

Religion, Freedom, and Prosperity in Oklahoma Country Music

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Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys performing on an ABC radio broadcast, 1946. Courtesy Johnny CuvIELLO.



Some years ago, I received a call for papers from the organizers of a conference on “Religion, Freedom and Prosperity in Oklahoma,” organized by East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma. At that time, I did not know very much about Oklahoma. I had heard of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Dust Bowl, the Sooners, and the Cowboys, as well as the famous Broadway musical, but the economics and politics of the Sooner State were as foreign to me as California was to the first “Okie” migrants during the Great Depression.

However, as I began to consider the state’s musical history, I quickly realized how many well-known musicians either came from or were closely associated with Oklahoma. For example, Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys drifted north from Forth Worth to Tulsa in the early 1930s, after a falling out with influential radio host and future Texas Governor W. Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel. Gene Autry, also from the Lone Star State, achieved national fame in Hollywood as “Oklahoma’s Singing Cowboy.” Merle Haggard, the proud “Okie from Muskogee,” was born in California not long after his parents fled Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl years. Along with these “transplants,” there are many modern-day country musicians who hail from Oklahoma, including Garth Brooks, Reba McEntire, and Vince Gill.

As my research expanded beyond my personal music collection, the list of popular country musicians with significant connections to Oklahoma kept growing. If one includes those who sang about Oklahoma or spent a substantial amount of time there, the list becomes rather long.

Garth Brooks	The Tractors
Reba McEntire	Merle Travis
Vince Gill	Bryan White
Gene Autry	Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys
Junior Brown	Jimmy Revard and His Oklahoma Playboys
Roy Clark	Otto Gray’s Oklahoma Cowboys
Tommy Collins	Hoyt Axton
Joe Diffie	Spade Cooley
Stoney Edwards	Smokey Wood and His Chips
Wade Hayes	The Modern Mountaineers
Toby Keith	Brooks and Dunn
Roger Miller	Billy Joe Shaver
Hank Thompson	Merle Haggard

Table 1. Some Country Singers Associated with Oklahoma

“Okie from Muskogee”	“You are My Sunshine”
“Take Me Back to Tulsa”	“Mama Tried”
“South of the Border”	“San Antonio Rose”
“Mexicali Rose”	“Faded Love”
“Back in the Saddle Again”	“Friends in Low Places”
“Here Comes Santa Claus”	“The Dance”
“Peter Cottontail”	“Much Too Young (to Feel This Damn Old)”
“Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer”	“King of the Road”
“The Tennessee Waltz”	“Joy to the World”
“Frosty the Snowman”	“Oklahoma Wind”
“Blueberry Hill”	

Table 2. Some Songs Associated with Oklahoma

In fact, Oklahoma places fourth among the 50 states in the number of musicians who have appeared on *Billboard* magazine’s country charts.²

Oklahoma also has had a significant influence on a number of different artists and musical genres beyond country. These include barbershop quartets (the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barbershop Quarter Singing in America, SPEBSQSA, was founded in Tulsa in 1938), folk singer Tom Paxton, rockabilly pioneer Wanda Jackson, jazz trumpeter Chet Baker, legendary American folk songwriter Woody Guthrie, and the “Bakersfield Sound,” which was originated in California during the 1960s by Okie transplant Merle Haggard and others (including Texas-born Buck Owens).

So, I thought I could do something with this; I attended the conference in Ada with great enthusiasm. Now I can honestly say that “I’ve never been to heaven, but I’ve been to Oklahoma.”³ Although a few years passed before I got around to writing a paper, due to my primary responsibilities as a teacher and scholar in political economy, I remained eager to explore how and why Oklahoma produced so many musicians, to what extent they were influenced by their time in the state, and how many of them had performed or recorded songs about Oklahoma.⁴

Traditional country music (as opposed to more pop or rock-influenced country) certainly is rich with the themes of religion, freedom, and prosperity. One need only look at the allegedly “perfect country and western song,” Steve Goodman’s parody “You Never Even Called Me by My Name,” with its pinnacle verse:

Well, I was drunk the day my mom got out of prison
And I went to pick her up in the rain
But before I could get to the station in my pickup truck
She got run over by a damned old train.⁵

All the elements are there—religion, if backhandedly; the freedom of trains and pickup trucks; the lack of freedom of jail; and the lack of prosperity that contributes to drunkenness. (Or, is it the drunkenness that contributes to lack of prosperity?) Religion, freedom, and prosperity are ubiquitous themes in Oklahoma country music, making this study a useful one rather than merely a fun stretch of the imagination. The three are intertwined in the state’s music, as they are in real life.

Many Oklahomans have a rich southern background of Protestantism; the state’s constitutional convention begins with delegates singing the hymn “Nearer, My God, to Thee.” Religious expression in country music has changed over the years. As Richard Peterson and Melton A. McLaurin observe, “In the early days of commercial country music the good and the bad side of [life] were expressed in separate sacred and secular musical traditions. . . . It was not until the coming of honky-tonk songs in the late 1930s . . . that [both] became joined in a single song.”⁶ And the relationship was not always friendly. “Early commercial country music was shot through with fundamentalist Protestant imagery, even though ministers condemned it as part of Satan’s music—music which drove people to dance, drink, and forget themselves.”⁷ Perhaps as a gesture of goodwill to such preachers, but also as a reflection of the widespread religious sentiment among many fans, “[c]ountry bands regularly played gospel hymns, and it became a common practice to end a show with one or more rousing gospel songs to cast a glow of sanctity on what had been an evening of secular music.”⁸

If Oklahomans are a religious people, they also tend to be the free, individualist descendants of frontiersmen. We thus see, in Oklahoma’s country music, as in the state itself, a very Protestant respect for God and the Bible, mixed with a profound suspicion of authority and institutions.⁹ Themes of religion are also evident in the strong belief placed in the afterlife. In country

music, we see “a fatalistic state in which people bemoan their fate, yet accept it.” When economic hardship is mentioned in country music, it is often “paired with the idea of having been saved into the church of God, [where] poverty [is] seen as just a temporary trial for the faithful.”¹⁰

Likewise, many Sooners share a deep-seated belief in personal independence, going back to the early days of homesteading, in which daily hardships engendered “a desire for freedom, and a fear of control.”¹¹ Freedom is another recurring theme throughout Oklahoma’s country music, and it can take several forms. We see links between freedom and religion, in the wariness about external constraints, be they religious or secular (“both big government and big religion often are portrayed negatively in country music lyrics”).¹² Another common theme appears in the links between freedom and prosperity, such as a desire for freedom from want, or the ironically juxtaposed desire for freedom from work. Fortunately, there is solace to be found in the arms of “honky-tonk angels,” beer, or the freedom of the open road. All of these elements are clearly on display in Oklahoma country superstar Garth Brooks’s song about a lonely rodeo cowboy who laments that “a worn-out tape of Chris LeDoux / Lonely women and bad booze / Seem to be the only friends I’ve left at all.”¹³

Finally, many Oklahoma country songs mention prosperity—or a lack thereof—as being intertwined with themes of religion and freedom. The music of Oklahoma, with its pioneer roots, is shot through with “the great themes of American idealism, hard work and individualism.”¹⁴ If an Oklahoman wants prosperity, he will work for it, not seek it from anybody else.

