

Lost Highways

MAX FRASER

The Hank Williams Reader, edited by Patrick Huber, Steve Goodson, and David Anderson, Oxford University Press.

As I was on the move, I passed close by a spot
where three roads meet...

—*Oedipus the King*

SOMETIME IN THE fall of 1994 or the winter of 1995, nobody seems to remember exactly when, Hank Williams began putting on impromptu streetside concerts for unsuspecting pedestrians in Paris. One night, he was spotted in the seventh arrondissement, posting up just blocks from the Eiffel Tower; another time, he was seen on the steps of a quiet apartment building where he was rumored to be living with a French woman he had recently married—perhaps for love, perhaps to ease the process of securing a busking permit from the Parisian police, nobody could say for sure. With greater certainty, Edith Detmon, an American tourist from Tennessee who remembered Williams from his Nashville days, was able to confirm reports that “He’s much older now.” The Detmons, retired, were doing a little window-shopping when, “I said to my husband, ‘My God, that’s Hank Williams. I’d know him anywhere.’” They stopped for a live rendition of one of Williams’s classic hits, “Cold, Cold Heart” (number one on the country music charts in 1951), and Edith was pleased to find that “his voice was just as clear and beautiful as ever.” Impressive, when you consider what the ravages of time have done to the voice of an aging crooner like Bob Dylan. Even more impressive when you consider that in 1995 Williams had already been dead for forty-two years.

So reported the supermarket tabloid *Weekly World News*, a source whose reputability was surely beside the point when the editors of *The Hank Williams Reader* decided to include it in their exhaustive compendium of documents about the abbreviated life,

sudden death, and lasting cultural significance of the legendary country music singer. Even crammed in among seventy-eight other texts spanning six and a half decades, the *Weekly World News* article stands out as definitive proof that there was, as the editors write, "something truly phenomenal about his stardom." There is no badge of American celebrity quite like the full Elvis treatment, after all—and a reincarnated Hank Williams on the banks of the Seine, so far from his Alabama backcountry roots, makes even your average Elvis sighting at a pet store in Kalamazoo seem quotidian by comparison.

Still, it must be said, *The Hank Williams Reader* is hardly as exciting as its protagonist. There are thickets of textual evidence to wade through, besides that tabloid article: contemporary album and concert reviews and interviews; police-blotter reports and Williams's first wife's divorce complaint; reams of newspaper columns and editorials announcing his unexpected death from a drugs-and-alcohol-induced heart attack at age twenty-nine; memorials and remembrances from his mother, two wives, sister, son, and even a "lost" daughter (born of an extramarital affair five days *after* Williams died); excerpts from four biographies and one screenplay for a 1964 biopic (another is set for wide release this spring); and a gaggle of swooning assessments of his artistic bona fides by pee-aitch-dees and pop culture sophisticates like David Halberstam, Greil Marcus, and Bob Dylan himself.

Throughout them all, the same warts-and-all, true-life stories are told and retold; the same proofs of greatness are stated and restated; the same claims of influence are offered and one-upped. This posthumous repetition, of course, is what solidified Williams's celebrity; dead just six years after the release of his first chart-topping single, he barely had time to know it in his lifetime. Try it in one sitting, however, and the sheer banality of it all is what is most striking. The fashioning of an American icon, it turns out, is less like the explosive birth of a star than the slow accretion of a geological formation—and, for better or worse, can be just as riveting to watch in real time. As is the case with many anthologies, *The Hank Williams Reader* is a book to be studied more than read.

On the other hand, there is much about Williams's brief career worth dwelling on, as anyone who has spent a night with his aching songs of love, loss, and lonely despair can attest. He had thirty *Billboard* Top Ten country singles before he died—and another seven postmortem. He was the first country singer to garner serious attention and respect from mainstream audiences, especially when pop vocalists like Tony Bennett and Rosemary Clooney began covering his songs. Though he was not the undisputed king of country music when he was alive, Williams was the only one they called the “Hill-billy Shakespeare.” When he died, twenty thousand mourners attended his funeral in Montgomery—the biggest the city had ever seen. “Bankers, jurists, physicians, writers, governors, and philanthropists have been returned unto dust in Montgomery,” the *Montgomery Advertiser* genuflected, “but the coffin of none was followed as was that of the dead singer.” That dead singer, the anthology's editors write, was to become one of “the immortals in the history of American popular music.”

The year 1953, which began with Williams's death, was also the year, in the words of the historian Diane Pecknold, that country music went “over the top,” emerging once and for all from its generic origins as a regional, lower-class, and broadly derided musical form into one of the major fields of postwar popular culture. By the end of 1953, the country music industry based in Nashville was well on its way to becoming a viable challenger to the historical recording centers in New York and Los Angeles, *Billboard* had anointed country music America's “native art,” and there was even a congressional resolution proposing a national country music day of observance. And throughout the year, the cult of Hank Williams only grew: retailers quickly sold out of his records, radio stations began programming two-hour blocks of his music, tribute songs were written and released, and Williams's publisher reported that fan requests for his photographs were coming in at a speed that exceeded their pre-death rate by a factor of one hundred.

The simultaneity of Williams's death and the explosion of country music onto the national stage were in some ways related, but in

the main a matter of what you might call historically significant coincidence. Williams was not the first country music celebrity to achieve national renown, and country music itself was rapidly outgrowing its regional roots well before his death, thanks in large part to the dispersion of its traditional audience to military bases and industrial cities in the decade during and after World War II. This substantial internal migration of largely rural white southerners to urban centers primarily in the Midwest and the far West—along what country musician Steve Earle calls on his 1986 album *Guitar Town* the “Hillbilly Highway”—had lasting ramifications for both country music and the country, as significant and probably more so than the popularity of any particular artists, even a singular one like Hank Williams.

But around this same time country music was also undergoing a transformation in form and meaning that Williams did have a great deal to do with. The sound of country music that emerged from this crucible period was very different from its earlier form—more tragic in its bearing, increasingly defined by stylistic conventions determined by the industry in Nashville, different in its class inflections, and, for the first time, markedly rigid in its ideology. It was here that Hank Williams and the hillbilly highway crossed paths, in a confluence of cultural and economic transformations that turned this supposedly “native” genre into a far more conservative art form than it had been at its birth. The year that began with Williams’s immortalization may well have been the year that country music went over the top—and that may have been the worst thing that ever happened to country music.



