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The Changing British Attitude to County Music: From the 1960's to the Present Day.

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Introduction

Mention Country Music to someone living in Great Britain and one will almost always be met with either a clueless, amused or sympathetic response. This vast musical genre, referred to as 'our heritage' by American guitarist Chet Atkins (Tichi, 1998, pg.1), is understandably considered to be an enigma by the vast majority of British people. This label, is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a person or thing that is mysterious or difficult to understand' (Soanes and Stevenson, 2005), and further reading, soon suggests that the dictionary's own description of Country Music does little to help the confused British listener understand, exactly what the genre is all about, or its extensive musical tradition:

'A form of popular music originating in the rural southern US. It is a mixture of ballads and dance tunes played characteristically on fiddle, banjo, guitar, and pedal steel guitar. Also called COUNTRY AND WESTERN.' (Soanes and Stevenson, 2005)

Almost immediately, one is misled by the use of the term 'dance tunes,' which in this instance refers back to the Barn Dance music of the Grand Ole Opry, which began life as a Barn Dance programme on WSM radio in the early 1920's (Havighurst, 2007, p.25), but which in a modern context could be taken as a reference to any number of Country Music singles which are often the result of promotional and commercial juggernauts such as Taylor Swift (Gold, 2012) and Jason Aldean (Flippo, 2011). Then there is the subtle distinction between Country Music and Country and Western, with the second term still being widely used to describe the music in Great Britain while the Country Music Association of America has done all it can to separate the two genres and distance itself from the old idea that Western music is part of modern Country (Tilbury, 2013).

So herein lies the problem, Country Music is mysterious and difficult to understand simply because it cannot be defined as only ballads and dance tunes and has, instead, been crossing

genre boundaries for near one-hundred years while at the same time seeking to encompass and represent all areas of a rural, Southern and American life on a world stage.

To make a foray into studying the changing British attitude to this wholly American music, is to consider the sometimes torrid relationship that the genre has had with the British people, and providing clear parameters for this study, will help to distinguish the British attitude from any other influences. With this in mind, I will be referring only to the attitude of Great Britain; the countries of England, Scotland and Wales to avoid any unnecessary confusion or contamination with the sometimes stronger views of Ireland influencing Northern-Ireland. Similarly, the attitude considered and my analysis will consist of arguments informed by previous academic studies and archive material from the music and media industries, which I will then compare against primary interviews conducted with leading industry professionals and musicians. While some of these professionals are musicians producing Country Music in Britain, the main focus of this study will be to look at the changing attitude to the American music as opposed to the 'cottage garden industry' which exists to provide this British Country Music, although some occasional references cannot be avoided. This will be the final key parameter that defines my study.

In order to examine the *changing* British attitude to Country Music, I will be focusing directly on three distinct periods in history, following the end of the Second World War in 1945. Firstly, I will provide a study of the 1960's wherein Country Music first gained widespread popularity in Great Britain through a number of American artists who were promoted as pop singers and, therefore, made it into the pop-charts of the time. In order to determine whether the work done in the 1960's, had any great lasting impact on the popularity of the genre, I will then consider the 1990's at which time those working in the industry had the opportunity to create a lasting legacy for Country Music in Britain. Finally, I will use specific case studies of the current market to indicate if, over forty years after it was first presented to the British, Country Music is finally making headway towards being considered a more prominent musical genre by those who live here.

There are, of course, a number of key texts which will inform discussion throughout this study. From a historical angle, Malone's *Country Music U.S.A* (Malone, 2002) and his *Southern / American Music* written with Stricklin (Malone and Stricklin, 2003), will inform initial discussion of America's rich Country Music roots, while key facts and figures will be provided from the *Encyclopaedia of Country Music* edited by McCall, Rumble, Kingsbury, and Gill (McCall et al., 2012) and the BBC 4 programme *The Joy of Country* (*The Joy of Country*, 2011). Beyond this, back editions of British newspapers such as *The Guardian* and primary interviews with *Cackett* (Cackett, 2013), *West* (West, 2013) and *Tilbury* (Tilbury, 2013) will provide detailed insight into the British attitude, and how it has changed from the 1960's to the present day.

From the outset, the main narrative argument of my piece will be to establish if it is true to suggest that the British attitude to Country Music has changed over time for the better, and, if instead of maintaining a consistent level of support and popularity in Great Britain, the genre has seen several bubbles of widespread popularity (notably in the 1960's, the 1990's and today as defined by my chapter choices) which while at first supported by the media and music industries, have eventually burst leaving Country Music to rebuild its positive British attitude once again. A secondary argument running throughout my piece, will look at the genre's presentation in the British media and determine how much of an impact this has had on dispelling, or indeed condoning the various stereotypes associated with Country Music.

Before beginning the main body of my study, it is important to recognise that there has been little previous academic writing in this field. While the academic study of specific music genres is well documented, and Country Music itself has been studied and written about in depth in the USA (East Tennessee State University, 2013), there has been little consideration of how the music is viewed and presented in Europe. Therefore, for this study of the changing British attitude, I will be supporting my arguments with primary interviews and secondary

media texts as mentioned above, in the hope that this dissertation will build on what little academic study there is of the perception of Country Music in the wider world.

Chapter 1: A Short History of Country Music up to the 1950's.

In order to establish how the British perceive Country Music as a genre and in doing so debate their attitude to it, it is important to first consider the roots of a musical tradition which grew up out of the poor American South at the turn of the 20th Century. So much of the genre's now world wide appeal, with a particular emphasis on markets in Europe and Australasia (Lady Antebellum grossed \$3.3 million touring Germany, the U.K., Ireland and Taylor Swift pulled in \$17 million in just six performances in Australia and New Zealand) (Phillips, 2013), stems from the fact that it has always remained true to its humble beginnings. Those humble beginnings though, depend a great deal more on life in the first British Colonies than one might first be led to believe, and can be traced back around two hundred years to the Appalachian Mountains when many of the Scottish and Irish settlers arriving on ships from their native lands decided to make the foothills their home (Gish, 2004, p.6). From the outset then, a connection can be established which binds the history of Country Music not only to Europe, where a majority of the instruments that would later become synonymous with the genre originated, but with Great Britain and Ireland itself (Carlin and Rubenstein, 2006, p.12).

Initially this new style was known as 'Hillbilly Music,' the sound of the Southern States as those who lived there 'tried to scratch a living off the land' (*The Joy of Country*, 2011). The name, Hillbilly offers up another British connection, with the most credible source of the word being that 'Scottish highlands either in their native country or in the New World, linked two older Scottish expressions, "hill-folk" and "billie" (a synonym for "fellow" or "companion")' (Harkins, 2005, p.48). It is largely agreed amongst academics that the term became part of the rural Southern vernacular by the late nineteenth century. Hillbilly Music, the first recorded use of the name accredited to North Carolina native Al Hopkins in 1925 (Weisbard, 2004, p.156), evolved primarily out of the folk songs and ballads brought over by these Anglo-Celtic immigrants and before long, while drawing upon the influences of other groups such as the African-American's, became a force strong enough to survive in an 'urban-

industrial society' (Malone, 2002, p.2). These aforementioned African-American influences on Hillbilly Music can be seen to directly manifest themselves in the Classic Minstrel Shows, a kind of American popular theatre established by Thomas D. Rice and George Washington Dixon in the 1830's (McCall et al., 2012, p.36), where entertainers performed in blackface and from which much of the classic instrumentation of the Banjo, Fiddle as well as the humour, skits and songs evolved (Carlin and Rubenstein, 2006, p.15). Of course, this kind of performance was rightly criticised (although it was immensely popular at the time) and along with slavery, and a lack of developed cities in the South, lead to many immigrants choosing to live in the more populated Northern States (Malone, 2002, p.2). This lack of new settlers and connections outside their own State borders meant that the Southern United States, where Hillbilly music first began, continued to develop as an almost isolated melting pot of stories and music connected and travelled primarily by the poorer classes, both black and white, who lived there. Thus, this sharing of music and stories was without doubt imperative to the early popularity of Hillbilly Music in the South, a period summed up by Peterson and Davies as the 'fertile crescent of Country Music' (Peterson and Davies, 1975).

As already stated, the early Hillbilly music was a product of British and Irish settlers and was, therefore, greatly influenced by the traditional folk-ballads of their homelands. Malone talks of the British immigrants bringing a great 'storehouse of lore and song,' which in the years that followed underwent some great kind of 'Americanization,' so that those who lived in the Southern states were no longer singing of knights and fair English damsels but of characters and locations that befitted their own, vastly expanding new world (Malone, 2002, p.4).

Eventually, these would evolve into the famous songs of Cowboys and Indians, loving, lying and the American way of life that have been so much a part of Country Music throughout its history – later defined by Harlan Howard as 'Three chords and the truth' (Wadey, 2006).

In the early years, two names stand out as bringing the fledging Hillbilly music to a larger stage. Vernon Dalhart, was one of country's first superstars, using over one hundred

pseudonyms to release more than 5,000 78 rpm records in the 1920's and 30's (Carlin and Rubenstein, 2006, p.26), while Jimmie Rogers known as the 'Godfather of Twang,' brought Gospel and Blues into his music and developed what is now known as the Blue Yodel (*The Joy of Country*, 2011). Both men were working in the 1920's South, and both died before Country Music found its national market in the 1950's, making them early pioneers for the Hillbilly sound. Indeed, Dalhart was described by talent scout Ralph Peer as a 'professional substitute for a real Hillbilly,' and one who would go on to 'adapt Hillbilly music to suit the tastes of the non-hillbilly population' (Russell, 2010, p.14).

The adaption of which Russell talks, allowed Hillbilly music to eventually progress into the Country Music that surfaced from the 1950's onwards. The early Hillbilly sound though was made up primarily of a combination of 'Anglo-Irish-Negro folksong and American popular song' played out on the fiddle and the banjo (Wilgus, 1965). The songs were raw, the instruments basic and therefore able to convey so effectively the stories of life in the rural South. The use of the banjo in Hillbilly music, with its 'distinctive frailing or finger-picking sound,' began with performers often playing a comedy role which while 'significant symbolically,' was often 'musically marginal' (McCall et al., 2012). Therefore, a picture of Hillbilly music starts to develop, as a raw and comic style which played on African-American minstrel influences and used instruments brought over from as far afield as the Middle East (McCall et al., 2012) to channel the experiences of everyday life in the South into music and song.

On September 27, 1903, the Southern Railway's fast mail train, number 97, plunged off a 75-foot trestle north of Danville, Virginia, killing nine of the 16 men on board (Scott, 1965). This being a national disaster, the sad fate of those on board was good inspiration for songwriters of the time with the first cut of the now famous 'The Wreck of the Old 97,' attributed to G. B. Grayson and Henry Whitter (Blue Ridge Institute and Museum, 2013). The lyrics were later polished up, and an alternate version recorded by Dalhart in 1924 became the first million-selling country song (Dalhart, 1924).