However, when the enthusiastic and idealistic Oklahomans fall, they fall hard. We then see a “resentment at the society that had allowed them to believe and to try to practice [the] inflated

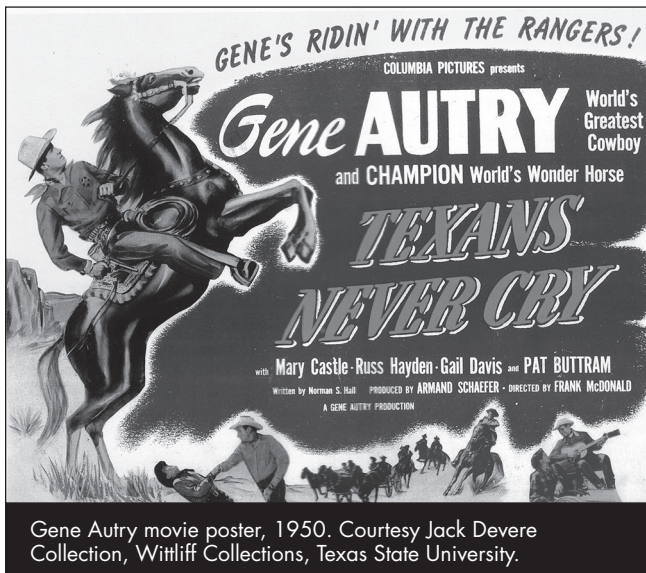
myths” of prosperity through freedom and hard work that surrounded early statehood.¹⁵ Enter country music, which “not only depicts the promise-and-denial tragedy, [but] also provides several means of rationalizing failure short of questioning the American dream itself.”¹⁶ In his essay on country music and populist ideology, Jock Mackay explains that country musicians then proceed to “(1) verbalize the problems in hopes of thus transcending them; (2) identify a malevolent force such as big business or big government; (3) underline a fatalism which declares ‘what will be, will be’; (4) promote escapist quests toward the freedom of a frontier or ‘the road’; (5) and boast a perseverance and pride in getting by.”¹⁷

This article offers a snapshot of religion, freedom, and prosperity as reflected in Oklahoma country music spanning the past 100 years or so, from Bob Wills to Garth Brooks. This study is divided into four periods—early commercialization of country music until World War II; World War II to 1959; 1959 to the 1980s; and the 1980s to the present. This will help illustrate the ways in which the evolution of Oklahoma country music parallels the development of the state’s history throughout this same time period.¹⁸

The Early Years Through World War II

Oklahoma and country music came of age at the same time, at the dawn of the twentieth century. This was the era of statehood optimism, oil booms, and early country music recordings. The general public attitude was positive and forward-looking, at times even innocent. Gene Autry, America’s first nationally famous singing cowboy, is a fitting ambassador for an era “when things were a little easier and a little less complicated.”¹⁹ This innocence is reflected in Autry’s *Cowboy Code*, which seems perhaps hopelessly romantic today.²⁰

1. The Cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage.
2. He must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him.
3. He must always tell the truth.
4. He must be gentle with children, the elderly, and animals.
5. He must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas.
6. He must help people in distress.
7. He must be a good worker.
8. He must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action, and personal habits.
9. He must respect women, parents, and his nation’s laws.
10. The Cowboy is a patriot.



Gene Autry movie poster, 1950. Courtesy Jack Devere Collection, Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

Although born in Texas, Autry's family moved to Oklahoma when he was in his teens. His personal story parallels the general optimism of pioneers forming their state. Convinced by Sooner humorist Will Rogers that he should try singing professionally, Autry made his way to New York and looked up fellow Oklahomans Johnny and Frankie Marvin, who were in the music business.²¹ According to Douglas Green, "If he had nothing else, Autry did have innocent confidence. He walked up to the Marvins and introduced himself with a big smile, saying that he was Gene Autry, a fellow Oklahoman, and that he, too, wanted to make records."²²

Gene Autry's music, while optimistic, expresses themes of hardship, albeit in a quiet, confident manner:

There's a gold mine in the sky, far away
We will find it, you and I, some sweet day
When we strike that claim
And we'll sit up there and watch the world roll by
When we find that gold mine in the sky.²³

42 A quiet sense of freedom is also present in the romanticized lyrics of his popular cowboy-themed song, "Back in the Saddle Again":

Back in the saddle again
Out where a friend is a friend
Where you sleep out every night
And the only law is right
I'm back in the saddle again.²⁴

Autry sings of prosperity, but in a humble, simple manner. He perhaps foresaw the hectic nature of the industrial age, singing of the joys of honest work followed by rest:

When evening chores are over
And all I've got to do is lay around
I saddle up my pony and ride down the trail
To watch the desert sun go down.²⁵

A slightly less innocent voice comes from Bob Wills, another Texas transplant and the leader of the legendary Western swing band Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys. Western swing is also infused with the energetic optimism of early statehood. Although Wills rose to regional fame working in collaboration with businessman, radio personality, and future politician Wilbert Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel, the two parted ways in 1933.²⁶ Frustrated with O'Daniel's efforts to restrict his ability to

perform throughout Texas, Wills and his band relocated to the relative freedom of Oklahoma. In 1934, the Texas Playboys made Tulsa their home and could be heard on the airwaves of local station KVOO.²⁷ It is perhaps the ensuing prosperity that led the Texas Playboys to sing of "Roly Poly," a boy who enjoys well-deserved food after his work is done:

Roly Poly, scrambled eggs for breakfast, bread 'n' jelly
twenty times a day
Roly Poly eats a hardy dinner, it takes lots of strength to
run and play
Pulls up weeds and does the chores
And he runs both ways to all the stores
He works up an appetite that way
Roly Poly, daddy's little fatty, bet he's gonna be a man
someday.²⁸

According to H. Wayne Morgan and Anne Hodges Morgan, "The main theme of freedom in Western swing is freedom from care, a reflection of the times. As the temporary prosperity and unity of the [World War I era] receded, Oklahoma entered a period of turbulence that rivaled that of territorial days. Oklahomans joined the rest of the country in voting for 'normalcy' in 1920, out of weariness with moralistic reform [and] governmental wartime regimentation."²⁹ It was time to party and "dance all night, dance a little longer."³⁰ The honky-tonks were in full swing. "The girls around Big Creek . . . jump on a man like a dog on a bone."³¹ In another popular dance song, the Texas Playboys sing, "Oklahoma Gals, ain't ya comin' out tonight / Comin' out tonight, comin' out tonight? / Oklahoma gals, ain't ya comin' out tonight / And dance by the light of the moon?" The gals are "on your left and now your right / Treat 'em all alike / If it takes all night / We won't go home till broad daylight."³²

Because it was a lively dance-oriented music intended to help working men and women temporarily forget the hardships of the Great Depression, the exuberant mood of Western swing sometimes could border on silliness:

Sitting in the window, singing to my love
Slop bucket fell from the window up above
Mule and the grasshopper eatin' ice cream
Mule got sick so they laid him on the green
Stay all night, stay a little longer
Dance all night, dance a little longer.³³

However, as in the case of Gene Autry, there are quiet references to poverty and hard work—part of what drove

Western swing fans to seek out light-hearted entertainment in the first place. In a humorous but starkly revealing commentary on work, race relations, and economic inequality, the Texas Playboys sing:

Little bee sucks the blossom
The big bee gets the honey
Darky picks the cotton
White man gets the money.³⁴

The jury is still out on the implications of those lyrics. “Clearly there is exploitation there, but how was it understood by the millions that danced and sang along with the Bob Wills western swing band of the 1940s?” Since race is not a common theme in country music, were these lyrics “understood as racial exploitation equating the white man with the capitalist,

World War II to 1959

The post-World War II years—1945 through 1959—brought a number of changes to American society. These were the years of the baby boom, post-war economic prosperity, and the growth of industrialization and urbanization, all of which helped reshape Oklahoma society in many ways. The Dust Bowl and Depression years were finally over, but many Oklahomans were coming to realize for the first time that quite a few of their fellow Sooners “had never shared in the State’s fabled prosperity.”³⁸

The basic values of work, the frontier spirit of freedom, and the opportunity to achieve one’s own prosperity continued. As one Okie migrant put it, “We ain’t no paupers. We don’t want no relief. But what we do want is a chance to make an honest living like what we was raised.”³⁹ However, a new mentality was emerging. Oklahomans “sensed the social changes that inevitably accompanied such new kinds of economic growth. Learning to live in a complex, interdependent society was not

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and, if so, is such race-as-class exploitation approved?” Or, “Alternatively, since many whites themselves picked cotton by hand in the 1940s, do listeners feel common cause with blacks against the exploiting owner?”³⁵ The resolution—universality of the working experience—may be found in a later change of lyrics, to the less controversial “Little man raises cotton / The beer joints get the money.” These lyrics are also more amusing if one considers that Oklahoma was a dry state at the time—at least in legal if not always practical terms.

During the 1930s, country music in Oklahoma evolved in the shadow of the Great Depression, although, surprisingly, most of the state’s country music songs of this period do not address themes related to the difficulties of surviving the catastrophic Dust Bowl. (Eventually, Woody Guthrie’s folk music single-handedly made up for that lacuna). One commentator speculates that country musicians were “discovering that a reasonably good living could be made in the midst of a nationwide Depression.”³⁶ So in certain ways, life was not as bad for them as it often was for their fans. “We always wear a great big smile and never do look sour / Travel all over the country / Playin’ by the hour,”³⁷ sang the happy Texas Playboys.

easy. Booster-ism and individual achievement characterized the first four decades of statehood. Oklahoma’s history was a series of confrontations that produced change.”⁴⁰

However, now the playing field was different. By the 1950s, Oklahoma was rapidly becoming more urbanized and industrialized. These profound changes and this tension between the old and the new manifested itself musically, as well. Despite the earlier success of Western swing, “traditional country music was forced underground in the mid-1950s as rebellious youth made their ambiguous statement through rock and roll.”⁴¹

Merle Travis, who was born in Kentucky but lived out the final years of his life in Oklahoma, often addressed social issues in his songs. In the tune “That’s All,” he makes what may seem to be self-contradictory comments about religious beliefs and practices. On the one hand, he expresses doubt regarding the concept of evolution. “Now man comes from monkeys / That’s what some people say / But you know that Good Book / It don’t tell it that way / If you believe that monkey tale like some people do / I’d rather be a monkey, brother, than you.” On the other hand, he also expresses skepticism about organized religion. “Some people go to school tryin’ to learn how to preach / If you

can't preach without going to school / You ain't no preacher / You's an educated fool."⁴² This attitude may well represent the feelings of many Oklahoma country music fans at the time—a strong belief in the Scriptures but perhaps a lesser degree of trust in those who interpret the Bible for their congregations.

In perhaps his best-known song, "Sixteen Tons," Merle Travis touches on several social issues, including religion, poverty, and mistreatment of working Americans. Here he contrasts the earthly burden of hard work for low wages with the spiritual freedom and rich rewards of eternal salvation:

You load sixteen tons, and what do you get?
Another day older, and deeper in debt
Saint Peter don't you call me, 'cause I can't go
I owe my soul to the company store.⁴³

This idea of work robbing a man of his freedom and his very soul appears in another Travis commentary on the difficulties faced by working-class Americans, especially the coal miners he witnessed first-hand during his youth. "There's many a man I've known in my day / Who lived just to labor his whole life away." Despite the dangers of the mine, a miner's life is extremely appealing. "Like a fiend with his dope / And a drunkard his wine / A man will have lust / For the lure of the mine."⁴⁴ If you don't work, you don't eat, but if you do work, you can't do much else, and you may lose your soul in the process.