Hank Williams died sometime during the early morning hours of 1 January 1953, drunk and doped up in the backseat of a Cadillac, along a lonely strip of highway that runs from Knoxville through the mountainous counties of east Tennessee and between the Appalachian ridge lines that stretch across West Virginia, before flattening out on the way to Canton, Ohio, where he was scheduled to play a New Year’s Day show. Over the previous year, Williams had been

fired from the Grand Ole Opry, country music's biggest stage, for his out-of-control drinking; finalized an acrimonious divorce from his first wife, Audrey; and married his second, nineteen-year-old Billie Jean, in front of a paying audience at the New Orleans Municipal Auditorium. In other words, he had been in a tailspin. Somewhere between Mount Hope and Oak Hill, West Virginia, Charles Carr, a freshman at the University of Alabama who was Williams's chauffeur for the trip, reached back to adjust a blanket that had slipped from the singer's shoulders and found his body cold and stiff. There was alcohol and morphine in Williams's system and chloral hydrate on his person—a combination sometimes used to euthanize the critically ill. Strewn among the empty beer cans at his feet were the unfinished lyrics to another song about faded love. His recently released single, "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive," was just then climbing the *Billboard* charts.

It had all the makings of the fateful end Williams had long seemed destined for, or at least so claimed those contemporaries who began writing the legend of Hank Williams even before he was in the ground. "The lonesome Alabama country boy who rose to fame and riches with an \$8 guitar and a melancholy voice" had been having premonitions of his own death, reported the *Nashville Tennessean* the day after the news broke. Allen Rankin, a Montgomery newspaper columnist and one of Williams's earliest supporters, spoke directly to the dead singer when he bemoaned "the obsession to catch down on paper and wax all the thousands of lyrics and melodies that reeled through your brain, that helped kill you young. It is often so with turbulent souls." Williams was, in the words of the influential country music promoter Charlie Lamb, a "star-crossed troubadour," a "wandering minstrel," a "sad-faced cowboy," "the baleful balladeer from Montgomery"—in sum, "the image of country music."

Lonesome country boy, turbulent soul, sad-faced cowboy, baleful balladeer: terms like these stuck from the beginning, and the common tragic note they sounded has remained the most frequently invoked in reference to Williams and his music. In certain ways, it has always been an imperfect fit, as a closer listen to a song like "I'll

Never Get Out of This World Alive” makes clear. Despite—or perhaps because of—its fatalistic tone and the morbid timing of its release, “I’ll Never Get Out,” as the wisecrack in its title would suggest, is really a big joke, one long riff on the singer’s bad luck. He is so broke that if it rained money the coins would fall through the patches in his pants; instead of asking his brother for a dime, he bets him a nickel that he can feel whether the dime is lying heads-up or tails through the worn-out soles of his shoes. He avoids jumping in the river for fear he will drown—and that is really saying something, given that a few stanzas earlier he has told us that his “fishin’ pole’s broke [and] the creek is full of sand.” Even when things break his way, they inevitably break back: “A distant uncle passed away and left me quite a batch / And I was living high until that fatal day / A lawyer proved I wasn’t born / I was only hatched.” Now, there’s a lawyer joke for you.

More in keeping with the Williams of tragedy is a song like “Lost Highway,” a maudlin number about hard living and its consequences that Williams released as a B-side in 1949, and which has since gone on to be one of the most frequently covered of his songs. First recorded a year earlier by a Texas songwriter named Leon Payne, “Lost Highway” originated as an installment in the long country music tradition of tramping and traveling songs. “In the early days of Leon’s career, he hitchhiked from one place to another, finding jobs wherever he could,” his widow Myrtie would later recall. “Once he was in California hitchhiking to Alba, Texas, to visit his sick mother. He was unable to get a ride and finally got help from the Salvation Army. It was while he was waiting for help that he wrote that song.”

In Williams’s hands, the song takes on a different meaning altogether. His struggles with alcohol and women were well known during his lifetime and a source of notoriety after his death, and the references to a life brought low by gambling, drinking, and “a woman’s lies” give his version of “Lost Highway” a seedy verisimilitude that Payne’s original could never possess. Instead of a song about the dusty and disreputable life of a tramp far from home and

family, Williams's "Lost Highway" is a very personal kind of morality play. "I was just a lad, nearly twenty-two / Neither good nor bad, just a kid like you," when temptation and weakness leads him astray. Lost, in the spiritual sense, it is "too late to pray" on the highway that Williams is traveling. "Now boys don't start to ramblin' round / On this road of sin are you sorrow bound / Take my advice or you'll curse the day / You started rollin' down that lost highway." When Williams turned up dead on a West Virginia highway a few years later, the ominous implications of a line like "for a life of sin I have paid the cost" were not lost on anybody.

Was this the "image of country music," then: lachrymose, self-pitying, condemned? Surely, it is the tragic and not the comic Williams that Lamb and others had in mind when endowing him with this kind of icon status—the Williams of "Lost Highway" rather than "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive" or, better yet, "Jambalaya" (number one on the country music charts in that fateful first week of 1953). In awarding him a posthumous citation in 2010, the Pulitzer Prize board would emphasize the special "poignancy" of Williams's music, and even the editors of the *Reader* seem most drawn to this version of the "melancholy life and tumultuous career" of the "hauntingly enigmatic" country star. For a musical genre that traditionally had been derided by mainstream audiences as the dissonant yodeling of so many semiliterate hillbillies, the weightiness of pathos may have been Hank Williams's most enduring contribution to the art form—a little Puccini to balance the opera buffa of, well, the Grand Ole Opry.

But there was another kind of tragedy here, too. Hank Williams did not singlehandedly change the direction of country music, but as one of its most influential practitioners at a critical juncture in its history he would have a considerable impact on what was to come. And in this way, "Lost Highway" was doubly significant: not only did it help cement the turbulent-soul identity for which Williams would be immortalized and which later singers would seek to imitate, but it also changed the meaning of the highway itself. After Hank Williams, all highways were lost.