Rodgers for his part, came into Hillbilly music almost by accident – having grown up working on the railroads and dreaming of a life of performing; catching tuberculosis in 1924, was realisation enough to cause him to consider performance as a means of supporting his family (Carlin and Rubenstein, 2006, p.50). Beginning with a radio spot on WWNC in North Carolina which was soon cancelled, he auditioned for Ralph Peer of *Victor* accompanied only by his guitar and was signed to record his first big hit the immortal ‘Blue Yodel (T for Texas)’ (McCall et al., 2012, p.434). In the five years that followed, Rodgers recorded no less than 110 titles, with his style of performance being about emotional immediacy (Mazor, 2009, p.17) which lead to him being the first artist inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame as the ‘the man who started it all’ (Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, 2013). To many, Rodgers epitomized Hillbilly music and the key features that would later lead Country Music to worldwide popularity, ‘wear the right thing, do the right thing and never forget the train song’ (*The Joy of Country*, 2011).

Remarkably, the first million Country song is released as early as 1924, at a time when the South was changing and the trains that crisscrossed America were transporting people from the ‘isolation of the country to the alienation of the city’ (*The Joy of Country*, 2011). So too was Hillbilly music changing, leaving its base in the rural South in the early 1940’s and gaining national prominence the like of which had never been thought possible before (Malone and Stricklin, 2003, p.94). Indeed, as Kyriakoudes suggests, in 1890 just over ten per cent of people in the South lived in cities, but by 1930, this figure had swelled to nearly one third (Kyriakoudes, 2004, p.68). Part of the national urbanisation that was sweeping across America in the years before the Great Depression, Hillbilly music was suddenly able to present itself to a far larger audience with songs born in the South travelling across the country as part of the ‘great migration North’ and the movement of African Americans to the West Coast which did not ebb in ‘any significant way’ until after World War II (Malone, 2003, pg.74).

By the 1930's, Hillbilly music had gained a national forum, and one prominent explanation for this change is arguably the commercialisation of the genre, which began in the first decades of the twentieth century. It was in the 1920's and 1930's that the upper-class folk preservationists distinguished Hillbilly music from the folk music of which it had derived, the former being 'performed for money,' while the latter developed further as a 'philanthropic exercise in cultural uplift' (Pecknold, 2008, p.2). In reality from then on, the stories once told through simple song by those working in the rural south, became entangled in the *business* of Country Music with fans developing a long-held interest in the inner-workings of the genre which has continued to this day.

It was alongside this now noticeably more commercialised music industry that the seed of an idea grew into what would go on to become an integral part of the Country Music story for over seventy years. The Grand Ole Opry began life in 1925 as one of the first radio barn dances on Nashville's WSM Radio (Escott and Gill, 2009). Arguably, no institution did more than the Opry to bring the different rural and urban fractions of the south together in the first half of the twentieth century, with Southerners in the North feeling uprooted and longing for the 'good times' (Davis and Pettus, 1992, p.123). This weekly radio programme first presented by George D. Hay allowed them to indulge and express themselves through music (Tassin and Henderson, 1975, p.18). Throughout the next two decades, the Opry came to be known as the embodiment of Country Music developing from a barn dance into a weekly stage show featuring the finest acts of the day and beginning with the immortal line, 'welcome to the Grand Ole Opry, the capital of Country Music throughout the world' (*The Joy of Country*, 2011).

But even the Opry was not immune to the now unmistakable commercial streak in the Country Music business. Its entire foundations were laid by the National Life Accident Insurance Company whose founding partner Edwin Craig had become fascinated by the phenomenon of radio and quickly decided to establish one of the finest stations in the country (Wolfe, 1999, p.5). The fact that National Life began broadcasting on a thousand

watts of power, making it one of the most powerful stations in the South (Wolfe, 1999, p.5), had a lot to do with the Opry's future success. For here was an area of the South that was rapidly developing a reputation as a city where music was produced, and one with a population largely consisting of rural Southerners who had decamped to the bigger, more urban city.

From the 1920's onwards the Grand Ole Opry, became a staple to radio listeners throughout the United States. Located in a city that was quickly expanding as those from the South moved in, yet housed in a building steeped in history (the Grand Ole Opry made the Ryman Auditorium, a former church, it's home for thirty-one years from 1943) (The Grand Ole Opry, 2013) and playing a mixture of the old time music (Kyriakoudes, 2004, p.74) and the more modern sound that would soon become known as Country, the Opry set itself up to be a traditional mainstay in this ever expanding and continually changing genre. Moreover, these values which were laid out by the founders of the Opry in the 1920's are the formula by which the institution is still run today, on a strong grounding of modern and traditional country music.

At the beginning of the 1950's, there were seven million farmers in the United States, but by the late 1960's there were only three million (Tassin and Henderson, 1975, p.16). Suddenly the way of life on which first Hillbilly music, then Country and the Grand Ole Opry were built, was disappearing at an alarming rate. Contrary to popular belief it was at this time that 'Country Music' or 'Country and Western;' the latter being the description of choice in much of Europe and certainly in Britain for the most part of the twentieth century, came into universal use. Over the next decades, Country Music would see a distinct fall from grace, remaining popular only in the hearts and minds of those who really lived the sound. However, there would be returns to favour, not only in the United States, but around the world in the 1960's and later in the 1990's and much of the twenty-first century. And it was in these periods as Country Music diversified even further to change and adapt to the popular music styles of the day as few other genres could, that the music of America which had once

grown out of the folksongs of British and Irish immigrants in the rural South, came full circle to take hold of the hearts and minds of those over 4,000 miles away in Britain and Europe.

Chapter 2: The 1960's: The Nashville Sound, 'gentleman' Jim Reeves, and the Wembley festivals.

In his UK No. 6 hit single from 1963, Jim Reeves croons: 'Welcome to my world, won't you come on in, miracles I guess still happen now and then' (Winkler and Hathcock, 1964). The lyrics themselves, sung in Reeves' 'resonant purr' (McCall et al., 2012) could be classed as a metaphor for the changing nature of Country Music in the 1960's, welcoming people in to a genre which was, at that time, being heavily influenced by the pop and easy listening sound coming out of Nashville and California. As arguably the most famous musical decade began, Country was just starting to gain a foothold in Great Britain and 'Gentleman Jim' as he became known, thanks to his distinctively smooth, lush, and pop-oriented style of Country (Country Music Television, 2013), would go on to become arguably the defining Country Music star in 1960's Britain.

Just like artists Patsy Cline, considered to be 'one of the most popular and influential talents of any musical genre' (Browne and Browne, 2001, p.180), and John Denver, Reeves has gone to be one of the more widely recognised and admired Country Music artists in Britain. And while each share a terrible macabre fate, perishing in separate air accidents in the latter half of the twentieth century, they were also collectively presented to audiences in Great Britain, not as a Country Music singers but as artists that could very well make it into the pop charts and, therefore, it was beneficial for record labels and promoters to 'play down the Country connection' (Cackett, 2013).

Much of this method of promoting Country stars in Great Britain had to do with the way the genre's sound was being shaped in its American homeland. At this time, several strands of different Country Music, notably the Bakersfield sound (produced out of California) and the Nashville sound were vying to lead the genre in a new direction. Indeed, Bakersfield spawned and exported so much Country Music from the 1940's to the 1970's that some observers called it 'Nashville West' (McCall et al., 2012). The style was defined by its harder edge, and

owed much to the work of Buck Owens and the empire he had built out West with radio stations, publishing houses and local management of artists including Merle Haggard. However, it was clear by the late 1960's that hopes of establishing a permanent 'Nashville West' were simply a pipe-dream as many artists continued to make the one-hundred mile drive South to record in Hollywood. The Nashville sound, on the other hand, had no such problems with location, being centered as it was in the very home of Country Music and a key city of the South. From 1960 onwards it was being described as the 'essence of C & W' and a way of defining the special atmosphere that could be found in Nashville studios (McCall et al., 2012). Deliberately aimed at broadening Country Music's listenership, following a dent in the genre's sales from the rise of Rock and Roll, the Nashville Sound featured more and more pop sounding singers including Reeves, Cline and Eddie Arnold. Part of the reason it was able to overtake the Bakersfield productions and become the dominant sound in the industry, was down to its reliance on a relatively small number of top studio players and a cooperative, relaxed atmosphere which lead to a plethora of tracks being produced that maintained a very similar sound. And with these changes taking place in a very early 1960's America, it is no small wonder management companies and record labels wanted to follow suit and promote Country Music artists more as pop singers in Britain, and with great success.

Interestingly though, seeds of this rebranding of Country Music and influences from outside the genre, can be seen in America even in the years before the Nashville sound took hold, thus suggesting for the first time a simple idea which would go on to define Country Music over the fifty years that followed, that the genre could continually reinvent itself and change its sound, drawing on influences from a variety of other progressive music forms. The idea was modest, but it got off to a bit of a false start, when Country Music aficionados encountered, but didn't learn from, the music of rising Rock and Roll star Elvis Presley which arguably had 'a more powerful and lasting impact on country music than pre-eminent country stars such as Hank Williams and Jimmie Rodgers' (McCall et al., 2012). While Presley was, in retrospect, undoubtedly Rock and Roll through and through, when the genre was first finding its feet it was unclear in which direction it might head. In a move that almost

directly mirrored what would happen in Great Britain in the 1960's, Presley's early music while mostly inspired by Rhythm and Blues, was instead 'marketed as Country' with his best exposure being on 'country radio stations' (McCall et al., 2012). Yet by 1954, when Elvis was invited to audition at the Grand Ole Opry, the music elite of America had come to their senses, with his 'hips and knees swaying to the music' and his 'unique riffs' being greeted by an eerie silence and the now famous words of Mr Denny who was auditioning on that day: 'I'm sorry but I don't think your act is quite right for the Opry at this time. We appreciate your visit, but maybe you ought to go back to driving that truck, son' (Tracy, 2007, p.67).

However brief the Country Music industries connection with Elvis Presley may have been, it's inevitable that his music and that of other contemporary Rock and Roll stars who started out singing Country (Jerry Lee Lewis had Country hits with both a *Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On* and *Great Balls of Fire* respectively) had an impact on the popularity of the genre, especially in Great Britain. As Alan Cackett, the current editor of Maverick Magazine who began working in Country Music publishing in the 1960's suggests, 'a lot of the people who were buying into Country Music in the sixties, had drifted into Country Music because they had heard rock and roll in the 1950's and that was heavily influenced by Country Music and therefore it was not much of a step from Jerry Lee Lewis and Conway Twitty to, if you like, Merle Haggard, Glen Campbell and those sorts of people' (Cackett, 2013).

But the specific rebranding of Country Music in Britain, or at least the idea of neglecting to make a clear point about an artist's Country origins appears to have started even in Britain in the 1950's, if only in a milder format. When Slim Whitman toured Britain between 1955 – 57, he 'wasn't called a Country singer, he was called a singer who sang Country music' (Cackett, 2013), and this definition immediately takes the act of being a Country Music singer away from the artists and presents more of a distance between them and the music that they are performing. It is almost as if to a British audience, being a Country Music singer alone was bad press, and yet being an artist who simply sang Country Music songs was viewed in a far more positive light. It is no great challenge then, to imagine how this could have easily

developed into a situation where the Country association was dropped all together with artists simply being presented as pop music singers as was the case by the 1960's. And it seemed to work because the music that these artists were singing, whether Country or otherwise, was popular with listeners and thus it took the highest places in the weekly charts.

