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## Politics and Country Music: Analyzing Why Country Music Is Associated with the Political Right

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## **Politics and Country Music: Analyzing Why Country Music Is Associated with the Political Right**

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Annotated Bibliography

The general perception that country music aligns itself with the political right is perhaps most exemplified by the songs, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)” by Toby Keith and “Okie from Muskogee” by Merle Haggard. Both songs speak of patriotic values that are traditionally associated with that side of politics. However, At the same time, some country songs, particularly older music, align more with the political left, such as “Man in Black” by Johnny Cash and “9 to 5” by Dolly Parton. Nadine Hubbs (2014) has shown how country music is often associated with the poor and lower class and therefore also the “bigoted white people of the country”, and thus, many people seek to disassociate themselves from it. Because of these contradictions, this paper delves into the politics of country music to figure out why the general conception is that the genre is right leaning. Through this, I construct a more nuanced perception of country music that more accurately represents its populist roots while also deconstructing the negative view of country music.

1. Ben Mna, Ilias. “This Country Ain’t Low—The Country Music of Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash as a Form of Redistributive Politics.” *Arts (Basel)* 12, no. 1 (2023): 1–16.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12010017>

Ilias Ben Mna is a professor at Humboldt-Universität in Berlin. He teaches in the American studies department with a focus in American film history and pop culture. In this article, Ben Mna argues against the “two-dimensional” view of country music and positions Dolly Parton and Johnny Cash “artists who reallocate cultural value to marginalized segments of society and call established power structures into question.” This seems to fall in-line with what Hubbs argues in “Anything but Country” and directly cites it and the Meier article. This article adds to the conversation of leftist politics in country music and offers a new perspective.

2. Blim, Dan. ““You Don’t Belong in Nashville!”: Politics, Country Music, and the Reception of Robert Altman’s Nashville.” *Music & Politics* 16, no. 2 (Summer 2022).  
<https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.3110>

Dan Blim is a professor of musicology at Denison University. He specializes in American music and shifting politics throughout history. In this article, Blim discusses the 1975 film *Nashville* and the negative reaction it received from both the right and left. He also discusses how new musicians find it difficult to thrive in Nashville. Evidence used includes the critic’s reviews and box office numbers the movie received. This work directly engages with Hubbs and Neal and adds a new voice to addressing politics with country music by investigating a film.

3. Cash, Johnny. *The Number Ones*. Recorded with Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, and Kris Kristofferson. Compiled 2012. Legacy Recordings, 2012. CD.

Johnny Cash still has one of the most influential legacies in country music today. His career started in the 1950s and went into the 2000s until his death. This CD is specifically useful because it is a compilation of his number one hits, so it’s easy to find the music that the public

resounded with. Other authors in this bibliography talk about him and these specific songs, and they are interesting to analyze as they hold leftist and populist values.

4. Hubbs, Nadine. "Anything but Country." *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Nadine Hubbs is a musicologist and cultural historian who views her work through the lens of gender and sexuality. She currently works at the University of Michigan in the gender and sexuality and music department. Hubbs' main argument in this chapter is that when people say they listen to any type of music except for country, it is a social signifier that they separate themselves from the poor working class and the negative stereotypes that come along with that. She raises the larger question of how country music is perceived by society and how this impacts on-going biases about the working class, race, and sexuality. Hubbs uses specific depictions of country music to support her argument. The first example she uses is the Foo Fighters imitating country music to make fun of it and in response to the Westboro Baptist Church protesting their concert. This chapter continues the conversation on the stigmatization of country music.

5. Reish, Gregory N. "The NRA Blues: Commercial Country Music and the New Deal" in *The Honky Tonk on the Left: Progressive Thought in Country Music*, edited by Mark Allan Jackson. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018.

Gregory Reish is a professor of musicology at the Middle Tennessee State University. His focus is on Italian music and Southern, Country, and Bluegrass music. He is also an active musician and has released several Country albums. This chapter discusses country music in the 1930s when the New Deal was signed by President Roosevelt. It talks about how the music showed a resounding support for FDR and his policies, and this is shown through evidence based on specific songs that came out at the time. This work directly cites La Chapelle, another author in this bibliography, and adds to the conversation of politics and country music by looking at the older repertoire in the genre.