For just about as long as there has been something we would recognize today as country music, there have been country songs about highways. In and of itself this is not a remarkable observation: the American cultural fascination with the open road is at least as old as the country, and the rapid growth in road construction over the twentieth century only expanded opportunities for footloose writers, photographers, filmmakers, and singer-songwriters eager to test its artistic possibilities. But country music's fascination with the highway, if not exceptional, is particular, a phenomenon born of the specific circumstances and milieu from which the genre emerged in the 1920s and to which it has remained mostly, if not completely, tethered ever since.

In its earliest incarnations, country music was better known, both colloquially and in the trade press, by the more offensive but sociologically descriptive term "hillbilly music." A regionally expansive epithet for poor southern whites coined by middle-class urban sophisticates, the hillbilly connoted the same image in the 1920s as he had in 1900, when the *New York Journal* defined him as "a free and untrammelled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him." Throw in a fiddle and a banjo and you have so-called hillbilly music.

To the untrained northern eye and ear, the hillbilly was a relic of a premodern rustic lifestyle, and his musical tastes likewise were a cultural holdover of the seclusion and provincialism of the mountain and the farm. Sympathetic listeners might elevate hillbilly music by ethnologizing its origins in the ballad tradition of Appalachia's Scotch-Irish ancestors; while the less so might degrade it by pathologizing hillbilly music as the picking and twanging of a primitive people. But this was disdain whichever way you cut it, and the implication behind either articulation of the genre's traditionalism was the same: hillbilly music, like the region from which it hailed, was backward.

Of course this portrayal of a static and stagnant regional backwater was itself increasingly out-of-date, as optimistic local boosters touting a New South had been insisting for going on half a century. In fact, there was no separating the birth of commercial country music in the 1920s from the by-then already decades-old processes of industrialization and urbanization that were churning up older ways of life across the rural South. As a house organ of the country's ascendant bourgeoisie, the *New York Journal* had little doubt on which side of that epochal cultural transformation it aligned itself. But the paper's erroneous yet influential depiction of the southern white common folk was more than a symptom of class condescension. It also represented a fundamental misapprehension of the already considerable penetration of capitalist modernity into southern life.

A quick economic tour will provide a sobering corrective. Southern cotton, king among cash crops, ruled the world's market through the Civil War, and the forms of debt peonage—sharecropping, tenant farming, crop liens, and the “mortgage system”—which replaced the slave plantation as the engines of capitalist agriculture after the war were among rural farmers' first introductions to the harsh discipline of the marketplace. The poor southern farmer might still dress as he pleased and prefer a whiskey when he could get his hands on it, but the increasingly ubiquitous mechanisms of credit and debt ensured that he was hardly “free and untrammelled” for long.

Life in the upland South, for all its notorious isolation, was no more immune to the patterns and pressures of economic development. Timbering employed thousands up and down the Appalachian range and brought market-driven globalization to even that remote corner of the American hinterland: in 1901, the *Lexington Morning Herald* reported that a shipment of close to one million dollars worth of Kentucky white oak was on its way to Austria, to be used to make barrel staves. Coal production in Kentucky alone had increased from three hundred thousand tons in 1870 to 2.7 million by 1890; twenty-five years later, when Cecil Sharp, a prominent English folklorist who traveled through southern Appalachia collecting traditional ballads and folk songs, passed through the coalfields of the eastern part of

the state, he noted to his great chagrin that “When there is coal and good wages to be earned, the families soon drop their old-fashioned ways and begin to ape town manners.” The Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, which got its start mining the rich coal seams in the Lower Cumberland Plateau region around Tracy City in the 1850s, by 1886 had relocated to Birmingham, Alabama, where it founded the company town of Ensley (named for TCI president Enoch Ensley) that was soon home to four two-hundred-ton blast furnaces.

Much of the early financing of the Birmingham steel industry came from the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, which had been incorporated in 1850; by the turn of the century, the L&N and other major lines like the Southern Railway had laid thousands of miles of track across much of the southeastern United States. By 1890, nine out of ten southerners lived in a county with access to the railroad, which by then had even penetrated the barely accessible hollows of Harlan County and the West Virginia mountains. Among the many lasting changes begotten by this region-wide web of industrial commerce that the railroad made possible were generations-worth of country songs about trains—from Vernon Dalhart’s “Wreck of the Old ’97,” one of the first country hits, to Johnny Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues.”

If these kinds of songs were symptomatic of the “town manners” Cecil Sharp feared would dilute and ultimately replace the traditional ballads he hoped to preserve, the truth of the matter was that he and the other early culture warriors who sought to preserve a fanciful (and often nativist) “Anglo-Saxon” heritage among mountain and rural folk were fighting a lost cause. When the Water Development Authority in Corsicana, Texas, accidentally stumbled across the first commercially viable oilfield in the state in 1894, the oil boom that followed and swept through Louisiana, Arkansas, and Oklahoma brought one more wave of industrialization to another primarily rural part of the south. As local farmers followed the model of their coal-country brethren and flocked to oilfields in search of good wages, another modern tradition was born in the roadside bars that began to line the outskirts of East Texas boomtowns. Called “honky-tonks”—

a term that may owe its origins to the name of a controversial burlesque house in downtown Fort Worth in the late 1800s—they provided alcohol, female company, and musical entertainment to the single men working the fields. Town manners were spreading fast.

By the end of the 1920s, the southern Piedmont was outproducing New England in textiles, and cities like Atlanta, Birmingham, Charlotte, and Richmond were large and growing industrial centers. Railroads, honky-tonks, Communist Party soapboxers in Gastonia, North Carolina, and perhaps the closest thing the country has ever seen to out-and-out class warfare in the mine wars of West Virginia and Kentucky—all this existed alongside lingering rural folkways to compose the social context that prevailed in the South during the decade of country music's birth. And quite literally paving the way for all this change was a threefold increase in the total mileage of paved roads interpenetrating the rural South between 1914 and 1930, which for the first time gave many country folk an alternative to rural poverty, the isolation of the family farm and the mountain hollow, and the close surveillance of the small religious community, and brought them in ever-growing numbers to the town, the mill village, the city, and even the North. Like the textile mill, the steel foundry, and the trade union, the highway was a symbol of an urban-industrial modernity with which the proletarianizing southern hillbilly was fast becoming familiar.