In the British market of the 1960's, Country rarely charted outside the Top 20 with now classic tracks such as *Sea of Heartbreak* (UK No. 14, June 1961), *Harper Valley PTA* (UK No. 12, August 1968) and *A Boy Named Sue* (UK No. 2, June 1969) all doing well week on week. Moreover, *King of the Road* recorded by Roger Miller and *Distant Drums* recorded by Jim Reeves were number one hit singles in the UK with Reeves himself charting six different tracks in the Top 20 between 1960 and 1969, all but one of which charted higher in the UK than they did in the USA (Music VF, 2013). It is clear then that Reeves had a large following in Britain; even after his death in 1964 his British fan club had 'around 900 members' (Parkin, 2012), and this provides even more support for the idea that the British attitude to Country music in the 1960's, was on the whole very positive.

It was as the 1960's came to close that a series of British Country Music festivals started to appear, with the most notable being 'The International Festival of Country and Western Music,' held at Wembley arena for twenty years from 1969 onwards (Kaufman and Macpherson, 2005, p.290). Such festivals gave the British public a chance to experience in person, the music of stars they had already been pushing up the charts and ultimately, it cannot be denied that they had a lasting positive impact on the British attitude to the Country Music genre.

As the festival launched at the tail end of the decade, with the initial line-up including such stars as George Jones, Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn and Conway Twitty (Kaufman and Macpherson, 2005, p.290), its base was evidently a popular interest in Country Music here in Britain which had been closely developed and nurtured since the late 1950's. Indeed, music promoter and brains behind the festival Mervyn Conn suggests, 'the press had been quite

down on the idea, but it was a different story when 9,000 people turned up' (Heathcote, 2013). By the time the Wembley Festival was ten years old, Conn was calling it 'most significant for the establishment of Country Music in Britain,' continuing to say 'it has become the focal point of the year for Country Music and, from it, the industry has been able to organise campaigns frequently stretching throughout the rest of the year, as well as establishing artists in the public forefront' (Byworth, 1978). Clearly the Wembley Festival offered up a bridge for Country Music popularity in Britain between its 1960's hey-day and the decades that followed.

While the 1960's appears in the most part, to have set a precedent for the popularity and a positive attitude to Country Music in Britain, it is important to consider in a study of this kind, what later sources say about the decade in hindsight. Country Music records were making it to the top of the charts that much is clear and yet David Allan, who began broadcasting Country Music on an offshore pirate radio station in the 1960's suggests: 'There was a market for Country Music over here, but it was treated rather cynically by the industry' (Byworth, 1978). This is in comparison to Cackett who considers that on reflection, 'there was no ridicule, there was no ye-haw type comments made or anything like that. It was accepted as being part of the general music strategy' (Cackett, 2013). Both present valid arguments, with Cackett's, coming from a modern perspective, and perhaps comparing the purely cynical industry of the 1960's with the more directly confrontational attitude of more recent years. However as we will discover later, what does become clear from the 1960's onwards is that an underlying animosity towards the genre from both the media and recording industries of Britain, is one which simply does not abate over time.

Chapter 3: The 1990's, CMT Europe and the intelligent Country Music listener who views America through British Eyes.

The Country Music stars of the 1960's, paved the way for the genre's popular hey-day in Great Britain which lasted until the mid-1980's, as artist Alan West suggests, 'if you were in a band that played Country Music there was lots and lots of work for you' (West, 2013). Undoubtedly the work of which he talks, grew out of a British Country Music scene where there were two large festivals each year, in Peterborough and at Wembley and a variety of different publications from magazines such as Country Music roundup and Country Music People, to Country Music News, which was 'more of a newspaper' (West, 2013). Outwardly, it certainly appeared that Country Music had developed a following in Great Britain, which showed no signs of dispersing even by the 1990's, some thirty years after it had first travelled across from the USA.

However, internally, and after studying the mood of a nation and the layout of national broadcasting in Great Britain at the turn of the 1990's, it can be concluded that a great opportunity was missed; one which would have created a lasting legacy for Country Music on this side of the Atlantic. From 1993 onwards the British fan had access to Country Music Television (CMT) on a new satellite service, artists as varied as Garth Brooks and Shania Twain were giving Country global popularity the like of which had never been seen before, and yet by 1998 Country had all but vanished off the British media radar and in doing so out of the minds of the British people.

The arrival of CMT in 1993 had as much to do with Rupert Murdoch as with anyone involved in the Country Music industry out of Nashville. The station launched on the Sky multi-channel package on September 1st 1993 (Sky, 2013), therefore in order to establish just why Britain received a constant stream of country music throughout the mid-90's, it is first important to pause a little, and discuss the launch of satellite broadcasting in the late 1980's. Horsman describes the venture as 'highly risky' for Rupert Murdoch who 'bet his entire

empire' which included stakes in Britain, the US and Australia, on a successful outcome for the project (Horsman, 1997, pg.1). In a speech from August 1989, Murdoch himself defined British TV as 'no more than a reflection of the values of the narrow elite which controls it' and in doing so set the stage for American TV imports to Britain which would offer 'untold opportunities for those equipped to grasp the future' (Hewlett, 2013). Clearly, the media believed this 'highly risky' gamble might pay off, with the Times of August 1993, describing the advent of Satellite TV in Britain as having the ability to 'significantly raise the stakes of commercial broadcasting' with most of the new content being 'imported from America' (The Times, 1993). Furthermore, satellite TV had no borders meaning it was possible to just 'beam some programmes into the UK and provide increased consumer choice' (Hewlett, 2013). It is a credit to Murdoch then, who managed to fight off a rival bid for the Direct Broadcast Satellite licence from DBS UK (a bid spearheaded by Carlton's Michael Green, who had previous been unsuccessful with terrestrial and takeover bids in 1980 and 1985), that CMT Europe was made available in Great Britain at all (Horsman, 1997, pg. 36). It is difficult to say if the outcome would have been the same, should ITV or another UK centric channel have instead launched the first satellite services, but as it stood the launch of CMT Europe as one of fourteen initial channels available to subscribers, created the new idea that 'Country could be an internationally saleable product' (Sweeting, 1994). And while it would take time to establish if the channel could be a success, Tracey Storey who was based in Nashville and yet in charge of European programming at launch suggested that it would be 'a little bit more progressive than its Stateside counterpart, with a view to capturing a young audience with little previous experience of country music' (Sweeting, 1994). As it turned out, BSKYB continued to open more channels and welcomed its five millionth subscriber by 1995 (Currie, 2004, pg. 93).

Contradicting previous occasions when the genre failed to maintain a presence in Britain, with the launch of the multichannel package in 1993, Country Music was thrust well and truly into the media spotlight. The CMT Europe logo even appeared directly to the left of Rupert Murdoch's head in a press photo from the launch event (see fig. 1), while an initial ident for

the station described its output as 'contemporary, colourful and me' (CMT Europe, 1993), seeming to appeal directly to the British market and ensuring one of the first forms of inclusion for British fans. Indeed the launch of the station, bringing it to more than two million homes in Britain, appears to have kick-started other areas of the Country Music market as by 1995, the market share of the genre's records had 'almost doubled' as compared with the start of the decade (Franks, 1995). But as is often the case; and as clearly echoed in previous examples, this might again be considered, in hindsight, as a false start, with Cackett suggesting that at the time record stores were in fact doing little to support the growth of Country Music with their aggressive pricing strategies:

'If they [the listener] went into HMV for example to buy the new Pam Tillis, they were being charged £19.99 and we're talking about nearly twenty years ago so if you put it into today's money you're talking about probably £25 or £27 for a CD' (Cackett, 2013).

Clearly people were buying the music in Britain, which in itself would warrant a positive attitude even if they couldn't always get a hold of it, and Gaylord Entertainment felt there was enough of a market to launch CMT in Europe (Trapp, 1993). However, there was still a large question mark hanging over the wider national British attitude towards Country Music. For many, it was still misunderstood and moreover, the obvious separation between the US and Britain coupled with an inability to be in receivership of daily news in the way one might be if they were living in Nashville, lead to the British effectively sectioning themselves off and recreating their own idea of America and its music scene, here in Britain.

It is a problem that has always been a part of the British attitude, certainly in the 1990's as Trapp suggests: 'IF EVER anything had an image problem in Britain, it was country music' (Trapp, 1993). And it can be argued that little was done then, to improve upon this kind of attitude as Cameron Tilbury, a Canadian born promoter who worked out of the UK between 2000 and 2011, was shocked to still find that at an Americana international festival in

Newark, it was 'everything that British people think America is, rather than what it is' and a whole variety of 'American things interpreted through British eyes' (Tilbury, 2013).

Roland White, sheds light on the somewhat hidden British reinvention of Country Music in his article for the Sunday Times of January 1994. Travelling through the Norfolk countryside he asks, 'is it just an excuse for old timers to dress up in cowboy outfits?' It is a pertinent question as the reader goes on to discover that there is a 'Country Music disco' and that 'an authentic look is important' where the 'western is more important than the Country' (White, 1994). It therefore seems that in Britain, the idea of dressing up for the music has always gone hand in hand with Country, try as many in the upper echelons of the music industry might, to shake off this age-old association. Again, Tilbury experienced this showmanship first-hand:

'It's something that you get all dressed up for, and kind of look the part. You do that and then you put it away. You know the guys riding, it was hilarious because they'd ride up and they'd have Stetsons on and boots and spurs and totally look the part. Then I'd ask, "Do you wear boots to the office?" And the reply would be, "no, no that's just what we do at the weekend."

And I found that initially Country Music is looked on as very much the same thing, people will put on a belt buckle, and a big flannel shirt and dress in their impression of what Country Music ought to look like' (Tilbury, 2013).

This kind of argument is important because the outward perception of Country Music is built, rightly or wrongly, on how fans present and interact with the genre. And, having developed in the decades that preceded the 1990's, this idolised view of the USA seen through British eyes has strongly informed the British attitude to Country Music and in some cases even clouded the public's view well into the twenty-first century. British musician Alan West puts this down to there being 'no investment in Country Music in the UK,' predominantly because in America 'it's their national music, it grew up there' and therefore rightly or wrongly there is more money pumped into the industry (West, 2013).