6. La Chapelle, Peter. "Fightin' Sides: 'Okie from Muskogee', Conservative Populism, and the Uses of Migrant Identity." *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Peter La Chapelle is a professor at Nevada State University, and he teaches history. He has written books on country music and politics and is well-known in the community for studying early country music. He is cited by several other authors in this bibliography. This chapter specifically looks at the song "Okie from Muskogee" and the general reception surrounding it and where it lands on the political spectrum. La Chapelle uses lyrical analysis and direct quotes from the time to justify his argument. This chapter, and book as a whole, is useful for looking at early country music and the politics surrounding it.

7. Meier, Kenneth J. "Looking for Meaning in All the Wrong Places: Country Music and the Politics of Identity." *Social Science Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (2019): 89–108.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12556>

Kenneth Meier is a professor at American University who works in public administration and focuses on equity and inclusion. In this article, he makes the argument that there are six

primary themes within country music: painting the “little man” in a positive light, upholding traditional values and feminism as a counterpoint, revering patriotism, the genre being primarily white, nostalgia, and religious messages. Meier’s main use of evidence is lyrics from various country artists. Some specific examples include “The American Dream” by Hank Williams Jr. and “Broken Freedom Song,” by Kris Kristofferson. This adds to the larger discussion by dissecting lyrics of country music to find the values that the artist and fans hold.

8. Minehan, Philip B. “The Second World War, 1939–45: From Anti-Communism to Anti-Communism.” *Anti-Leftist Politics in Modern World History: Avoiding “Socialism” at All Costs*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

Philip Minehan is a professor of history at California State University Fullerton. His focus in history is on neo-liberal politics from the 1800s to the present. In this book, he discusses anti-leftist politics from a variety of locations, but this chapter specifically focuses on the United States after World War II. While not specifically referring to music, this chapter is useful to see the political opinions and viewpoints that were popular at the time of its creation.

9. Neal, Jocelyn R. “The Metric Makings of a Country Hit.” In *Reading Country Music*, edited by Cecelia Tichi, 322–337. New York: Duke University Press, 2020.

Jocelyn Neal is a professor of music theory at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. Her focus is on analyzing country music, which she does in this article. In it, she uses metric analysis and phrase structure analysis to address common themes in current country music as well as historical. She also discusses the close ties to dance that country music has and how that has impacted the genre. This provides a nice balance to the other musicological sources on this bibliography by being a more theoretical work, and Neal is cited by other authors listed and is well respected in the country music academic sphere.

10. Riley, Nancy P. “Country Music Doesn’t Have to Suck: Intertextuality, Community, and Bloodshot Records.” In *Whose Country Music? Genre, Identity, and Belonging in Twenty-First-Century Country Music Culture*, edited by Paula J. Bishop and Jada E. Watson, 177-190. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.  
doi:10.1017/9781108937443.016.

Nancy Riley is a professor at Belmont University. Her PhD is in musicology, and her areas of study include local music scenes in Chicago. This chapter examines a local Chicago label putting out music of punk and alternative bands playing country music. By investigating this, she finds how important small and independent record labels are to musical practices in the current day. This is important to have as other sources on this list investigate historical impacts of country, and this looks at the modern day.

11. Savage, Ritchie. “From McCarthyism to the Tea Party: Interpreting Anti-Leftist Forms of US Populism in Comparative Perspective.” *New Political Science* 34, no. 4 (2012): 564–584.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2012.729743>.

Ritchie Savage is an adjunct professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. With a PhD in sociology, he studies populism and political discourse. This specific article looks at how populism is used in the Tea Party Movement. To answer this question, Savage analyzes

academic texts as well as more popular sources, like newspapers. This source is useful to identify and define what is meant by populism as well as distinguishing political ideals from the left and right. While this does not focus on music specifically, it is excellent to use in comparison to and support the other sources listed.

12. Tichi, Cecelia. "Country Music, Seriously: An Interview with Bill C. Malone." In *Reading Country Music*, edited by Cecelia Tichi, 290-306. New York: Duke University Press, 2020.

This chapter is an interview between Cecelia Tichi and Bill Malone. Tichi is a professor emerita at Vanderbilt with her focus being in American studies, and Malone is a professor emeritus of History at Tulane University. His book, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, was the first academic source on the history of country music. In the interview they discuss why country music has been overlooked and the stigma and stereotypes surrounding it. This is a great source to use in conjunction with the others to understand the current perception of country music and the politics tied to it today.