Not surprisingly, then, songs about the highway have been around since very nearly the moment of recorded country music's birth. Henry Whitter's 1923 "Lonesome Road Blues," the lament of a poor convict stuck doing outdoor gang work while dreaming of escape to a place "where the climate suits my clothes," was recorded just a few months after Fiddlin' John Carson made the first country recordings for the Okeh label. The hillbilly wasn't the only proletarianizing southerner, of course, and the highway would make similar appearances in the music of the black sharecroppers and tenant farmers who began singing the blues around the same time—songs like Charlie Patton's "Down the Dirt Road Blues" (ca. 1929), Robert Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues" (1937), and Big Bill Broonzy's

“Key to the Highway” (1941). And just as it would in the blues, the highway would continue to be prominently featured in country songs—because hillbilly music was the music not of a premodern people, but of a people confronting directly the powerful economic forces then transforming the social and cultural landscape all around them.

This confrontation was fraught with often ambiguous meaning for those experiencing it first hand, as another early highway song, Dorsey Dixon’s 1937 composition “I Didn’t Hear Nobody Pray,” made clear. Roy Acuff would take “I Didn’t Hear Nobody Pray” and turn it into a country hit as “Wreck on the Highway” in 1942, but in Dixon’s hands the original, at least at first glance, is a dour piece of pious moralizing. The narrator tells the real-life story of a horrific car crash in Rockingham, North Carolina, in which two people were killed; the highway is the scene of their bloody end and alcohol the contributing factor, but it is really the whole desacralized social order that Dixon is inveighing against. Grisly descriptions of the aftermath of the accident couch the main message of the song: “Whiskey and glass all together, / Was mixed up with blood where they lay. / Death played her hand in destruction, / But I didn’t hear nobody pray.” That final line is repeated throughout as a kind of sermonie refrain, and Dixon leaves it intentionally unresolved whether it is the dead couple or the rest of us who are being insufficiently penitent. More than booze and fast cars, it is pervasive irreligiousness that he sees as the scourge of contemporary society. Or rather, they are all of a piece—the whiskey, windshield glass, and blood all “run together,” an impure mixture of a distinctly modern and secular vintage. And not incidentally, they flow into one another on the pavement of the highway.

Dorsey Dixon grew up poor in South Carolina and worked for more than three decades in the textile mills of the Carolina Piedmont while writing and recording songs with his brother Howard, who played the steel guitar and worked in the mills, too, straight up until he died of heart attack while on the job in 1961. A devout Free Will Baptist who thought of his music as way of bearing witness, Dorsey was also, in the words of folklorist Archie Green—who did as much

as anybody to redeem early hillbilly music from the dustbin of critical and historical condescension—"the poet laureate of the cotton mill industry." (Patrick Huber, one of the editors of *The Hank Williams Reader*, has also written a fine account of Dixon in his book *Linthead Stomp*, about country musicians from the Piedmont South in the early twentieth century.) Pete Seeger and other postwar protest singers would make popular a number of Dixon's compositions about industrial life, among them "Weave Room Blues" and "Babies in the Mill," and it was primarily Dixon's songs about work and poverty, rather than his didactic memorials of local tragedies, that the generation of folk revivalists would come to embrace.

Dixon's take on the highway in "I Didn't Hear Nobody Pray" was an unusually pessimistic one—many of his contemporaries were just as inclined to look on the highway as a way out rather than as another link in their chains. Henry Whitter did both: his convict is forced to work on the same highway that is his only means of escape; the Lonesome Road is at once sentence and salvation. For others, it was simply the latter. The most popular country musician of Dixon's generation, Jimmie Rodgers, made a career out of singing songs about hopping trains and living the hobohebian lifestyle; to many, the highway signaled the same kind of freedoms. Rodgers worked on the railroads until he contracted a case of tuberculosis that killed him at just thirty-five—like Dixon, he was familiar with the darker side of industrial life. But the "Singing Brakeman," as they called Rodgers, kept yearning after the sound of the train whistle, and his famous yodel was like a howl at the moon, with all the barely sublimated lupine sexuality it evoked.

If there was something in Rodgers's music that presaged the restlessness and its refusal of conformity that would come to define the postwar Beat movement, Dixon's was a more traditional and in many ways more trenchant model of resistance. Well before Progressive reformers like Walter Rauschenbusch coined the phrase "the social gospel" in 1917, American Christians of various denominations and class backgrounds had been applying the teachings of Jesus to the conditions of the workingman, and in doing so had found the

new economic order unleashed by unfettered industrial capitalism to be sorely lacking. Especially in the first decades of the twentieth century, Holiness churches like the Free Will Baptists grew rapidly, particularly among poor white and black southerners who felt themselves alienated from the more blue-blooded mainstream Protestant denominations. In the eastern Kentucky coal towns that became the backbone of the United Mine Workers, or the cotton fields of southeastern Missouri and Arkansas from which emerged the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the 1930s, Pentecostalism provided the vocabulary and ethical cosmology for some of the most valiant labor struggles that rural southerners would ever engage in. And when the wave of labor unrest that swept the southern Piedmont in the late 1920s and early 1930s reached the Aleo mill in East Rockingham where the Dixon brothers worked, it was noted that the striking workers there liked to pass their time on the picket line singing "Weave Room Blues."

Given all this, it's impossible to read "I Didn't Hear Nobody Pray" as simply the teetotaling sermonizing of a devout antimodernist. Dixon's version of fundamentalist Christianity did not deny modern life so much as deplore the moral logic of its dominant system of production; his were the kind of religious people who might have voted for William Jennings Bryan or even Eugene Debs. Evangelizing the gospel and recounting the hardships of mill labor, in other words, were not incompatible identities for a songwriter in the South in the 1930s, and Dorsey Dixon was not the only Carolina millhand who might see in the flowering roadways of the New South the creeping of the marketplace and its corrosive amorality. A wreck on the highway indeed.