A similar part of the bigger problem and one that can again be seen to heavily influence the British attitude to Country Music, is a misunderstanding of the genre's audience here in Britain. It is something that has been prevalent since the 1990's with Tilbury suggesting that in his view advertisers in Britain have long thought of Country Music fans as 'buck toothed freaks' (Tilbury, 2013), and Cackett recalling how he would receive emails that began with 'Howdy Alan' (Cackett, 2013), which clearly indicate that some PR and advertising companies in Britain feel it is correct to distinguish between their clients and use language that to an insider that really understands and has a passion for Country Music, could be seen as offensive. Although only minor points, they go some of the way towards suggesting how clearly those in the media and marketing industries did not understand 'that the majority of people who watched CMT were business people, doctors, lawyers, professional people' (Cackett, 2013). And if confirmation on the point were needed, West goes on to make an interesting comparison between the lyrical composition of Country Music and the intelligence required to understand such compositions:

'Listen to, for example, the song that Brad Paisley and Alison Krauss did, and to get that song and understand that song you have to have a modicum of understanding of what those people are going through. And if you have that, then I love it man. I mean sit me down and listen to that it really makes you consider, and a consideration of other peoples fight. And then admitting that you also may have those issues, is something that just requires intelligence'

(West, 2013).

The song in question, is the 2004 track *Whiskey Lullaby* which includes the lyrics 'We found him with his face down in the pillow, with a note that said I love her till I die. And when we buried him beneath the willow, the angels sang a whiskey lullaby' (Anderson and Randall, 2004). Once again we see an example from outside of the 1990's, and once again it can be said the modern example was informed by earlier music in the same vein. The 1994 Martina McBride hit *Independence Day*, talks openly about family break-up and an abusive

relationship: 'Well she lit up the sky that Fourth of July, by the time that the firemen come. They just put out the flames, took down some names and sent me to the county home. Now I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but maybe it's the only way. You talk about your revolution, its independence day' (Peters, 1994). It is clearly foolish then, for anyone to suggest as the British media clearly did in the 1990's, and before that the music industry in the 1960's – 'Country was old hat, they claimed, and he wouldn't get a big enough crowd to fill his living room' (McPherson, 2012), that the only people in Great Britain who might enjoy Country Music are those who have a desire to get all dressed up and pretend they're living the life of an American cowboy; or indeed those who are 'buck-toothed' or have some kind of issue because they do not always listen to the same music as everyone else. As Tilbury suggests, it is an analogy as ludicrous as saying 'the only people who ride Harley's are say bike game guys!' (Tilbury, 2013). Thus, it can be concluded that a majority of the British media has little to no understanding of real Country Music and fans that honour the genre, through their understanding of and emotional connection to the lyrics of songs. Putting an attitude forward for the British people as a whole, our media could easily be seen to ridicule Country Music in the 1990's, and in an equal fashion today.

By the end of the decade, it might have appeared Country Music was here to stay. Even as late as 1997, the BBC broadcast full coverage of the CMA Awards from the Grand Ole Opry on TV and radio in what the Belfast Newsletter defined as 'pulling out all the stops' with BBC Radio 2 covering the awards live and a follow up telecast on BBC2 the following Sunday (Kennedy, 1997). But change was in the air, with the BBC side-lining the awards show to merely a single highlights programme by the turn of the twenty-first century. The final blow for Country Music in 1990's Great Britain, came when CMT Europe finally ceased broadcasts on the 31st March 1998, with the Nashville-centric broadcaster pledging to 'continue supporting Country Music in Europe' while thanking 'all our dedicated viewers for writing and supporting this channel' (CMT, 1998). In reality, as Richard Katz explains in his article for Variety magazine, it was gambling on what was considered to be an uneconomical venture from the off that eventually caused the demise of CMT in Britain. Losing \$20 million in the period 1996-98,

the Nashville management of the company appeared to be a victim of poor advertising as Cackett clearly states in his recollection of advertising agencies that 'didn't sell advertising for cars and things like that onto the CMT channel, but they did onto the geographical channel which had much lower viewers' (Cackett, 2013). Clearly there was a deep-rooted problem with a huge American entertainment company misunderstanding the willing British audience. While viewers had been lapping up the music shown on CMT, the station had been losing money as a direct response to poor advertising. This kind of misunderstanding is interesting, particularly when compared against the British reinvention of Country Music already discussed; it clearly suggests that neither the British nor American markets understand each other coherently during the 1990's.

In a decade which brought the 20th Century to a close, Country Music had once again risen to the forefront of British culture, being featured on British TV and charting on British radio. Stars like Garth Brooks and Shania Twain were acting as strong ambassadors for the genre on an international level, and yet just as it appeared Country Music might have a continuing place in the British media, attitudes changed and at the turn of a new millennium Country was once again downgraded as 'old hat.' Changing the style of a genre with time is all well and good, but it might be suggested that it was now right that Country Music changed its image and attitude. Could it be third time lucky for the genre to reinstate itself in Great Britain?

Chapter 4: A Case Study of the current British attitude to Country Music and how it is changing.

By discussing in depth the three years from 2011 to 2013, with reference to specific examples of Country Music in mainstream British life and the media; it is possible to draw a conclusion on the current state of the British attitude and therefore hypothesise on the argument for or against the genres continued rise or fall in our market. The British attitude of today, differs significantly from that of the 1960's and the 1990's, primarily due to the continued work of the Country Music Association of America and the rise of viral video, social media and the internet which have helped to break down the distance barriers between Great Britain and the USA, thus reforming long held stereotypes about Country Music.

For over twenty years, since the final Wembley Festival in 1991, there has been no nationwide Country Music festival in Britain and it can be argued that the genre's presence here has suffered because of it. While it can be suggested that due to our increasing digital culture and the way this has affected the music industry; specific tastes and attitudes have changed more rapidly in the past two decades than at any other time, having a national celebration of a music genre in the form of a festival brings fans together, increases awareness and as has already been suggested by Conn, gives the industry something on which to focus its attention. This could explain then, why after a twenty year hiatus, Conn decided to bring back the International Festival of Country Music in 2012 – 'The regard for Country music has grown significantly in the UK since the first year I promoted this event and I believe that now is the time to reintroduce this once hugely popular event to converted fans of Country music and to a new and emerging group of Country music lovers' (All Access, 2013). Interestingly, Conn chose to headline the festival with Country superstar Reba McEntire whom he refers to as the 'next Dolly Parton' (Heathcote, 2012) and while it is undeniably true that McEntire is a big name in the USA, she had only played the UK once prior to 2012. This then, begins to paint a picture that echoes the International Festival's sad demise in 1991, which some argue was because 'the artists they were putting on were no longer chart names' (Cackett, 2013). On the

other hand, the Country to Country Festival (c2c) of 2013 which came as a surprise to many British fans, and yet received the long-term backing of the CMA, appeared to be quite different in its style. Headline acts were Tim McGraw and Carrie Underwood who are both contemporary well-known names in Country Music circles, even in Britain; the festival took place over two days at the O2 arena and received a generally positive response from the British Media. Veteran DJ Bob Harris, who compared the whole weekend suggested that he hoped 'we have these wonderful Nashville artists here year after year from now on' (Hancill, 2013), while Mossman called it a 'real shame if the organisers came under pressure to make C2C any less "country" next year' (Mossman, 2013). The mere fact that two very different Country Music festivals have been accepted on a national level in Britain over the past two years, suggests a real change in attitude to the music, bringing it back in line with its early 1990's high. Moreover, with the C2C festival trumping the return of the one-day Wembley concert and returning in 2014 (Hancill, 2013), it would not be without cause to predict that the genre could once again be on the cusp of a prolonged period of popularity.

In order to change long held negative attitudes towards Country Music from the wider British Public, those in the industry need to establish a cohesive presence across all media. While a festival like C2C generates its own press, the lack of presentation of Country Music on primetime TV also needs to be addressed if the genre is ever going to thrive for a sustained period in this country. Thankfully, in 2013 these changes appear to be finally taking place with More4 picking up the *Nashville* TV series from ABC and the BBC making a prime-time feature of Country Music on its flagship talent show *The Voice*. These, join the aforementioned Bob Harris on his BBC Radio 2 programme (which has been one of the only outlets for Country Music in the National media in Britain since the start of the 21st Century).

The decision by Channel 4 to buy the rights to *Nashville* is an interesting one, as the Country Music drama which charts a fictional story behind the industry is currently making waves in the USA. While the reasoning behind this show being picked up for broadcast in the UK is still somewhat unclear, one can assume that bosses at Channel 4 believed it would draw in

new audiences to its digital channel More 4; however Cackett appears to indicate that the drama's placing on a digital only channel was a bad thing with the show being 'turned down by ITV and the BBC because they believed in quotes, "That much Country Music would be off-putting"' (Cackett, 2013). Even though it is important to highlight that a show like Nashville, perhaps because of its Country Music theme, has been relegated in a fashion to a digital only platform (Rainey, 2013), it may not be as poor a decision as when CMT launched on the SKY package in 1993 (a comparatively more expensive and therefore premium market) because the general public has a much wider awareness of digital TV now, thanks to services like Freeview. Similarly, the show has not been forsaken by the media, and in a change to previous views on Country Music in the British press, Watson describes the show as having the ability to 'turn a non-country boy into a Grand Ole Opry groupie' (Watson, 2013) and Barnett hopes it will 'make Country Music more acceptable' (Barnett, 2013). Having lived in both the USA and UK for some considerable time, the views of Tilbury on this issue provide some clarity in a what can only be described as a British fog over the issue of Country Music on television – 'One hour once a week? See [that's](#) just ignorance. That shows they don't know anything about the product,' before he goes on to further challenge the British media's continuing digs at Country fans; 'Nashville is no different to any other city I've worked in, the people are intelligent, they're professionals' (Tilbury, 2013). The point is a strong one, why is Country Music any more ridiculed in Britain, than hip-hop, soul or any one of a plethora of American music genres?

In complete contradiction to Cackett's idea that the BBC would condemn too much Country Music as off-putting, the broadcaster featured not one, but two Country Music singers in the opening auditions of *The Voice*, series two. In a complete Turnaround on long term stereotypes which have already been examined in this study, both Mike Ward and Emma Jade Garbutt can be seen as examples of the young modern Country Stars who are being discovered in America year on year (winners of *American Idol* and the *X Factor USA* are often Country singers that go on to big things, with Carrie Underwood, Scotty McCreery and Tate Stevens being key examples). In both cases, the judges reacted positively to their

performances, with an introduction VT showing Garbett performing at a talent contest in Nashville (Ross, 2013), and judge Danny O' Donoghue referring to Ward as having 'a lovely, current, Country voice' (Ross, 2013). The idea that the production team behind *The Voice* believed Country Music to be a genre which would be successful on the show, clearly shows a change in the British attitude towards it.

A lot of what is changing about Country Music's perception, in Britain and other international territories, can be put down to social media. Twitter, for example, has allowed British fans to connect with each other and the world in a way they never could have dreamed of before. American singer/songwriter Gretchen Peters is a great advocate of the medium, suggesting that 'Twitter is a very democratic world and you're really not helping yourself by having an assistant tweet for you' (Peters, 2013). Her argument is a clear one as Country Music icons as varied as Merle Haggard and Dolly Parton are taking to the social media site to connect with their fans in person, as opposed to having their management tweet for them. While the latter idea of social media use, appears to see no drop in followers, it can be argued that when an artist tweets only news and updates (as in the case of Kenny Chesney), and clearly none of the content is personal to the artist, there is little reason for having a social media presence in the first place (Chesney, 2013). Peters herself, clearly one of the more progressive and interactive twitter user, has even made use of Twitter to plan set-lists for her British concerts by 'taking an informal poll to see what songs people might like to hear on a tour' (Peters, 2013). And it is this that, rather than isolating British fans as was the inevitable case in the years before the digital revolution, really allows British Country Music fans to feel connected and a part of what is going on in America. If a positive British attitude towards Country Music is ever going to be sustained, securing the genre a bigger platform on social networking sites like Twitter is a key place to start.