Texas honky-tonk singer Hank Thompson is another popular musician from the post-World War II era who often addressed issues of religion, sexuality, and morality. In one of his biggest hits, "The Wild Side of Life," he laments the fact that his love interest has been lured to "where the wine and liquor flows / Where you wait to be anybody's baby / And forget the truest love you'll ever know." Thompson also seemingly draws a direct connection between the heavenly realm and earthly vice when he claims, "I didn't know God made honky-tonk angels."⁴⁵ Similarly, Roger Miller, born in Texas but raised in Oklahoma, recalls in the song "Chug-a-Lug" his "first taste of sin," complete with a "jukebox and a sawdust floor," topped off with "a big old sip" of moonshine.⁴⁶

In light of the powerful social changes re-shaping the nation in the post-World War II years, it is no wonder that this era helped produce a nostalgia for a more rustic, "simple" past. Hank Thompson wistfully sings an old Woody Guthrie tune about "those Oklahoma Hills where I was born." The hills share their bounty ("the black oil rolls and flows and the snow-white cotton grows"), but they are also an idyllic place "where the oak and blackjack trees kiss the playful prairie breeze." Similarly, Roger Miller's smash hit "King of the Road" offers a romanticized tale

of a hobo who has no money but enjoys freedom in abundance. In a way, Miller's wandering hobo is reminiscent of Gene Autry's free-roaming cowboys from decades earlier:

Two hours of pushin' broom
Buys an eight by twelve four-bit room
I'm a man of means by no means
King of the road.⁴⁷

The road, like the range, offers a free and friendly atmosphere. "I know every engineer on every train / And all of the children and all of their names." And, of course, the Sooner mistrust of big, anonymous entities is still there:

Old worn-out suit and shoes
Don't pay no union dues
I smoke old stogies I have found
Short but not too big around.

If these singers romanticized the difficulties of the past, they did not gloss over the hardships of the present. "I've been drinkin' all day long / Takin' in the town / I've done spent my whole paycheck / Just-a honky-tonkin' round," sings a dejected Hank Thompson. "I don't have enough to pay my rent / I ain't gonna worry, though / 'Cause I've got time for one more round / And a six-pack to go."⁴⁸ However, escaping one's responsibilities through drinking alcohol or hopping freight trains was not an option for everyone. Roger Miller's "Queen of the House" serves as a counterpoint to "King of the Road" by featuring a wife who complains that her husband "goes out with the boys and gets tight" while she is left at home with "four kids from one to four / Pretty soon there'll be one more . . . Four floors to wax and scrub / And there's a ring around the tub." She is left to dream that she'll "get a maid someday" and "wish that [she]'d picked a millionaire."⁴⁹

1959 to the 1980s

1959 marks an important year for Oklahoma—the end of prohibition in the state (a generation after the Twenty-First Amendment to the US Constitution). Although alcohol had been mentioned in Oklahoma country music many times before, it now seemed more prevalent. Merle Haggard, the California-born son of Okie Dust Bowl migrants, frequently sang about his struggles with alcohol. Apparently, he concluded that it was futile to resist the temptation of drinking, since "the reasons to quit don't outnumber all the reasons why."⁵⁰ The perennial Oklahoma theme of freedom surfaces again, as Haggard sings

of losing control. “I stood by and watched the bottle take control of me / The turn I made was not the one I planned / And I watched my social standing slip away from me / While I watched the bottle slowly take command.”⁵¹ It was a hope deferred that led to drinking in the first place:

Once I lived a life of wine and roses
I drank a lot back then for one concern
Success for me lay just around the corner
I thought my social friends would help me
make the turn.

But now I’m paying for the days of wine and roses
A victim of the drunken life I chose
Now all my social friends look down their noses
‘Cause I kept the wine and threw away the rose.⁵²

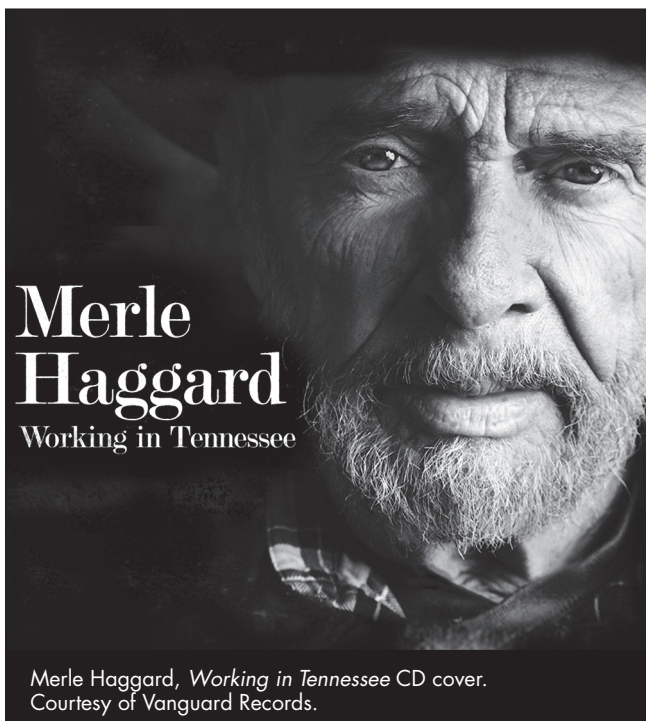
The end of prohibition in 1959 marks a year of change for Oklahoma in other ways, as well. Prohibition had reflected both conflict and a compromise of sorts between religion and freedom.⁵³ Oklahoma humorist Will Rogers once remarked that during the first five decades of statehood, “Okies would stagger to the polls and vote dry.”⁵⁴ All joking aside, “[T]he passing of Prohibition marked an end to a major phase of the state’s history. Socialism, the prominence of the Klan, and now Prohibition, passed into history. The old tensions and

aspirations that they represented yielded to new problems and responses.”⁵⁵ Oklahoma started to fully experience the upheavals of the decade after World War II, and the discomfort of “a large group of people who have been forced to make an overly hasty adjustment to a hostile urban environment.”⁵⁶

The era between 1959 and the mid-1980s was a period of both personal and professional distress for some of these musicians. Oklahoma-born Western swing bandleader Spade Cooley struggled to adapt to the changing times. Despite his fame and financial success, his alcoholism and misogyny helped lead to his tragic downfall:

Cooley’s investments in real estate meant that he was far from being a pauper when he decided to retire; however, the spare time just meant he drank more and had more time to develop an insane jealousy over his wife. Suspecting (wrongly as it turned out) that she was having an affair with Roy Rogers, he started abusing her, and in 1961 filed for divorce. Returning home one day considerably the worse for drink, he proceeded to kill his wife in front of their horrified 14-year-old daughter. Following a further heart attack, he stood trial and was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. [He was allowed out in 1969 to perform a concert, but] after receiving a standing ovation for his performance, he collapsed and died backstage. A man who enjoyed a halcyon career in the mid-forties, Spade Cooley never adapted to the changing times and ultimately his life degenerated into darkest tragedy.⁵⁷

Merle Haggard’s music certainly reflected the tumultuous social changes taking place throughout the 1960s and 1970s, along with the difficulties he and others faced adjusting to changing gender roles, the rise of the youth counter-culture, and the struggles of working-class Americans to make a living in an increasingly automated and globalized economy. Haggard sang of longing for the days “when a man could still work and still would” and “a girl could still cook and still would.”⁵⁸ In another song (written by Dolly Parton about her impoverished Tennessee childhood), Haggard sings, “Anything at all was more than we had / In the good old days when times were bad.”⁵⁹ Such lyrics are almost reactionary and are clearly rooted in a nostalgic longing for a supposedly simpler past, prior to the 1960s anti-Vietnam War movement and the 1970s Watergate scandal. Haggard’s 1969 hit “Okie from Muskogee” became an anthem of sorts for social conservatives whose collective desire was to live in a small-town environment where they “still wave Old Glory down at the court house / And white lightning’s still



Merle Haggard, *Working in Tennessee* CD cover.
Courtesy of Vanguard Records.

the biggest thrill of all.”⁶⁰ However, Haggard’s idyllic vision of a peaceful and orderly existence did not necessarily extend beyond one’s local community. In a rather sarcastic critique of the federal government and its attempts to provide a system of social welfare for the public at large, he also sang about an imaginary prosperous future when “We’ll all be drinkin’ that free Bubble-Up / And eatin’ that rainbow stew”:

When a President goes through the White House doors
And does what he says he’ll do
We’ll all be drinkin’ that free Bubble Up
And eatin’ that rainbow stew.⁶¹

After all, in the words of Billy Joe Shaver’s “Oklahoma Wind,” “the government ain’t something you can trust.” When presented with injustice, “Washington just turn[s] the other way.”⁶²

True to their pioneer roots, Oklahomans are not expecting a hand-out, but they do dream of better times. In a throwback to Gene Autry, Merle Haggard sings of the same “Goldmine in the Sky,” which has evolved into a more appropriately modern “mighty Super Service in the sky / Where a retired worker can

“Greenback Dollar,” Axton also expresses his skepticism about attaining prosperity through simple hard work:

And I don’t give a damn about a greenback dollar
Spend it fast as I can
For a wailin’ song, and a good guitar
The only things that I understand.⁶⁶

As with so many of his songs, Merle Haggard once again seems to equate personal freedom with being untethered to either a typical “day job” or government assistance in his 1981 hit “Big City”:

Turn me loose, set me free somewhere in the middle of
Montana
Gimme all I got comin’ to me
And keep your retirement and your so-called Social
Security
Big City, turn me loose and set me free.⁶⁷

Following the tumultuous changes of the 1950s-1960s Civil Rights era, Oklahoma entered another transitional period.

find happiness a-pumpin’ gas forever / For the angels in the sweet by and by.”⁶³

This theme of distrust in the government along with a desire to be self-reliant is further expressed in Haggard’s “Workin’ Man Blues,” where he proudly proclaims:

I ain’t never been on welfare
And that’s one place I won’t be
‘Cause I’ll be working
Long as my two hands are fit to use
I’ll drink my beer in a tavern
And sing a little bit of these working man blues.⁶⁴

Unfortunately, many Oklahomans seemed to fit the scenario described earlier by Merle Travis in his songs about coal miners—namely that even hard work does not guarantee prosperity. As singer Hoyt Axton asked, “Work your fingers to the bone, what do you get? / Bony fingers, bony fingers.”⁶⁵ In his first hit song,

A lack of faith in modernity surfaces in Merle Haggard’s complaint about the big business that “after twenty years” can anonymously and heartlessly “put [an employee] on the side.”⁶⁸ However, if Haggard doubted the virtues of modernity, faith in traditional Oklahoma values prevails. He articulates this rather plainly in “Okie from Muskogee,” where “we like livin’ right and bein’ free.”⁶⁹

Resistance to being “tied down” by a demoralizing, urban-industrial job was a common theme in Haggard’s lyrics, and it clearly resonated with many working-class Oklahomans. Likewise, Billy Joe Shaver sings, “Movin’s in my soul, I guess a gypsy got a hold of somebody in my family long ago . . . Life made dice out of my bones and it won’t leave me alone / ‘Til it warms me up and takes another roll.” The call of freedom is a strong one, and “that restless wind is calling me again / Her warmin’ hand is tuggin’ at my soul.”⁷⁰ At the same time, the misuse of freedom can lead to trouble. In one of his earliest songs, “Mama Tried,” Haggard accepts personal responsibility for his mistakes:

I turned twenty-one in prison, doing life without parole
 No one could steer me right but Mama tried, Mama tried
 Mama tried to raise me better, but her pleading I denied
 That leaves only me to blame, 'cause Mama tried.⁷¹

Although religion has long played an important role in the belief systems of many Oklahomans, Haggard points out how sin often prevails despite the best of intentions when he sings, "In spite of all my Sunday learning / Toward the bad I kept on turning."⁷² The temptation is just too strong. "I raised a lot of Cain back in my younger days / While Mama used to pray my crops would fail."⁷³

By contrast, prayer could also be an effective source of comfort, as in the poignant song Haggard sings about a mother who reads about the death of her son in battle. Instead of blaming God, she "knelt down by her bedside / And she prayed Lord above hear my plea / Please protect all the boys who are fighting tonight / And dear God keep America free."⁷⁴ Religion can also serve as an opportunity to give thanks for the simple pleasures of life:

Let me sing a song for Jesus everyday
 For he's the one who guides me every step of the way
 He's my soul's inspiration and the one who guides my pen
 So let the last song be for him.⁷⁵

Hoyt Axton warns listeners that one can enjoy a life rich in material wealth, but that offers little comfort or security in the afterlife:

I know a man, rich as a king
 Still he just won't give his neighbors a thing
 He'll get up to heaven someday I bet
 He'll get up to heaven and here's what he'll get
 A rusty old halo, skinny white cloud, second hand wings
 full of patches
 A rusty old halo, skinny white cloud, a robe that's so
 woolly it scratches.⁷⁶

Mid-1980s to the present

Following the tumultuous changes of the 1950s-1960s Civil Rights era, Oklahoma entered another transitional period. "By the early 1970s the state population began to grow slowly. For the first time since the end of the oil boom, people from other parts of the country came in some numbers, and young Sooners elected to stay."⁷⁷ Some attributed the state's nascent economic rebound in no small part to a long-heralded "pioneer work ethic."