In the end, country singers like Dixon and Rodgers had more in common than not—even though Rodgers was one of the few country musicians, then or since, whose repertoire included virtually no religious songs. In ways both material and symbolic, the highway was contributing to the transformation of life and labor in the twentieth-century South; not surprisingly, then, a significant subgenre of early country music was about hitting the road, moving on, and leaving

behind life's impoverishments, be they economic, familial, physical, or spiritual. Dixon wanted to escape the venality of mill society; Rodgers just wanted to "grab a train and ride"—but for both these hillbillies, the open road led not backward but forward.



Country music and the American highway came of age together, and so it stands to reason that the heyday of each would also be the heyday of the country music highway song. The Interstate Highway Act was signed into law in 1956, just three years after country music went "over the top," and from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s country musicians of all stripes sang songs in which the action, whether literal or metaphoric, took place against the backdrop of the pavement. They were not the only Americans in the immediate postwar period who were obsessed with the highway and all things related to car culture—these were the years, after all, of *On the Road*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and Robert Frank's *The Americans*; the tailfin, chrome plating, and Chuck Berry's "Maybellene"; Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at any Speed* and Andy Warhol's *Silver Car Crash (Double Disaster)*. But if the highway had been a symbol pregnant with meaning at the dawn of commercial country music, in the decades that followed Leon Payne and Hank Williams recording "Lost Highway" it gave birth to a litter of prodigious proportions.

A quick, dirty, and by all means only partial discography should suffice to give a sense of the scope of the postwar highway-song phenomenon. Like Payne and Williams, Jim Reeves ("Highway to Nowhere," 1956) and Hank Thompson ("Headin' Down the Wrong Highway," 1958) found only aimlessness and dissipation on the highway, while Don Reno and Red Smiley, contra Dorsey Dixon, saw in it the straight path to redemption, in "I'm Using My Bible for a Roadmap" (1950). After Fiddlin' Jim McCarroll made "Lee Highway Blues" into a string band standard in the 1920s, highway songs became a staple of bluegrass music, with luminaries like Bill Monroe ("Highway of Sorrow," 1951) and The Stanley Brothers ("Highway of Regret," 1959; "God's Highway," 1966; "Highway Ambush," 1969)

following suit. Ferlin Husky ("The Drunken Driver," 1954), Howard Vokes ("Death on the Highway," 1964), Porter Wagoner ("Carroll County Accident," 1968), and Stonewall Jackson ("Drinking and Driving," 1968) all had hits with songs about road accidents, often alcohol-induced and always carrying with them a lesson in morals. In 1963, Dave Dudley's "Six Days on the Road" hit number two on the country charts and ushered in a whole subgenre of its own—the trucking song, which became such a popular style that it eventually begat its own multimedia offspring, with trucking films like *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) and *Convoy* (1978) playing much like country songs set in 35mm. Country outlaws and rebels like Merle Haggard ("I'm a Lonesome Fugitive," 1969) and Townes Van Zandt ("Highway Kind," 1972) found the romance of the open road to be a convenient stand-in for their aversion to the growing commercialism of the country music industry, even as Dottie West followed "Route 65 to Nashville" (1975) in pursuit of brighter lights and bigger opportunities.

Two significant and interrelated developments going on simultaneously in the world of country music would combine to make the highway a very different kind of symbol in the postwar period than it had been earlier. The first was the consolidation of the economic apparatus of country music recording and distribution as a culture industry per se, along the lines of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's definition of the concept in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Even the earliest country music had always been "commercial," of course—in fact, as Cecil Sharp's lament made clear, commerce was changing musical folkways well before the invention of electrical recording devices. Hillbilly may have been a pejorative label for the editorialists at the *New York Journal*, but it was also an effective marketing category for the early recording and broadcast outfits, which packaged even the more urbane country artists like Jimmie Rodgers in hayseed garb and broadcast them on "barn dance" radio shows. But it was only beginning in the 1950s that the country music industry became, in Adorno and Horkheimer's phrasing, "a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part"—and, even more significantly, one that could reach beyond the limitations of class

and region that inevitably circumscribed the market appeal of the hillbilly label.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the logic of the culture industry was perfectly tailored to the prerogatives of an economic order based on mass production and mass consumption, a system in which imitation was "absolute" and the factory-like operations of cultural production generated cultural commodities that were "cyclically recurrent and rigidly invariable types." The studio system in American moviemaking was an ideal example; in the realm of country music, this productive logic generated what came to be called "the Nashville Sound," which emerged in the mid-to-late 1950s from the recording studios of influential local producers like Chet Atkins and Owen Bradley to redefine the sound and style of country music. By design, the Nashville Sound was intended to make country music sound and feel more like mainstream pop music, which not only continued to sell more records but also was still considered a more respectable and cultured—a more middle-class—alternative to country. When asked once to define the Nashville Sound, Atkins glibly replied that it was "the sound of money." In effect, the Nashville Sound took the hillbilly out of country music: it emphasized smoother vocals and sophisticated editing, more string arrangements and background harmonies, fewer fiddles and less twang. And in doing so, the Nashville Sound succeeded in stripping country music of the lingering resonances of its origins among the southern rural working class and helped turn it into a cultural commodity suited for true mass consumption.

The second development that helped refashion the symbol of the highway in postwar country music was the significant increase in migration out of the rural South in the decades during and immediately after World War II. Rural southerners had been moving between farm and mill or mining town for some time before the war, and in increasing numbers had even begun leaving the region altogether, African Americans in particular. But it was in these postwar years when millions of southern hillbillies left home for good, fleeing rural poverty on highways bound north and west to the booming

urban-industrial centers of the Midwest and California. By the 1960s, there were an estimated forty thousand transplanted white southerners living in Chicago, and tens of thousands more in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Columbus, Detroit, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Oakland, and Los Angeles. Smaller cities too, like Richmond, California, Muncie, Indiana, or Dayton, Ohio, which found themselves along the floodplains of the new interstate system, were inundated with white southern migrants in search of better jobs and better chances. During these years, the outflow of people was so great that the overall population in parts of the South actually decreased in absolute terms, even in regions with notoriously high birth rates like the southern mountains. It was a movement of people so large historians tend to use biblical terminology when describing it (James Gregory's *American Exodus* from 1989 and Chad Berry's *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* from 2000 are two prime examples). In humbler terms, this was the golden era of Steve Earle's "Hillbilly Highway," which carried his ex-miner grandfather and homesick grandmother "Detroit City bound" in pursuit of "a dream of a better life" and the hope that someday their son might work with "his brains and not his hands."