A study of Country Music in this form, particularly one that aims to assess attitudes to the genre outside the USA, would be unbalanced without considering its reluctance to push boundaries when it comes to narrative storytelling. The problem, as highlighted by the

British public and in the British media over recent years, is that Country Music is still perceived as a music form, which talks openly about honky-tonks, truck driving and beautiful women wearing 'cut-offs' in the summer. Much of the subject matter written about in Country songs hasn't changed in fifty years, as comparing the lyrics of Hank Williams from 1951 and Kip Moore from 2012 clearly shows:

'I've got a Hot Rod Ford and a two dollar bill, and I know a spot right over the hill. There's soda popping and dancing free so if you want to have fun come along with me' (Williams, 1951).

'Well I've got a little cash burning holes in my pocket, foot on the gas taking off like a rocket. I've got enough to last us all night, you've got the kiss that tastes like honey and I've got a little beer money' (Moore, Daly and Verges, 2012).

The narrative structure of both songs is very similar; in each case the essential elements need only be a man with a car, some money and a woman who is only ever referred to in a general context. Despite the tracks having been recorded some fifty years apart they convey the same simple virtues that have been present at the very core of Country Music throughout.

Never the less, these traditional values can sometimes land Country Music in hot water as nationalist views, the perceived glorification of the American gun culture and the objectification of women, are all perfectly valid arguments against some of the music that is released out of Nashville. With such arguments in mind, it is not beyond reason to suggest that many in Britain feel alienated from a genre which has little in common with their own often forward thinking attitudes to women, sexuality and culture.

One of the more progressive Country artists of the modern age is Brad Paisley, who as it turns out is also hugely popular in Great Britain. A case study of the period surrounding the release of his latest album 'Wheelhouse' in April 2013, provides evidence of Country's baby steps

towards improving its own, sometimes backwards attitude. On the concept album, Paisley tackles such topical issues as 'spousal abuse, Southern provincialism, racism and social justice alongside characteristically well-crafted mainstream country fare' (Lewis, 2013). These are the kind of subjects that Country Music has often steered clear of in the past, and yet Paisley remains one of the genre's biggest stars thus putting him in a strong position to challenge the music's attitude towards controversial issues with lyrics like: 'A famous TV preacher has a big affair and then, one tearful confession and he's born again, again' from the track *Those Crazy Christians* (Paisley, 2013). While songs of a strong religious sentiment are bound to cause controversy in the USA, they have little impact on the more accepting culture of Britain, and in many ways could be seen to improve the British attitude to a genre which instead of condoning is choosing, at least in some form, to finally address some of the controversial issues associated with the international view of American culture. Religion shows up as the most prominent example, as one review of C2C notes: 'Every reporter in the O2 licks their pencil point and scribbles disapprovingly as the O2 becomes a superchurch, with images of stained-glass windows and shafts of godly light beamed on the back wall for Carrie's cautionary hit *Jesus, Take the Wheel*' (Mossman, 2013).

But, even Paisley's attempt at reforming Country Music does not always hit the right balance as the track *Accidental Racist*, which aims to address the long-held views about racism in the South, has received much negative criticism with debate over the song even reaching Great Britain. Denzel Smith begins by suggesting that 'The United States is in need of a serious, prolonged discourse about its historical and still very prevalent racism,' before going to brand Paisley's track 'a model for exactly how *not* to start that conversation' (Denzel Smith, 2013). The song itself, challenges Country Music's own boundaries from the off, by introducing a rap segment from LL Cool J. While it is true to say that previous Country Stars have rapped on their records, a prominent example being Jason Aldean on the track *Dirt Road Anthem* (Ford and Gilbert, 2011), Paisley remains one of the first stars to openly feature a true rap artist, as opposed to just rapping himself. This can again be seen as an example of how the album

Wheelhouse sets out to challenge Country Music and change attitudes both in the USA and further afield.

All things considered, Country Music has clearly set itself on a trajectory which will undoubtedly lead to an increased presence in Britain and, over time, a change in attitude from this part of the world. With the media focusing more on Country Music's strengths than its weaknesses and a new blend of music developing out of Nashville thanks to trailblazers like Taylor Swift, Lady Antebellum (who's recent album *Golden* entered the UK charts at No. 7) (see fig. 2) and Paisley himself, it can be imagined that, within a few years, Country Music might well be accepted as a musical form of merit in Britain. More than ever before, it is clear action is being taken to change the cherished idea that Country Music is as one journalist puts it 'as trendy as flared jeans' (Rainey, 2013).

Conclusion

Contemporary Country Music star Brad Paisley, ends his latest album *Wheelhouse* with a track titled 'Officially Alive.' The lyrics to the chorus of this song are: 'Congratulations you are officially alive, here's affirmation, you are officially alive.' Paisley himself, associates the song with the feeling of fulfilment you get at the birth of your first child (Country Now TV, 2013), however the song also provides a fitting metaphor for Country Music itself. From the Hillbilly music of the early 1900's, to the Rock and Pop tinged Country of today, the genre has always focused on presenting the everyday lives of those who sing it. As artist Jerry Vandiver suggests: 'Country Music songs speak to the heart, to the very foundation of who we are as a people. It is honest, unassuming and real' (Vandiver, 2013). And with this in mind, it isn't a huge step up to realise that in fact listening to Country Music can make you feel 'Officially Alive,' understanding in great detail the story of real life in the South while learning about American history and culture at the same time.

In this study, I have taken secondary accounts of Country Music's popularity in Great Britain across a fifty year period and compared them against primary interviews which express what it was like to experience and live through each individual focus of my investigation. Aiming to assess how the British attitude has changed in the aforementioned time period, I have been able to focus in detail on specific events which have had some lasting impact on the British attitude towards the genre.

The clearest conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the British attitude to Country Music, while undoubtedly changing over time, appears to move in waves of a strongly positive then somewhat negative fashion. In the 1960's Country Music was new and exciting, with British listeners paying a real interest to the artists that were touring here, predominately because the sound reflected what they were used to hearing in the British pop charts of the time. Then by the 1980's Country Music appeared to be losing face, perhaps because the genre failed to reinvent itself in any contemporary fashion, and while the 1990's

saw many positive outlets for Country Music in Britain the genre was still unable to retain a hold on the market, nor return to the heights it had enjoyed as a popular form of music in the 1960's. Now, as we enter the second decade of the 21st Century, it appears that Country Music is finally receiving the lengthy recognition that it deserves, however it remains to be seen as to whether or not efforts undertaken today will secure the genre's future in a Britain ten years hence.

Of course, underpinning all of the above conclusions, is a steady-fast reluctance for the media to let go of stereotypes which have been associated with Country Music in Britain ever since its hey-day. Time and again the newspapers, magazines and websites of Great Britain will open and close any discourse on the subject of Country Music by highlighting the fact that the genre has always had a torrid relationship with this country and that because perceptions have never been fully in favour of the music, why should they change?

While Country Music has done well to associate itself with other genre's over the past fifty years, initially it's pop style was what brought the genre to prominence in Britain, and it is worth noting that if the music is to survive in markets outside of the USA, it simply cannot find itself merging into a conglomeration with any other genre and should instead cut its own path moving forwards. The bottom line, is that Country Music has always had a grass roots following in Britain (McPherson, 2012), and the litmus test as to whether it can survive here in the truest sense of the word would be see if artists such as the *Time Jumpers* who bring traditional Country Music to a modern audience can survive in this market alongside the likes of Brad Paisley and Carrie Underwood. As West suggests 'that music is current, and it's absolutely spot on' (West, 2013), and so long as there are professionals like Cackett working in the industry who are willing to introduce a British audience to the best of new Country Music before then starting to 'gradually wean them into, if you like, the history' (Cackett, 2013); and with artists like Peters, Paisley and Lady Antebellum continuing to tour Britain either on their own or as part of the C2C festival, there is nothing to suggest why Country

Music couldn't soon regain a positive British attitude and following as strong as that which existed at the start of the 1960's.

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Illustrations

Fig 1. Rupert Murdoch at the launch of SKY TV in 1993.



Fig 2. Lady Antebellum's fourth album *Golden* charts at seven in UK Album chart of 12/05/13.



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Appendix I (interviews)

Cameron Tilbury – Country Music Promoter

Ben: What would you say is the international perception of Country Music?

Cameron: Well when I first moved over to the UK, I wasn't working in music at all. I was working in ad agencies and it was only in the last three years that I became involved in it and it was a little strange, kind of a backdoor way into it. I've always ridden horses and while looking for a place to ride, I got hooked up with the British reigning people. So there was a quarter horse ranch we'd go to, and it drew me back into Country Music. Then I started my business doing international radio promo for North American artists and I started doing a little bit of radio in Peterborough. And the interesting thing about Country Music when I first got back into, kind of the same way that riding western is looked on there, it's something that you get all dressed up for, and kind of look the part. You do that and then you put it away. The guys riding, it was hilarious, because they'd have boots and Stetsons and totally look the part! And then I said, oh do you wear boots to the office, and they said – 'Oh no, that's just what we do on the weekends.' Initially, I thought the same thing about Country that people will put on a belt buckle and a big flannel shirt and dress up what their idea of Country is supposed to look like, go out at night and then back to normal. Whereas I'm so much more used to, is if you're Country you wear boots all the time.

I found there that Country Music is still very much called Country and Western Music. And I was always correcting people, and I was like this lone voice in the wilderness. So I found myself saying, no, Country Music is what's new today. It's relevant, it may be more pop driven or more traditional but it's all Country, we've dropped the western. Western music had its own thing and that's, you know, Ian Tyson and Michael Martin Murphey and it used to be called Country and Western here and the CMA have spent a lot of time rebranding it. But it just hasn't kind of stuck in the UK yet, probably because there is no 24/7 broadcast station.

Ben: There is no station on FM radio.

Cameron: Yes, there is a lot online and that's great as listening habits in the UK are much different to here with internet radio being much more accepted in the UK and Europe. But, yeah I listen to planet rock all the time, and if there was a Country station on DAB and it played 24/7 Country and it operated like one of the stations here I think that would go a huge distance over there.

Ben: But others have come back to me with the same idea, and they say the reason it doesn't work is because of the media in the UK. They misunderstood that the audience had to be pretty intelligent to understand the message in the music.