As the owner of one high-tech firm remarked, "[T]hese folks don't want welfare. All they want is the chance to do a job."⁷⁸ By the mid-1980s, as the nation emerged from the global energy crisis, Oklahoma's economy experienced even stronger growth.

If things got better for Oklahoma as a whole, though, they did not improve for everybody. Some musicians complained of being among "those who wait forever for ships that don't come in"⁷⁹ or feeling as if "everything we got is fallin' apart."⁸⁰ Despite the state's general rise in prosperity, many continued to suffer and, as they had done for generations, many blamed the government:

I've had enough of bills and taxes
 I can't get ahead no matter what I do
 I've had enough of politicians
 You can't believe a word they say.⁸¹

Sometimes this anger found expression through more humorous means:

Why don't we take all the city-slicker bankers
 And put 'em on John Deere tractors in the summer sun
 And sit back and watch 'em sweat
 You can bet all the wheat in Oklahoma
 They'll get a different attitude when the plowing's done.⁸²



Reba McEntire, *For My Broken Heart* CD cover.
 Courtesy of MCA Records.

For others, the widespread skepticism toward Washington resurfaces. “Why don’t we take all the IRS boys / And watch ‘em try to make a living from the family store.”⁸³ This rural/urban, modern/traditional, affluent/poor conflict is apparent in another contemporary expression of dissatisfaction with city life and a lack of trust in the government. “I’m goin’ back to the country / ‘Cause I can’t pay my rent / I may not be completely broke / But brother I’m badly bent . . . I am just a country boy / Tryin’ to make some sense / But I’d like to ask the Congress / I’d like to ask the President / Can you tell me where all the money went? / We might not be broke / But we’re badly bent.”⁸⁴

The traditional element of freedom (and the corresponding tension with prosperity) is also still present in contemporary Oklahoma country music. In some cases, “freedom” is represented by one’s choice in mode of transportation. “You can set my truck on fire and roll it down a hill / And I still wouldn’t trade it for a Coupe De Ville.”⁸⁵ In a somewhat different vein, Oklahoma superstar Reba McEntire sings, “I’d like to fly to Hawaii / But honey if I had to choose / I’d rather ride around with you.”⁸⁶

The juxtaposition of prosperity and freedom, or in this case, the inherent conflict between work and fun, is expressed by Wade Hayes in his song about a hangover:

Monday morning I wake up with a hammer in my hand
The boss-man yelling something at me that I don’t understand
I don’t know how I got to work, but I sure know I’m there
I’m old enough to know better, but I’m still too young to care.⁸⁷

In his song “You Ain’t Much Fun (Since I Quit Drinkin’),” Oklahoma-born Toby Keith laments, “So much work is hard for your health / I could’ve died drinkin’ / Now I’m killing myself.”⁸⁸ Again, the singer takes responsibility for his actions. He drank too much and must now face work with a headache. In a nod to Merle Haggard, Keith admits that “mama raised me right / That just leaves me to blame.”⁸⁹ This acceptance of the consequences of one’s action is not always the case when greater forces come into play. “Longneck bottle, let go of my hand,” begs Tulsa native Garth Brooks. “I oughta waltz right out of them swingin’ doors / But that’s a step I just can’t learn.”⁹⁰ Similarly, “I’m a victim of life’s circumstances,” laments Vince Gill, yet another son of Oklahoma. “Well I was raised around bar rooms and Friday night dances / Singing them old country songs / And half the time endin’ up some place I didn’t belong.”⁹¹

The loss of control over one’s own life is a theme that can also be heard in the lament of a housewife who has followed the rules all her life, losing her freedom in the process. “Is there life out there?” Reba McEntire asks:

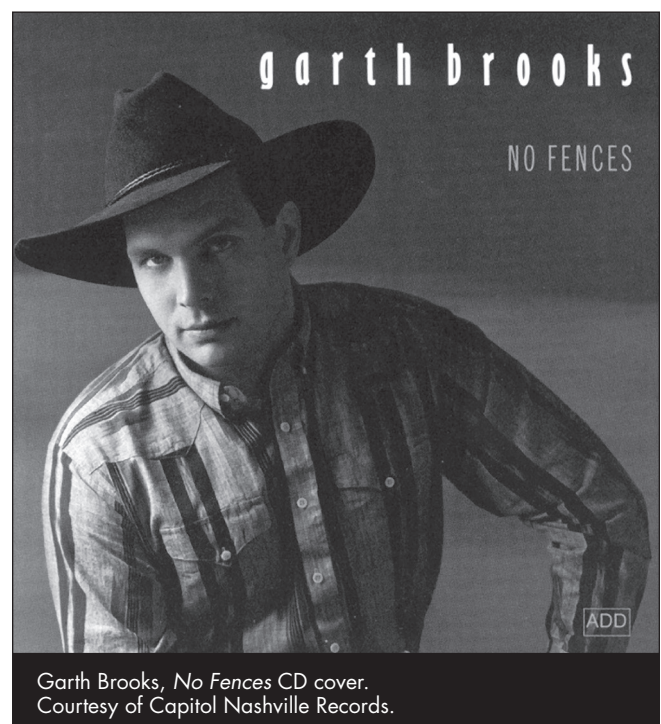
So much she hasn’t done
Is there life beyond her family and her home?
She’s done what she should, should she do what she dares?
She doesn’t want to leave
She’s just wonderin’, is there life out there?⁹²

According to Garth Brooks, there is, but you’ve got to fight to hold on to it:

Life is like a windshield, it ain’t no rearview mirror
The only way to get where you’re goin’ is find that higher gear
And keep it rollin’
Life’s gonna run you over if you don’t get goin’.⁹³

This theme is expressed somewhat differently in Toby Keith’s lament about modern life:

I should’ve been a cowboy.
I should’ve learned to rope and ride . . .
Stealin’ the young girls’ hearts
Just like Gene and Roy
Singing those campfire songs
I should’ve been a cowboy.⁹⁴



Garth Brooks, *No Fences* CD cover.
Courtesy of Capitol Nashville Records.