What this meant was that during the same period of time that Nashville-based producers were tailoring country music to broaden its appeal to nonsouthern ears, country music's traditional rural and working class audience was moving in growing numbers to nonsouthern cities—and they brought their radios with them. This presented both opportunities and challenges to the country music industry. The opportunities were obvious: to transcend country's traditionally region-bound identity, to expand the geography of touring and record sales revenues, to market the country sound to the nation's rapidly growing (and consuming) middle classes. The challenge was to capitalize on those opportunities without turning off country music's base—without selling out the same rural folk who may have moved to Chicago or Detroit and left the farm for the factory for good, but who still at this time composed the large majority of the country music market.

Among the many consequences of the development of a mass-production economy in culture that Adorno and Horkheimer identified was “the predominance of the effect, the obvious touch, and the technical detail over the work itself,” which may once have guided “rebellious” aesthetic experimentations with form “as a vehicle of protest against the organization,” but amid the high modernism of the mid-twentieth century now only worked to “subserve the formula.” To solve its postwar audience challenge, the country music industry also turned to an effect—although in this case it might be just as appropriate to call it an affect. Complementing the “cyclically recurrent and rigidly invariable” production values of the Nashville Sound recordings was an increasing reliance on the emotive language of nostalgia, especially as it was bound up with a set of images and feelings associated with a fanciful recreation of a bygone rural southern past. Both were designed to smooth the rougher edges of country’s less polished roots as the music of poor white country people—in the first case, by making that music *sound* more like the pop music that middle-class listeners preferred; and in the second by disassociating the *feelings* the music was meant to invoke from any grounding in the real experiences of region and class that had defined the country genre for its earliest practitioners. Where artistic style might once have moved freely as an independent variable, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, even potentially as a vehicle of protest, it now was subsumed entirely by the apparatus of mass production; the style of the culture industry was “the negation of style.” In a similar vein, nostalgia would prove to be the negation of country music’s working-class style.

The critical theorist Susan Stewart has defined nostalgia as something more ideological in nature than the word’s etymology—from the Greek *nostos*, meaning homecoming, and *algos*, meaning pain or ache—or a strictly literalist translation of the word as the feeling of homesickness would immediately suggest. Homesickness is the ache we feel for a specific time and place called home; it’s no coincidence that we trace the word’s roots to the *Odyssey*, to Odysseus’s longing for a return to Ithaca and Penelope. On the other hand, as Stewart writes, “Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a

sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience." This past "has never existed except as narrative"—home, you might say, not as it is or used to be but as we always wished it was—and its invocation is both backward looking and in some fundamental way ahistorical. "Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin," Stewart continues, "nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality."

This nostalgic affect was written all over the postwar country highway song. Indeed, if there was a unifying narrative through-line to these songs, it was home: going home, missing home, leaving home and regretting it, begging the departed to come back home, returning home to die. Many songs made this theme explicit. The Bailes Brothers were "Traveling the Highway Home" in 1952; Curly Dan and Wilma Ann were driving "South on 23" in 1961; Kenny Price was "Southern Bound" in 1968; and Porter Wagoner was on the "Highway Headin' South" in 1974—all of them imploring, like John Denver in 1971, "Take Me Home, Country Roads." Southern Missouri-born Wynn Stewart's long lost girlfriend finally returns to his small town after a crash on the highway in "Long Black Limousine" (1958), while Loretta Lynn rues the day she lost her man to the big city in "Blue Kentucky Girl" (1965). Even Glen Campbell, the smooth boy wonder of 1960s country music, as perfect a product of the Nashville Sound as there ever was, who looked much more comfortable on television or in sun-soaked Hollywood where he preferred to record than down on the Arkansas farm where he was raised, eschewed the "highways come between us" for the "backroads by the rivers of my memories" and took home two Grammys in 1967 for "Gentle on My Mind."

At times, these highway songs could capture the special poignancy associated with the experiences of dispossession and dislocation that often came with the hillbilly's postwar urban migration. The full immersion into industrial life amounted to a rupture for many, the pain of which was felt daily in the claustrophobia of factory

work, the blight and prejudice encountered in the urban ghettos where southern migrants tended to cluster, and the anonymity of life in the city and far from family. This was a version of what Marx had in mind when he described the concept of alienation as a process of estrangement—and you can hear it in a song like “The Ballad of Barbara,” Johnny Cash’s 1973 reinterpretation of the traditional Scotch-English ballad about unrequited love, “Barbara Allen.” After abandoning “my land and my people” in the southern town where he was born, the singer ends up in an unnamed northern city, “in a world that’s all concrete and steel.” He meets a woman there, falls in love and marries her, and they move into a “fancy downtown flat,” where the singer slowly begins to pine after the quiet life he left behind. He asks Barbara to leave with him but she scorns him, literally transforming herself into the cold and heartless place he has come to despise: “She turned into concrete and steel / And she said, ‘I’ll take the city.’” From the unnaturalness of the building materials to the conspicuous displays of wealth and his ultimate emasculation at the hands of his wife—besotted in her own way with town manners—Cash’s song is a hillbilly parable of urban alienation and class defeat. Of course, it bears brief mention again that the experiences of urban alienation and demoralization were not unique to white southern transplants, nor did they appear only in the music of the southern white diaspora—as a song like Atlanta-born Gladys Knight’s magisterial “Midnight Train to Georgia,” released the same year as Cash’s “Barbara,” made so achingly clear. Unlike in that soulful and self-abnegating valentine, the singer of “The Ballad of Barbara” ends up chastened and alone, but in this case better off for it. “Now the cars go by on the interstate / And my pack is on my shoulder / But I’m goin’ home, where I belong / Much wiser now and older.”