Cameron: See, that's it! I'll give you another example of something that opened my eyes, just before I moved out here I went to the big Americana festival that they have at the Newark showground and I went there and it was all a bit weird because it wasn't like I was seeing American things, I was seeing American things interpreted through British eyes. And I was wondering around thinking 'there is something I'm just not getting here,' and once that kind of clicked it made sense. What was happening was, everything that British people think America is, rather than what it is.

Ben: Yes, and there is this idea that we still don't have the huge venues for music, we can't contain the festivals. It's an idealised view of America.

Cameron: I think that's a part of it, but I think they used to have a huge Country Music festival in Wembley and Peterborough and that all kinda ended after Garth Brookes dropped off. I think you're right, my first Country concert in England was Sugarland at Shepard's Bush, and I was astounded because it was exactly the kind of audience we get here. It was intelligence people, they were not idiots. There was everything from sixteen year old girls to seventy year old guys. It was a younger demo, and you're right about things being miss-sold. I don't think the advertisers, marketing people for companies understand what the Country audience is all about. They have that idea that they are buck-toothed freaks, and they're not intelligent and professional just like they are here. Because, having worked again in both the advertising and music side of things, I think it's ignorance on advertisers parts on what their audience is all about.

Ben: So would that be the same reason why Nashville was turned because there would be 'too much Country Music' on the TV?

Cameron: One hour once a week? See that's just ignorance. That shows they don't know anything about the product, you've been here and you know that this city is not full of hillbillies. Nashville is no different to any other city I've worked in, Country music is not the only music that happens in Nashville. Country Music is intelligent, people who follow it are intelligent, they're professionals. You know one of the guys who was involved with British reigning, he's an estate agent and owns a big company, Real Estate Company. He's not a hillbilly, he's got a lot of money, he's very successful and he's very intelligent. Its equivalent to saying the only people who ride Harley's are say bike game guys! Well no it's not, the average demographic for a Harley rider is someone like a broker, they're older and they've made a lot of money in their lives and they're fifty plus. I don't think companies like ITV and the BBC have done research, I can bet you they have no concept, or any statistics that the Country Music association would put out.

Ben: It's interesting as in the 60's, 70's and 80's which people say were the peak periods, the BBC was playing this kind of music a lot. It had its own show, and now you would think that hopefully C2c will be a better version of the Wembley Concerts, because by the end they were just rolling out the same artists.

Cameron: Yes, and the most recent thing was an absolute mess. And you know, people will point at that and say "see what a failure that was!" But if you look at the guy who promoted it, he didn't promote it properly, to put the thing on a Sunday night when the headliner doesn't even come on till 10 o'clock and you put it at Wembley arena where transportation was abysmal, you know late at night everyone wants to get home because the tube stops running. I saw a lot of Country Music gigs in the UK and the audiences are exactly the same as you get here, and when I say here, I mean North America not just Nashville. It's beyond me why companies like, well I can see the BBC because they are intensely idiotic about what they pick and what they don't pick – in fact, Bob Harris on Radio 2, the guy is a legend but they gave him one hour for Country and Americana and roots. You know, you can't even scratch the

surface. I don't even bother sending Bob stuff anymore, because there just isn't enough. But you know, this Country to Country festival that's going on I think that's great and you know, Brad Paisley has played there and I think he sold it out. It's ignorance on BBC's part and on ITV's part for them to complete ignore this – you know Brad Paisley, isn't even the biggest Country Music artist and he can sell that out. So for them to say we're not putting Nashville on TV because it's too much Country Music, that's just ridiculous. They've just opened their mouth and illustrated their ignorance by doing that.

Alan Cackett – Editor of Maverick Country Magazine.

Alan: I've been battling ever since I started to change the attitudes to Country Music, and if anything I think it's got worse.

Ben: Ah, well we will come to that in a little bit. The first thing I wanted to ask you was, you've been working over here, obviously in Country Music, in terms of publishing magazines since the late sixties according to your website. Now this puts you in a great place to comment on the changing British attitude to Country Music, in your opinion how has it changed or not change perhaps since you started out?

Alan: I think Country Music was more readily accepted back in the late sixties, early seventies, into the musical mainstream than it is today. When I say that, you had Country artists getting into our pop charts on a regular basis and British artists singing, if you like, a British version of Country Music – Joe Brown with a picture of you, all those sorts of artists, I mean, for example when Slim Whitman came to the UK back in fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven he wasn't called a Country singer he was called a singer who sang Country music and I think that's quite an important difference. And he was accepted, there was no ridicule, there was no ye-haw type comments made or anything like that. It was accepted as being part of the general music strategy.

Ben: And when you were publishing your first magazine, Country Record Exchange, what kind of response were you getting to that? Because as you say, the sixties was the first period where these Country stars were getting into our pop charts over here.

Alan: From the readership, it was obviously a very positive mood. It was much more difficult as far as the record labels were concerned. They weren't really interested in marketing Country Music as a separate entity, they were quite happy to market it as part of the general pops scene. So, with RCA which at that time came through Decca Records, they looked on people like Jim Reeves more as someone they could get into the pop charts and so to a certain extent they played down the Country connection.

Ben: So would you say, the artist from that period of the sixties and the early seventies, were popular because they were in our pop charts and marketed as such? Or was it because they were Country and people liked that kind of music at the time?

Alan: I think it was a combination of both, a lot of the people who were buying into Country Music in the sixties and seventies, had drifted into Country Music because they had heard rock and roll in the 1950's and that was heavily influenced by Country Music and therefore it was not much of a step from Jerry Lee Lewis and Conway Twitty to, if you like, Merle Haggard, Glen Campbell and those sorts of people.

Ben: Now obviously you work with magazines and that kind of thing, part of what I'm going to talk about in my study is how important the media was and still is to promoting Country Music, so would you say the media has always presented it in the right light?

Alan: No, I think the main reason why Country Music has not grown as it could have done over here is because of the media. There seems to be almost a stumbling block with the media, a typical example was that yesterday I had an email from a PR company because they've taken on Tim McGraw's new album. Now I deal with a guy on a weekly basis via email and normally he'd put "Hi Alan," this time he put "Howdy Alan..." And I took him to task on it. That's the way they react you see. When I picked up my TV listings magazine a couple of weeks ago with the news about the Nashville TV series, what did it say? Bonanza! What's it got to do with Bonanza?

Ben: That was a point I was going to make, because I read one of the broadsheet papers recently with a review of it. It was kind of, it was nice at the start and then towards the end they said but it can only be accepted with as much acceptance as we would give a show which comes from Nashville.

Alan: Yes, I mean the TV series was turned down by ITV and the BBC because they believed in quotes, "That much Country Music would be off-putting."

Ben: Now that's very interesting, because another thing I've noticed is, I mean I watched a great programme on BBC4 called the Joy of Country Music and also the BBC have done things like collections of all the songs in the BBC's history that are Country Music. There's

loads from the sixties and seventies when it used to be on the TV, but it isn't anymore. Why do you think this is? Is it this attitude that they have?

Alan: They don't think the public want it, and yet the success of people in recent years like Brad Paisley virtually selling out the O2. Toby Keith, I'd never have thought that Toby Keith would appeal to a British audience and yet he's attracting thousands. It just goes to show that the audience is out there, but they're not being catered for. I don't know if you were old enough to remember when we had CMT on Satellite TV over here...

Ben: I don't, no....

Alan: Yes, back in the 1990's from ninety four to about ninety seven or ninety eight we had CMT Television over here. It showed all the up to date Country Music videos. But, they couldn't make it work because the advertising was sold by advertising agencies and the advertising agencies didn't sell advertising for cars and things like that onto the CMT channel, but they did onto the geographical channel which had much lower viewers. And the reason why they did that, was because they said that CMT only appealed to our equivalent of America's white trash audience. In other words, council house tenants and people who lived on housing estates. And yet, I know that the majority of people who watched CMT were business people, doctors, lawyers, and professional people.

Ben: They didn't do the right market research then...

Alan: They didn't even bother. But they've got this fixed image in their mind.

Ben: To me, noticing the last four years, this year [2013] seems interesting in terms of the number of artists who were coming over here to perform. I know last year we had a revival of the Wembley Concert and I'll come on to that, but this year for example, I've noticed that just in the first couple of months almost double the number of tour dates have been announced for American artists over here. Is this a good thing, the start of something better for Country Music in the UK?

Alan: I think it is, but it's a long way to go to reach the peak of Country Music. I would say the peak years were about 1975 – 1984. That was when Country Music really had its peak over here. I think the major record labels and people involved professionally in Country

Music in the UK, missed a great opportunity in the early 1990's. We had CMT TV over here, we had Garth Brookes suddenly exploding all over the place and nobody really got behind it not even the CMA. And that's the time that the CMA should have really gotten behind it. They could have made big stars out of people like Colin Ray, Pam Tillis, all those sorts of people that were happening at that time. A golden opportunity was missed.

Ben: So if they'd have done what they're doing now, then, that would have been a good thing?

Alan: Very much so, probably a better chance because we had CMT over here and people were seeing all of these artists and they were going into their record stores and the CD's weren't there. And if they went into HMV for example to buy the new Pam Tillis, they were being charged £19.99 and we're talking about nearly twenty years ago so if you put it into today's money you're talking about probably £25 or £27 for a CD. It's ridiculous isn't it?

Ben: Yes, it is. Now Country to Country festival is happening in a couple of weeks. Is it a good thing for the music over here and could it become a staple like the Wembley festival was for a number of years over here in the 1990's?

Alan: Yes, I'm just praying that it will. And I get the impression that it's going to be very much like the first Wembley festival. The first Wembley festival the average age of the audience was probably between twenty-five and thirty. And the acts that were on, almost all of the acts that were on were currently in the Top Twenty in America that week. But what happened was that Wembley continued over the next twenty-five years to keep putting on the same old artists so that by the time you got to about 1985 and 86, the artists they were putting on were no longer chart names over there. Now the first Country to Country festival, every artist on there is a current chart act, with the possible exception of Vince Gill. But Vince Gill is still classed as current, it's just the way that music moves on and I believe music needs to move on but should never forget its roots. That's something I've always championed all the way down through the years.

Ben: So in terms of Wembley, what kind of artists were they putting on and when did it run from? Because I don't know really anything about Wembley.

Alan: The first one was in 1969 and on that one it was Bill Anderson, Conway Twitty, Loretta Lynn they were the three main acts. And if you look at the Country charts in Easter 1969 all three of those had Top 10 hits in that week. And they carried on until, 1989 I think was the last one.

Ben: And as you say they weren't moving the artists along...

Alan: They weren't moving with the times, and you know you've got to keep the current artists coming along. Yes, include some of the older ones, but it was a case of playing it safe and because of that what happened was that the audience grew old as the festival grew old so that by the time you got the Wembley of 1989 I'd say the average age of the audience was probably fifty. When they did Wembley last year [2012] the average age of the audience was sixty to sixty-five.

Ben: I must admit, Reba McEntire was the big draw for me last year, but I'm probably more akin to the lineup for the Country to Country festival.