This same quest for freedom is heard in Garth Brooks's rendition of "Night Rider's Lament":

Why does he ride for his money?
And why does he rope for short pay?
He ain't gettin' nowhere
And he's losin' his share.⁹⁵

In the chorus, Brooks explains that this type of freedom is one that city dwellers will never understand:

Ah, but they've never seen the Northern Lights
They've never seen a hawk on the wing
They've never spent spring at the Great Divide
And they've never heard old Camp Cookie sing.⁹⁶

As the lyrics of this song suggest, it may be a lonely life out there on the range, but it is better than an urban existence with its façade of prosperity. In much the same way, Garth Brooks, singing from the perspective of a traveling rodeo cowboy, laments the loneliness of life on the road. "A worn-out tape of Chris LeDoux / Lonely women and bad booze / Seem to be the only friends I've left at all."⁹⁷ Fortunately, Brooks finds solace at the "American Honky-Tonk Bar Association,"⁹⁸ in the company of "friends in low places / Where the whiskey drowns and the beer chases [his] blues away."⁹⁹

Some sing of a lost way of life on the range, like Gene Autry longing for his "Gold Mine in the Sky."¹⁰⁰ For others, the Sooner faith in work and the Bible shines through, even if things are less than ideal. According to singer Joe Diffie, "I guess we can't complain / God made life a gamble / And we're still in the game."¹⁰¹ Another, more flippant expression of religion comes from Diffie's amusing take on poverty:

If the devil danced in empty pockets
He'd have a ball in mine
With a nine-foot grand
A ten-piece band
And a twelve-girl chorus line.¹⁰²

He concludes, "I'd sell my soul to get out of this hole / But there'd be hell to pay."¹⁰³

On a more serious note, the religious Oklahoma spirit once again shines through in country songs that appeal to a higher power. "I know I haven't been a saint," admits Bryan White, "and asking You for anything takes nerve."¹⁰⁴ Still, Garth Brooks enjoins us to

Remember when you're talking to the man upstairs
That just because He doesn't answer
Doesn't mean He don't care
'Cause some of God's greatest gifts
Are unanswered prayers.¹⁰⁵

Oklahoma country music is filled with themes of religion, freedom, and prosperity stretching back throughout the state's history. Garth Brooks combines all of these elements in his song "We Shall be Free":

When the last child cries for a crust of bread
When the last man dies for just words that he said
When there's shelter over the poorest head
We shall be free.¹⁰⁶

Select Discography*

Gene Autry. *Back in the Saddle Again – 25 Cowboy Classics*

Hoyt Axton. *Road Songs*

*Chet Baker. *West Coast Live*

Brooks & Dunn. *Brand New Man*

Garth Brooks. *No Fences*

Joe Diffie. *Greatest Hits*

Stoney Edwards. *Poor Folks Stick Together: The Best of Stoney Edwards*

Vince Gill. *The Key*

*Woody Guthrie. *This Land is Your Land: The Asch Recordings, Vol. 1*

Merle Haggard. *16 Biggest Hits*

Wade Hayes. *Old Enough to Know Better*

Toby Keith. *Blue Moon*

Reba McEntire. *For My Broken Heart*

Roger Miller. *King of the Road*

*Tom Paxton. *I Can't Help But Wonder Where I'm Bound: The Elektra Years*

Billy Joe Shaver. *Restless Wind – The Legendary Billie Joe Shaver, 1973-1987*

Hank Thompson. *Vintage*

The Tractors. *The Tractors*

Merle Travis. *The Merle Travis Story*

Bryan White. *Between Now and Forever*

Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. *Classic Western Swing*

*Artists marked with an asterisk are not country musicians but nonetheless hail from Oklahoma. ★