More often than not, however, the feeling expressed in these songs amounted to a kind of wallowing self-pity, at once abject and artificial sounding, and the resolutions they offered were clearly little more than a Nashville-produced special effect. Nobody quite captured the spirit of nostalgia in postwar country music like Bobby Bare, who had a series of hits in the 1960s—“Detroit City,” “500

Miles Away from Home,” “Streets of Baltimore”—which all took as their subject the homesick country boy in the big city. In “Detroit City,” which made it all the way to number six on the *Billboard* country charts and won a Grammy in 1963, the singer goes north to find work in the auto industry, but all he does is dream “about those cotton fields and home.” He writes boastful letters to his family about how well he is doing, but really it is just a long procession of empty workdays and lonely nights. “From the letters I write they think I’m doing fine / But by day I make the cars, and by night I make the bars / If only they could read between the lines.” By the end, he decides to swallow “my foolish pride / And put it on a southbound freight and ride,” back to the filial embrace of those familiar cotton fields. The song closes with Bare, a tremble in his voice, warbling “I wanna go home / I wanna go home / Oh, how I wanna go home.”

Bobby Bare grew up on the Ohio side of the Ohio River, right where it makes a triangle with Kentucky and West Virginia along the Allegheny Plateau: a southerly part of the state in many ways, but not exactly cotton country. That little agronomic exaggeration was telling because it was such a transparent piece of artifice. (In fairness to Bare, “Detroit City” was written by Danny Dill and Mel Tillis, two songwriters from states with actual experience in cotton production—Tennessee and Florida, respectively.) You would be hard-pressed to think of a more obvious symbol for a left-behind South than cotton fields—except for the Confederate battle flag, which more than a few country musicians took to waving around the same time. But given the record’s success, Bare apparently knew his audience would appreciate where he was coming from, even if he didn’t quite come from there.

Less visible, then, in the postwar highway song was the lived experience of industrial modernity, with its liberating possibilities and stifling realities, which had once made country a music of everyday life for the southern white working class. In its place was an only ideological reality: a rural past that was no more real than the Elizabethan arcadias Cecil Sharp and the other ballad collectors and folklorists had hoped to find when they journeyed into the southern

mountains a half century earlier. When Glen Campbell sang of country back roads, or Bare yearned for those lost cotton fields, the emotional response these songs evoked was exactly what Stewart meant by “inauthentic”—a longing for an imagined and imaginary “simple life” that did not recall an actual time or place or former way of life, but was always only a fantasy.

All this was a marked shift from how the highway had operated in song during the days of Dorsey Dixon and Jimmie Rodgers. Where once the highway had symbolized country's desire to transcend the limitations of a social order in transition, the southbound highway in postwar country music increasingly came to operate as a conservative myth or political fable—and one that would have lasting implications for the genre's class associations and political orientation. But more immediately, the strange marriage of Nashville Sound polish and the simulations of down-home provincialism practiced by Nashville stars like Campbell and Bare proved to be the perfect recipe for mass culture respectability and profitability. The undercurrent of antiurbanism that wound its way through postwar country may have been a tonic to all those displaced southerners who struggled in the factories and ghettos of industrial America, but it also appealed in growing numbers to the urban ethnics, white flighters, and suburban warriors who were then remaking the landscape of American politics and cultural life. *Billboard* was right: country music was fast becoming a “native art,” but not of the historic white yeomanry so much as the new suburban and exurban white middling classes, who shared their hostility to the postwar city but felt none of early country's unease about the culture of the market. These highways led only to strip malls and subdivisions. The era of a Garth Brooks or a Shania Twain—crossover country singers whose popularity often eclipsed contemporary pop stars—was not long off.

♦ ♦ ♦

Unfortunately, country music nostalgia did more than just sell records. By the end of the 1960s, Bobby Bare was recording jingoistic drivel like “God Bless America Again” while stumping for that

great revanchist hero of the little man and the defeated South, George Wallace. Among the many other country stars who joined Bare on the campaign trail in 1968 was a young Hank Williams, Jr. Then still known for little more than offering spot-on vocal impersonations of his famous dead father, in another fifteen years Hank Jr. would top the country charts with the ultimate ruralist cri de coeur, "A Country Boy Can Survive" (1982), an anthem of backwoods survivalism that celebrates the rougher arts of country living and portrays New York City as a kind of modern-day Gomorrah. Thirty years on again, he would be thrilling an enthusiastic crowd at the Iowa State Fair Grandstand by ending a 2012 concert with the rallying cry: "We've got a Muslim president who hates farming, hates the military, hates the US, and we hate him!"

I don't think this is exactly what the music critic Tom Piazza had in mind when, in a long essay the editors of *The Hank Williams Reader* quote from in their introduction, he proposes that "if there has been a gravitational center to country music since World War II, Hank Williams occupies it." In fact, for Piazza, like the other critics and scholars whose thoughtful but largely one-note encomiums to Williams compose most of the last couple of sections of the *Reader*, the connection between country music and postwar conservatism seems to be precisely beside the point. This is probably a case of a kind of critical overcorrection: ever since Robert Altman's biting 1975 satire *Nashville*, if not before, the relationship between country music and the cultural politics of the New Right has been, if anything, overdrawn. And to be sure, it is a salutary contribution to the study of a major field of American popular culture to be able to consider what the life and music of a country star like Williams also has to tell us about cultural alienation, queer identity, racial boundary crossing, or the frailty of the midcentury masculine ideal, as do a number of these excerpted essays.

But there also appears to be a bit of fanboy (and girl, but mostly boy) exceptionalism to the way Hank Williams, both in the *Reader* and elsewhere, has been spared the taint of association with what is, inarguably, the major field of American popular culture most visibly

associated with political conservatism. Somehow, Williams is both the gravitational center of postwar country music—and Piazza is surely right on this point by at least one measure; I would hazard a guess that we will not be seeing Oxford University Press put out an anthology devoted to George Jones or Kitty Wells or even Johnny Cash anytime soon—and yet also singularly unimplicated in the political picaresque that ends with his son and namesake hailed as a hero by the buffoons over at Fox News. For too many critics who are fans of Williams and country music more broadly (and I would consider myself one of them), this all is irrelevant. As Bob Dylan writes about Williams in his memoir *Chronicles: Volume One*, “When I hear Hank sing, all movement ceases.” Enough said.