Alan: You know when I got involved in Country Music in the 60's everybody that was involved was my age, we were all in our late teens early twenties and they were the people I hung around with. And yet we liked the Country Music and we were into things like the Beatles, the Hollies, The Searchers you know and all of those things alongside it.

Ben: Obviously at the moment we're in a digital revolution where people have a better access to their music, I think this is a good thing but what are your views on that? Surely it gives people a better access than ever before, and perhaps that's part of the reason it's not shown on the TV anymore because people can access it online.

Alan: Again I think that's the reason why younger people are getting into acts like The Band Perry, I mean I was amazed when I saw their London concert because I thought I'm probably the only person over here who knows who they are and likes them. I go along to the show and see outside all of these teenagers queuing up I was just totally blown away. And I have to admit I felt a little bit of place, but you know that is the future of the music and that's what I want to see, the legacy of the music that I've worked on for the last forty years moving on.

Ben: And so, having written about Country Music for as long as you have, what would you say it is that draws people to a music that is American and not necessarily, you know places names and things like that, what is it that draws people in Britain to Country Music do you think?

Alan: I think initially back in the 1950's early 1960's, Britain was at that time a very drab place because it was still recovering after the war and I think it was the American lifestyle it had this sense of freedom. I think it's the reason why we got into groups like the Beach Boys as well, equally alongside Country Music because it gave us this new thing that we could only dream about you know, we saw it on our TV's in black and white and to a certain extent I think that myth has somehow carried on. You know, we don't have, at least not until fairly recently or even now, we don't have the big shows that they have in America in these great big sports stadiums. The shows that they put on are still reasonably fresh and new to people in Britain because you know the population doesn't support those sorts of shows all over the country does it? So it's something that's almost the unreachable, that you want to be involved in and effectively be a part of.

Ben: So obviously you're an editor of a magazine, Maverick Magazine, if you could give me some examples of Country Artists who are popular today....

Alan: Well obviously, to a certain extent especially with the older generations it is the veteran artists of the past. Your Don Williams and your Charlie Pride, people like that. But as far as the younger people are concerned it's a) those artists who have bothered to come over here, you can count in amongst those probably The Band Perry, Brad Paisley, Carrie Underwood, Lady Antebellum all those kinds of acts that have been over here. Now you'll read in Country Music People all about the additional Country singers that are going to be popular over here, but they're not because they sound out of date. Don't get me wrong, the music they make is wonderful, I love it. But you've got to be realistic. You wouldn't play pre-war, in the sixties when we were getting into artists like Merle Haggard and Buck Owens if someone had said what about the pre-war artists like Jimmy Rodgers and The Carter Family we'd have turned our noses up and said, no. And yet the traditional fans over here today,

expect modern people to listen to stuff from thirty to forty years ago. So it's today's music if the music is going to take off over here, no doubt about that.

Ben: I think that's part of the reason why it's becoming more popular too isn't it? It's a different style, I try to tell people I like Country Music and then I sit them down and play them some and they can't tell that it is...

Alan: Yes, you see I've done that all my life and I've moved it along as we've moved through each era. And that's the way to do it. I wouldn't dream of playing somebody of today my Merle Haggard or Hank Williams records, if I wanted to introduce them to Country Music. I'd sit them down and put on Lady Antebellum then I'd dig back and put them on someone like Josh Turner and gradually wean them into, if you like, the history.

Alan West – British Country Music Musician

Ben: So I'd like to ask you, what you think is the British attitude to this kind of music, in your opinion?

Alan: Well, I think that from my perspective as an artist here in the UK who predominantly plays Country Music, you know my kind of music is, I think, very Country. You know, it's not Americana necessarily, I mean it can be construed as that. But I mean I think the general attitude to Country Music in the UK is not very good and I think that's born out of the fact that through the seventies and eighties when there was a fantastic scene in the UK – If you played Country Music in a band there was lots and lots of work for you, there was also the Wembley Festival and the Peterborough Festival, Country Music Roundup, Country Music People and Country Music news all these gloss magazines. Well Country Music Roundup was more of a newspaper type thing. They were all in WHSmith and because of the big festivals like Wembley, there was lots of media interest, it was on BBC2 Television every year and they did like a half-hour show, so there was a lot of media coverage of it. During the early nineties that all stopped, you know, there was no Wembley anymore and subsequently the media interest disappeared and the record labels appeared not to be releasing stuff here so, you know, it kind of became British Country Music club scene which is bad news in my opinion. It's very amateurish, it's run by amateurs and certainly today, the bands that play that scene are inevitably weekend warriors and the musical quality in my opinion is isn't that good. It's a lot of cover stuff, there's a lot of line dance stuff, you know associated with it, which to me I mean you might as well go to pilates or aerobics or something.... You know, I mean it's just a little social gathering. There's no new people coming to the scene, it's just dying, dying, dying. Involved with that is of course the British Country Music Awards, or Association, whatever they call themselves who do their annual backslapping get together over at Heathrow. That's just junk!

Ben: Now I wanted to ask you about this, because one of the things I'm looking at is online and how these organisations are represented. I mean if you look at the websites for the Opry, the CMA and the stuff they do over in America it's new, it's really good. But then if you look

the website for what you would call the British Country Music Association, I believe the thing that you talking about here, their website almost looks like the kind of site that was built when the web first began and hasn't been changed since.

Alan: Yeah, I know. I mean I suppose firstly I should say that the CMA and Country Music in America it's their national music essentially isn't it? I mean it grew up there, okay it started, and came from France and Germany and England, yeah but that was a century ago. But they've built on it and there is a lot of investment in it around Nashville, now there is no investment in Country Music in the UK. So I suppose if I was looking for an excuse for their amateurism here, then you could possible say that. However, we built Alan Cackett's website for nothing, we just put our time and effort into it. And it looks good. Everything is doable, but the problem is this island is so small and that particular organisation is run by people who all have an interest and it's all about what they do. They're not doing it for the right reasons, the acts they put on are rubbish, quite frankly. And really you know I don't want to be associated with that in any way, shape or form. And I think that's just bad news. I think you know they purport to want to be, they have a mission statement on the front page of their website which says... I'm going to just find it.

Ben: Okay. I've got it.

Alan: It doesn't appear that their website is actually working at the moment. So you know really, rest your case. It says something like, "To Get Country Music the Credibility It Deserves," or something like that. But the thing is they are not going about it in the right way. They are kind of pandering to the British Country Music scene. Listen it's horses for courses, you know that's a fact. There are a lot of working men's clubs out there and a lot of social clubs, and I've got no interest in them. You see to appreciate Country Music I believe you have to have a modicum of intelligence.

Ben: Yes, this is exactly what Alan Cackett was saying to me. He said that when the music was being promoted over here in the 90's, he was saying that CMT was on TV and the advertisements were not working as they were American's advertising to our equivalent of 'white-trash,' so our white-trash would be people who don't have the income to buy the things

being advertised. And in his opinion, from what he knows, people who listen to Country Music tend to be Doctors, professional people with a lot of intelligence in that way.

Alan: Absolutely, and the thing is, those people don't just have intelligence, they have self-confidence. Now to listen to, for example, the song that Brad Paisley and Alison Krauss did...

Ben: ... what Whiskey Lullaby?

Alan: Yes, and to get that song and understand that song you have to have a modicum of understanding of what those people are going through. And if you have that, then I love it man. I mean sit me down and listen to that it really makes you consider, and consideration of other peoples fight. And then admitting that you also may have those issues, is something that just requires intelligence. And those people are no more going to go to a Country Music club, which is predominantly the place where they think they can see Country Music in the UK, they ain't going to do that. Now from my own perspective I play Country Music week in, week out and we played last night in our local little pub. There were forty or fifty people in and it was like a concert. We could preview a song, which we wrote this week. We don't tell them it's Country Music necessarily, but they like it. And we can have a good conversation with them, but there's no, and this is the main issue... take the British Country Music Awards out of it... there's no organisation in the UK which brings all of these people together. Now Bob Patterson, he runs a company called BPA live and they tour people like Tom Russell. Now that's much the Americana thing, but a lot of that's Country Music, all of these people, and that seems to be thriving the UK a little. But if you talk to Bob he'll say differently, because he works very hard to put those tours together. But, he's one and there is Maverick Magazine and there's Bob Harris and everyone is working on their own thing. They never get together. Now Bob Patterson is looking to put together the UK Americana Association, they did a piece on it in Maverick magazine this month, and there are a bunch of people looking to build a platform from which to begin shouting the odds. There's also of course, the American artists that come here. Obviously there is the Country to Country festival coming up. That could be massive for Country Music in the UK...

Ben: Is that going to become a replacement for, or be as big as the Wembley festivals were? I mean it has the backing of the CMA and that's their way of promoting Country Music outside of the US.

Alan: Yeah, unfortunately they're bringing their Country Music to the UK but they're not involving many UK acts in it. Not that there are many that should be involved, but there are some and I understand there are pop-up stages in the village of the O2 where the Good Intentions are going to be playing and that duo Rain Town.

Ben: I mean my problem with it, was that I didn't even know it was happening. I'd seen a twitter account... and I like to think because I do the radio show, I know things a bit in advance of others who don't have that connection. But I didn't know anything about this!

Alan: Yeah, I mean it's sold out as I understand it. That can only be good for the music over here, I genuinely believe that and hopefully it will go from strength to strength. I'm not convinced that the, and this is only my opinion, likes of the Country Pop acts in the US, I don't see necessarily the Country Music in there, myself. I don't believe that's necessarily the Country Music of today. I think the music of today lies with the likes of the Time Jumpers, you know, that music is current and it's absolutely spot on. You listen to that kind of music from fifty, sixty years ago and there was a little bit of out of tune stuff in there and it was all recorded live, but if you go and listen to the Time Jumpers or watch them it's perfect. You know Vince Gill is a big part of it... and there was the big thing a few weeks ago, with that guy who said "you're all old farts."

Ben: Blake Shelton?

Alan: Yeah, right. And there was a very interesting retort to that from Randy Kohrs, he's a player out in Nashville. And the point that he made was that, Blake Shelton said that the music needs to "shape and evolve and so on..." Well evolution is great, but with evolution you need to keep and maintain the basic ingredients of how it began. And without evolution you know that's something new. Listen, it's a massive industry over there and there's a market for it over here. But Country Music, there's a lot more to it than a few guys in a band rocking out pop stuff.

Ben: So then, what would say to something that Alan said yesterday and get your opinion on that. He said that, the artists who will be popular here and the artists that the people will like are, and I'm paraphrasing here, the ones that make an effort to come to the UK. The likes of the Band Perry, Lady Antebellum, Brad Paisley the kind of people who have an interest in playing in this country as opposed to just releasing music here...

Alan: Absolutely the case. I mean, otherwise nobody is going to know of them. It's absolutely right and that kind of makes perfect sense because unless they come here people are not going to know too much about them. And it is a bit of an effort for them to come here, but most of the time their Record Companies will pay it. And they don't have to fund it themselves. Playing Country Music in the UK is a tough call, you know if you don't want to sell yourself short and wear a cowboy hat and go line dancing.