Notes

- 1 Nikolai G. Wenzel, Research Fellow, University of Paris Law School (Center for Law & Economics), and Senior Fellow, Eleutheria Institute, nikolaiwenzel@hotmail.com. A special thank-you goes to my late grandfather, Orrin J. Wenzel, Jr., who performed his way through college in a swing band on a 1934 Gibson guitar he passed on to me, along with a love and appreciation for the music. Thanks also to Will Longwitz and the organizers and participants at the 2002 conference on “Religion, Freedom, and Prosperity in Oklahoma” (East Central Oklahoma University). For building my discography (and periodically imitating the Bob Wills holler), thanks to Ben Chang. For research assistance and administrative support, thanks to George Mount and Brandon Carmack.
- 2 Paul Fryer, “Local Styles and Country Music: An Introductory Essay,” in *All That Glitters: Country Music in America*, ed. George H. Lewis (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1993), 68.
- 3 “Never Been to Spain,” written by Hoyt Axton.
- 4 For a non-scholarly but informative commentary on country music as a mirror for American society see “Country Music: Middle America’s Soul,” *The Economist*, December 19, 2006. For more scholarly studies, see Charles F. Gritzner, “Country Music: A Reflection of Popular Culture,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Volume XI, Issue 4, Spring 1978, 857-864; Bill C. Malone, *Country Music USA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) and *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993); and A. A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); on race specifically, but country music as culture generally, see Charles L. Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); on country music and regional culture, see Billy D. White and Frederick A. Day, “Country Music Radio and American Culture Regions,” *Journal of Cultural Geography*, Volume 16, Issue 2, 1997; more generally, see Bill C. Malone, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, Volume 12: Music (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) or Kenneth J. Bindas, ed., *America’s Popular Pulse: Popular Music in Twentieth-Century Society* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 1992); for case studies on Oklahoma country music and culture from Woody Guthrie to Merle Haggard, see Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). On country music and politics, see Chris Willman, *Rednecks and Bluenecks: The Politics of Country Music* (New York: The New Press, 2007); for a look at early twentieth century country music and religion, see Ron Briley, “Woody Guthrie and the Christian Left: Jesus and ‘Commonism,’” *Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 7 (2007) available at: http://gato-docs.its.txstate.edu/jcr:e61200af-2954-4e98-8f9d-91df7d8d36b2/Volume_7_Woody%20Guthrie%20and%20the%20Christian%20Left%20Jesus%20and%20Commonism.pdf; Michael Grimshaw, “Redneck Religion and Shitkickin’ Saviours?: Gram Parsons, Theology, and Country Music,” *Popular Music*, Volume 21, Issue 1, 2002, 93-105; or M. L. Grossman, “Jesus, Mama, and the Constraints on Salvific Love in Contemporary Country Music,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 70 (1), 2002, 83-115.
- 5 “You Never Even Call Me by My Name,” by Steve Goodman and John Prine.
- 6 Melton A. McLaurin and Richard A. Peterson, eds., *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 12.
- 7 Richard A. Peterson, “Class Unconsciousness in Country Music,” in McLaurin and Peterson, *You Wrote My Life*, 52.
- 8 Ibid., 53. As late as the 1990s, Washington, D.C.’s daily bluegrass show (which ended in the early 2000s to lamentations of “O Bluegrass, Where Art Thou?”) closed every hour with ten minutes of “hymn time.”
- 9 Jimmie N. Rogers and Stephen A. Smith, “Country Music and Organized Religion,” in Lewis, *All That Glitters*, 276.
- 10 Peterson, “Class Unconsciousness in Country Music,” 60.
- 11 H. Wayne Morgan and Anne Hodges Morgan, *Oklahoma: A Bicentennial History*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 70.
- 12 Rogers and Smith, “Country Music and Organized Religion,” 280.
- 13 “Much too Young (To Feel this Damn Old),” performed by Garth Brooks.
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- 15 Ibid., 57.
- 16 Paul Dimaggio, Richard A. Peterson, and Jack Esco, Jr., “Country Music: Ballad of the Silent Majority,” in *The Sounds of Social Change: Studies in Popular Culture*, eds. R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand Macnally, 1972), 51, quoted in Lewis, *All That Glitters*, 288.
- 17 Jock Mackay, “Populist Ideology and Country Music,” in Lewis, *All That Glitters*, 288.
- 18 Melton A. McLaurin, “Songs of the South: The Changing Image of the South in Country Music,” in McLaurin and Peterson, *You Wrote My Life*, 18.
- 19 www.brightok.net/chickasaw/ardmore/country/autry.html
- 20 <http://courses.cs.vt.edu/~cs3604/lib/WorldCodes/Cowboy.Code.html>
- 21 Gene Autry, like several of the singers discussed in this article, was not born in Oklahoma, but he built much of his early musical career there and often was billed as “Oklahoma’s singing cowboy.”
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- 24 “Back in the Saddle Again,” performed by Gene Autry.
- 25 “Riding Down the Canyon,” performed by Gene Autry.
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- 27 Adam Komorowski, liner notes to *Doughboys, Playboys, and Cowboys—The Golden Years of Western Swing* (London: Proper Records, 2010), 9.
- 28 “Roly Poly,” performed by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.
- 29 Morgan and Morgan, *Oklahoma*, 102.
- 30 “Stay All Night,” performed by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 “Oklahoma Girls,” performed by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.
- 33 “Stay All Night,” performed by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.
- 34 “Take Me Back to Tulsa,” performed by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.
- 35 Peterson, “Class Unconsciousness in Country Music,” 54.
- 36 www.eyeneer.com/America/Genre/Folk/bluegrass/Profiles/monroes.html
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- 40 Ibid., 137.
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- 42 “That’s All,” performed by Merle Travis.
- 43 “Sixteen Tons,” performed by Merle Travis.
- 44 “Dark as a Dungeon,” performed by Merle Travis.
- 45 “The Wild Side of Life,” performed by Hank Thompson.
- 46 “Chug-a-Lug,” performed by Roger Miller.
- 47 “King of the Road,” performed by Roger Miller.
- 48 “Six-Pack to Go,” performed by Hank Thompson.
- 49 “Queen of the House,” performed by Roger Miller.
- 50 “Reasons to Quit,” performed by Merle Haggard.
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- 57 Komorowski, liner notes to *Doughboys, Playboys, and Cowboys*, 27.
- 58 “Are the Good Times Really Over for Good?” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 59 “In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad),” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 60 “Okie from Muskogee,” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 61 “Rainbow Stew,” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 62 “Oklahoma Wind,” performed by Billy Joe Shaver.
- 63 “Harold’s Super Service,” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 64 “Workin’ Man Blues,” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 65 “Bony Fingers,” performed by Hoyt Axton.
- 66 “Greenback Dollar,” performed by Hoyt Axton.
- 67 “Big City,” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 68 “Under the Bridge,” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 69 “Okie from Muskogee,” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 70 “A Restless Wind,” performed by Billy Joe Shaver.
- 71 “Mama Tried,” performed by Merle Haggard.
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- 73 “I’m a Lonesome Fugitive,” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 74 “Soldier’s Last Letter,” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 75 “When My Last Song is Sung,” performed by Merle Haggard.
- 76 “Rusty Old Halo,” performed by Hoyt Axton.
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- 78 Ibid.
- 79 “Ships That Don’t Come In,” performed by Joe Diffie.
- 80 “Fallin’ Apart,” performed by the Tractors.
- 81 “I’ve Had Enough,” performed by the Tractors.
- 82 “The Little Man,” performed by the Tractors.
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 “Badly Bent,” performed by the Tractors.
- 85 “Pickup Man,” performed by Joe Diffie.
- 86 “I’d Rather Ride Around with You,” performed by Reba McEntire.
- 87 “Old Enough to Know Better,” performed by Wade Hayes.
- 88 “You Ain’t Much Fun,” performed by Toby Keith.
- 89 “Old Enough to Know Better,” performed by Wade Hayes.
- 90 “Longneck Bottle,” performed by Garth Brooks.
- 91 “Victim of Life’s Circumstances,” performed by Vince Gill.
- 92 “Is There Life Out There?” performed by Reba McEntire.
- 93 “Rollin,’” performed by Garth Brooks.
- 94 “I Should Have Been a Cowboy,” performed by Toby Keith.
- 95 “Night Rider’s Lament,” performed by Garth Brooks.
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- 97 “Much Too Young (To Feel This Damn Old),” performed by Garth Brooks.
- 98 “American Honky-Tonk Bar Association,” performed by Garth Brooks.
- 99 “Friends in Low Places,” performed by Garth Brooks.
- 100 “Somewhere Under the Rainbow,” performed by Joe Diffie.
- 101 “Ships That Don’t Come In,” performed by Joe Diffie.
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- 103 Ibid.
- 104 “One Small Miracle,” performed by Bryan White.
- 105 “Unanswered Prayers,” performed by Garth Brooks.
- 106 “We Shall Be Free,” performed by Garth Brooks.