. In the study, four specific aspects of country music culture were identified as having contributed to the idea that authenticity is important in the genre and discussed in depth. These four cultural aspects were: the strong connection with and nostalgia for the past, the spiritual nature of the listening experience, the accessibility of artists to their fans, and the “classic country life story.”

Research Question 4 was concerned with how the examples of these artists’ success fits with the views on authenticity presented in the literature. The view on authenticity presented across the literature is that it is of vital importance in the country music industry. George Strait

and Garth Brooks have both found extraordinary success in the country industry, while George Strait is considered a highly traditional artist and Garth Brooks is considered a non-traditional or inauthentic country artist. Garth Brooks' success seems to prove that this view of authenticity's importance does not truly carry over into sales, and that being labeled "inauthentic" does not necessarily halt an artist's chances of success.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the literature regarding the culture of the country music industry concludes that authenticity is of major importance to country audiences, and that an artist must be authentic in order to be considered a true and real country artist. However, the findings of this study seem to imply that perceived authenticity does not serve as a major influence on an artist's commercial success. When examining George Strait and Garth Brooks as specific examples, it is clear that both traditional (perceived as authentic) and non-traditional (perceived as inauthentic) artists are able to find success in the contemporary country music industry. The true effects of perceived authenticity cannot be determined conclusively without additional research into specific consumer behavior.

This study identified four cultural aspects of the country genre that have built up the idea that authenticity is important: a connection with the past, spiritual experiences, artist accessibility, and a classic life story that many country artists fit. Each of these factors have contributed to the discussion on authenticity in the genre, and are long-standing cultural norms. Therefore, these factors are not likely to become less prominent in the culture of the genre. Because these factors will continue to be present, the discussion on authenticity will likely also continue. However, commercialism is often brought up in the discussion on authenticity without a logical basis for doing so. An increased understanding of the idea that commercialism and

authenticity are not mutually exclusive is needed to ensure that there is plenty of room among country's wide contemporary audience for an entire spectrum of traditional to non-traditional artists to succeed.

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