Ben: I mean it depends, because the artists who come over are the ones that we know are going to sell. This year for example we've had more than double the number of artists playing in the UK.

Alan: I mean yeah it's great that they're coming and as I say it can only do the music good. You know, to raise the profile of the music in any way that they can is a bonus. And if it makes it cool then that's great by me. I love the music, I believe in the music and I know it has a lot to offer. But there are too many artists who are not good over here, and that's part of the issue. Too many people think that they can play Country Music, and that may be the case because it's easy to play any kind of music badly. To perform and present a song that has some meaning and some kind of moral value, that isn't that easy. You need to know what you're talking about...

Ben: You have to have lived it for Country Music.

Alan: Pretty Much, and the subtiles that are required to make it groove and to make the music likeable by people that understand Country Music and that's what I believe a lot of the artists here in the UK need to do, understand that it's great music and it deserves more time and effort than I believe they put into it.

Ben: So finally, what is your opinion of the digital age that we're currently in? Compared to say the seventies and the eighties when it was on TV and you could watch it? Now you can have access to it even though it's not on TV.

Alan: You know the kind of digital revolution, iTunes, YouTube and the internet I think in many ways it's very good. But I think fundamentally for an artist or a venue or a promoter or a management company to sell their music to someone... you have to build a relationship first. And you know you can go on the internet now and type in Country Music and you'll be absolutely inundated and who has the time for that? People can make music at home and then send CD's to managers, promotion companies and everything else... to radio stations too. I mean how many CD's do you get to your show?

Ben: Lots...

Alan: And how many do you listen to that you don't know?

Ben: Well, not as many as I should probably.

Alan: Well, quite. I mean I rest my case, and as much as I think it does make it acceptable, I still believe as an artist that you get your fans in one by one and predominantly you do that by getting out there and playing your music.... When I just said to you how many CD's do you get and actually listen to? That's the same the world over everyone is getting as many as you, probably some more. It is just physically not possible, so I don't think that much has changed in reality. I believe that the way forwards is to get out there and play your music. It's okay if you're a Brad Paisley or a Lady A or a Carrie Underwood and you have a massive machine behind you. I mean you've had hit records and that's a different kettle of fish all together. I mean there are not many Country Music artists in the UK who have a name like that and they're all unknown. There may be some very, very good ones but if you don't know their name and they haven't got any history then the chances are you are not going to click on that track or watch that video. So I don't think it's changed all that much, I mean likes on Facebook, they don't matter a jot really because how many people come out and see you and how many buy your records? And all these people who go "oh I'm nearly up to 500 likes on Facebook." Please can we forget it and get out of here? Get real! You know you don't just want

people liking it for the sake of liking it, you want people to come out and see you play... it's very easy to click like on Facebook and I don't take any notice of that whatsoever. And that's all part of this digital revolution, it's made things go a little pearshaped. You get so many people saying, "I can't afford to make a record. Can you sponsor it before hand?" I saw one online from a Bluegrass band in Cornwall who were looking for five-thousand to buy a van. You know, I've been in music for thirty-five years and always brought my own van because I feel it's a fundamental part of making music. No, I love the internet, don't get me wrong. But from the point of view of selling music I don't think it's made that much difference.

Jerry Vandiver – American Country Music Singer / Songwriter

Ben: Over the years, a number of now established artists have been noticed during performance at the Blue Bird cafe. How important would you say the cafe is for artists looking to further their careers?

Jerry: The Bluebird Café is primarily a songwriter’s venue, the most famous one and deservedly so. In fact, as I write this, I’m getting ready to play there tonight. Because so many artists write their own songs, the Bluebird has become an important part for new artists to play in order to get an honest audience reaction to their material. Every now and then an established artist drops in to listen and maybe even do a guest song which, of course, is a thrill for the audience. When they do, it is not unusual to hear the artist talk about how the Bluebird Café was an important part of their career.

Ben: For those who are unsure of the history, can you explain a little the background to the Blue Bird Cafe?

Jerry: Yes, it is an interesting story and there is a great book about it by Amy Kurland who originally opened the venue. (It’s called “The Bluebird Café Scrapbook”). Amy originally opened it as a lunch venue without music. Someone suggested that she have a jazz band play weekends that was mildly successful. Then a friend of hers needed a place to do a benefit for a family in need and approached Amy to use the Bluebird. It was a huge success and Amy decided to offer the stage to other bands. Then a woman named Gail Terri approached Amy to do a songwriter’s night on Sundays – normally an off evening, business wise. That grew into another huge success and Amy saw the value of a venue devoted to songwriters. It has continued to grow and now with the success of the US television series, “Nashville” – which uses the Bluebird as a central area to the story line, the venue is almost always sold out.

Ben: What would you say are your views on Country Music internationally, if you have any?

Jerry: International operations are very important to the Country Music Industry. We have found that Europe and the UK especially has such a strong fan base for country music and there is a special place in the hearts of the business for that. Japan and parts of the

South Pacific are good, too. However, piracy in Asia is so rampant that it is not a successful venture there.

Ben: Given you're a songwriter, might you be able shed some light on what makes Country Music so popular in your opinion?

Jerry: I think Country Music songs speak to the heart, to the very foundation of who we are as a people. It is honest, unassuming and real. I don't find that in popular music very much at all.

Ben: The stories told and messages conveyed at the heart of Country Music cross boundaries, and give the genre an appeal beyond the limits of its own fans. Would you agree?

Jerry: Yes, most definitely. I continue to be amazed at the popularity of Country Music at all age levels. The demographic used to be female 35-55. Now it reaches all ages and all walks of life.

Ben: Do you feel it is a good thing that the genre is constantly changing and reinventing itself?

Jerry: Oh yes, anything can become stale. We all like fresh sounds, ideas and such. At the same time, the essence of what we like to hear about – love, friendship, heartache – never changes. It's the way it is presented that keeps moving on. I find it refreshing to constantly hear new ways to say and sing "I love you".

Ben: Looking back, it can be said that a number of Country Music songs have passed over into the pop charts both in the US and Internationally, do you think these kind of songs (Help me Make it Through the Night, Rose Garden, You've got a Friend etc. The kinds of songs that have been popular in the UK) have done much to bring new fans into the genre of Country Music?

Jerry: Yes, I do. What seems to happen is that while these songs bring over new fans, those fans can be understandably fickle and if there isn't anything interesting to keep them there, they'll leave again. That is a constant challenge of any music genre.

Ben: How important do you feel the current digital revolution is to Country Music?

Jerry: This is an ongoing discussion that probably will never end. On one hand digital access has created a system that has the potential for larger audiences. However, the same access has created a situation where people assume music is free and downloads are like a pack of chewing gum. This has created great financial stress in the industry. Spotify, iTunes and such have not made up for the losses. In fact, I just got a check for some plays of my songs on Spotify – a whopping 2¢! That doesn't go very far in making a living and being able to stay creative.

Ben: Finally, how important is live performance to the promotion of Country Music? Do fans like to get together?

Jerry: The heart of Country Music is on the stage where the artist gets to connect with the fans. You hear about bands in other genres doing an occasional tour now and then, but the typical Country artist is on the road constantly. It is a part of our music heritage to reach our audiences on the stage. I can't imagine any successful Country artist not touring.

Gretchen Peters: American Singer / Songwriter

Ben: Thinking back on the dates you've played here in the UK recently, what is it as an American artist that keeps you coming back, you've been here several times?

Gretchen: Several? I mean we're in like the mid-twenties. Twenty-six tours, something like that? Well obviously first and foremost it's the audiences, there was just this connection that happened and I can't tell you exactly why but it happened very early on when I first came over here in 1996, when my first record came out. And it was not doing well in the States, a lot of people urged me, people who knew better than I and had been here said, you know, you need to go the UK because they'll get you. They'll get what you do and they were right, and there was just this kind of instant connection. I think part of it, you know, first of all we were helped immensely by people like Terry Wogan and Bob Harris but I think also, the audiences here are really focused on lyrics they really come into a show, you know wanting to sit and hear the words and they're just sort of primed to do that. That's really my dream audience, that's my perfect audience so I think that had partly to do with it too. And the other thing is I came back, I think a lot of artists think they can come over and reap the benefits and leave, and I knew that it was about building a career here. And we're playing in these beautiful halls now but you know, I tell my fellow artists who call me up in Nashville and say – "Hey, I wanna go play in the UK, I wanna go play where you're playing." Well I think, you know, do it for twenty years. Start in a pub with twenty people, you know, and eventually you will because it does take that kind of commitment.

Ben: Now what would be the highlight of playing the UK, is it the venues or the audiences?

Gretchen: Well I mean for me it's been the growth, and the natural organic growth of our audience. This tour we're doing right now we're seeing the biggest audiences we've ever seen, you know, we played at Queen Elizabeth Hall which is an eight or nine hundred seat venue and it's not like I had a big hit and you know all of a sudden hundreds of people turned up, it's definitely been an organic sort of word of mouth growth and to have that happen, to have the outpouring of appreciation from the audience – that's the ultimate highlight for me. As

far as individual shows, the one we did in London just two days ago was a huge highlight for me, with Elizabeth McGovern and all of that. But you know, there was a funny little gig we did in Maidstone six or seven years ago and Bryan Adams came out and sat in with us. And all the people, there couldn't have been eighty a hundred people there maybe, they went nuts of course when he showed up on stage. And that's a very fond memory, I have a lot of great memories from touring here.

Ben: And would you say the audience gives you a different reaction? Is there a different reaction to your music here, as compared to America?

Gretchen: You know the thing that I think I love about being here, is that I don't feel like they put me in a box. I don't feel like, in America it seems to be that I'm either labelled as a "Nashville songwriter" which gives people the impression that I spend all my time in some office, in Nashville, writing songs for other people, which I've never ever done – or I'm an Americana artist, or some kind of hybrid, not really an artist because I've written all these songs. There's this weird kind of thing I've had to overcome for a while, and over here I've never felt that way. I feel like the people who turn up to hear us are, well I don't think of them as Country fans, as Folk fans, I just think of them as music lovers. They have the same music collection that I do, you know they listen to Mark Knopfler and they listen to the Rolling Stones, Tom Russell and you know they're eclectic and they listen to great songs and I love that. Like I said, that's my dream audience.

Ben: Now you make use of Social Media, particularly Twitter, how important do you feel that is for an artist to connect with their audiences?

Gretchen: If they do it in a genuine way, I think it's hugely important and effective. But I think that artists have to know that – Twitter is a very democratic world and you're really not helping yourself by having an assistant tweet for you, or coming off as if you're... I don't know, it's a very level playing field, anyone can talk to anyone and that's what I love about it. And I guess for me, it comes very naturally to use those forms of media as I love to talk, you can ask my family I've been blabbing since I was a baby. So I like to talk to people and see what they like, I've done things on Twitter and on Facebook like, taking an informal poll to

see what songs people might like to hear on a tour. We did that for this tour in fact, so I think if you use it in a genuine way and you're your real self then it's hugely effective and it's a great way to stay in touch when you can't be there. But you gotta be real!