One explanation for why postwar country music found itself so at home in the Wallace campaign—so much so that the journalist Paul Hemphill called the Nashville scene “practically a battlefield command post for George Wallace”—were the pungent notes of ruralist resentment that echoed through both. Wallace’s race-baiting, law-and-order campaign rhetoric made much of nonurban America’s fear and loathing of the inner city—the portrayal of New York as the mugging capital of America appeared in Wallace’s speeches before Hank Jr. set it to song in “A Country Boy”—and his tactical juxtaposing of out-of-touch cosmopolitan elites with the aggrieved common folk could have been lifted directly from a country songwriter’s playbook. When the *National Review* issued its oft-quoted criticism of the Alabama governor’s “country and western Marxism,” it was this political style—as much as the substantive issues they disagreed on, like Wallace’s support for social security, collective bargaining, and other forms of “egregious welfare-statism”—that the magazine was objecting to. Wallace’s people, “the bus driver, the truck driver, the beautician, the fireman, the policeman, and the steelworker” (a litany he liked to trot out on the campaign trail), may have feared or resented competition over status and resources with black Americans, but they were New Dealers on economic matters—“country and western Marxists,” if you will. More to the point, they most certainly did not include among their ranks the Yale Club-dining *National Review*

subscriber. From that citadel of elite conservatism, Wallace was still just a little too hillbilly—too comfortable marching, as the *Review* put it, “to the Nashville station.”

Country and western Marxism was not nearly so new a phenomenon as the *Review* may have thought it was when coining the phrase. Fiddlin’ John Carson laid down an ode to the Georgia Populist Tom Watson (an accomplished fiddler himself) in 1923—“Tom Watson Special”—a year after Watson’s death and a decade and a half after Watson’s populism had taken on a vicious anti-Catholic and white supremacist cast. Apparently unperturbed by these developments, Carson sings proudly, “Got a Watson dog and a Watson cat. / I’m a Tom Watson man from my shoes to my hat.” Tom T. Hall, one of the more prolific and successful country songwriters in the post-war period, once said about country music that it “has always reflected the mood of working people, so it went the way they went.” Hall leaves out the racial qualifier, and is too quick to treat “the music” as an organic and depersonalized medium rather than as a realm of strategic cultural production, but otherwise I think he is more or less right. The experience of dispossession and the politics of resentment, as Tom Watson well knew, have always kept close company in the lives of the American white working class; and if country music lays some genuine claim to being the music for (if not necessarily always of) this class, it is because to a considerable degree it has, from its inception, been able to evoke the special poignancy of that experience.

Trying to explain why this native populism has bent right more often than left—toward the later Watson, George Wallace, and, more recently, as Hank Jr. shows, the Tea Party—is one of the cottage industries of American labor and working-class history. I am not even going to begin to try to answer that question here, recognizing however belatedly, as the great country songwriters did long ago, that there is real merit to trying to keep what you have to say to under three minutes. But it does seem to me that if we are going to reckon with Hank Williams as an “icon” of American history, we must also reckon with his relationship to the history of the right-wing populism that is one of major through-lines of the American musical genre and

social milieu he defined and inhabited. Not doing so overlooks one of the more lasting effects of the gravitational pull Williams has exerted on the generations of country musicians who followed.

For it was Hank Williams—the Hank Williams of “Lost Highway”—who gave country music its defining tragic cast, and the name of that tragedy was nostalgia. There is a straight path from Williams mourning the day he “started rollin’ down that lost highway” to Bobby Bare moaning “I wanna go home,” and it is not altogether different from the one that leads to Wallace’s most famous restorationist mantra, “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” The line between the benign fantasies of the simple rural life of the Old South, and the economic apartheid and herrenvolk democracy upon which all that rested, was a blurry one. More to the point, those fantasies signaled the end of early country’s critical modernism, the economic enclosure of hillbilly music by the productive logics of midcentury consumerism, and the final acquiescence of country and its listeners to the cultural status quo of the newly dominant middle classes.

Folklorists and musicologists in the 1960s and 1970s had a questionable tendency to liken country music to the blues—Marc Landy of the Appalachian Oral History Project once called it “paleface blues”—but whatever truth there may have been to the comparison, you never heard Son House reminisce fondly about his days as a sharecropper on the Mississippi Delta. As the Martinican writer and anticolonial intellectual Édouard Glissant once wrote about the revitalizing musical effects of the Great Migration, “black music... progressively records the history of the community, its confrontation with reality, the gaps into which it inserts itself, the walls which it too often comes up against.” In other words, when the blues hit the highway—to St. Louis, Chicago, Harlem, Motown, Greenwich Village, London, Compton, Bedford-Stuyvesant—it rarely looked back, even as the Delta remained a prolific place of origin for generations of bluesmen and women to come. Too often, especially after record producers discovered the crossover appeal of bathetic nostalgia, country music just wanted to go home.

The tragedy of "Lost Highway" is that it mistakes symptoms for causes. An itinerant lifestyle and reckless substance abuse did not cause Williams's depression but was a symptom of it; the highway did not bring about the demise of rural life but was another symptom of the galloping progress of capitalist modernity. There is good in that version of modernity, as Jimmie Rodgers recognized, and there is bad, as Dorsey Dixon did—but either way, as no less a critic of capitalist modernity than Marx himself understood, it defines the boundaries of our world and can be a rich source of material for critique, experience, and political engagement. Beginning with "Lost Highway," postwar country music put its head in the metaphoric sand; from then on, the highways only go in one direction.

By my reading of Susan Stewart's definition of the concept, it isn't Odysseus but rather Oedipus who in some way invents the tragedy of nostalgia. It is his overriding if only subconscious desire for an object he can never attain—his father's crown, his mother's bed—that leads Oedipus to take the wrong turn at the crossroads where he encounters his father Laius; had he taken a different road than the one that leads him back to a past he cannot possess without destroying himself, who knows what would have happened to him? Highways lead forward and backward—and, for that matter, outward and inward, side-to-side and back-and-forth. Hank Williams and his successors got lost because they took the highway toward an unobtainable past of rural simplicity which was too often code for all kinds of reactionary politics. The postwar turn in country music is tragic because it is nostalgic, and its nostalgia is conservative in its attachment to the very premodern forms—orthodox religiosity, the patriarchal family, cultural isolationism, feudalistic norms of deference at the workplace—that the highway promised to obliterate when it first came on the scene. It did not have to be that way—and to be sure, it would be to mistake symptoms and causes to say that because country music moves right during these years, so does the country. But those highways do run in the same direction.

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