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The Time of Contemporary Country Music

Narrative has always been an important feature of country western music in the United States. In their book *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, Richard Peterson and Melton McClaurin state: “Among the recurrent elements of country songs is a strong sense of the narrative. For this reason, country music has often been called a story teller’s medium, and most of those familiar with the music, fans and scholars alike, would agree that country songs generally tell stories.”¹ In the words of country music legend Hank Williams, “a song ain’t nothin’ in the world but a story just wrote with music to it.”² My interest is the narrative time in these musical stories.

Not all country songs employ narrative, but those that do are usually written in a verse/chorus form. [See Example 1.] This form, also found in numerous popular songs, alternates a verse—a section with fixed melody and harmony but with changing text—and a chorus—a section with fixed melody and harmony but with static or nearly static text. The verses tell the story and the chorus reflects on the plot. In the words of singer/songwriter Holly Tashian, “If you’re writing a song, you’re telling a story that funnels down and it makes its point—bam!—and there’s your chorus.”³ The narrative time is advanced in the verses; the reflection on the action is found in the chorus which usually lies outside of the narrative time. The chorus essentially interrupts the narrative time.

In the past quarter century, there have been numerous country western songs that are either “about” time or involve some sort of “play” with time. For example, in a recent article in the *Music Theory Spectrum*, Jocelyn Neal describes a type of narrative that began appearing in country music in the mid-1980s involving a particular play with time—what she refers to as the time-shift paradigm. Neal states that the time-shift narrative must include: “first, the presence of a verse-chorus song form . . .; second, a sequence of verses that center on the multigenerational life-cycle and attention to family in chronologically distinct episodes; and third, a reinterpretation of the chorus’s text and meaning in each iteration.”⁴ [See Example 2.] George Strait’s 1990 song “Love Without End, Amen”⁵ is a

good example of a time-shift narrative. The first verse takes place in the narrator's youth, the second verse when the narrator is an adult, and the third verse when the narrator dreams of his own afterlife. Slight adjustments are made in the text of the chorus to identify the speaker—the narrator's father in the first chorus, the narrator in the second chorus, and the imagined voice of Jesus in the third chorus. The main difference between a "simple narrative" and a "time-shift narrative" involves the amount of narrative time that occurs between the verses.

In the past ten years, there have been a number of nostalgic country songs that reflect on "the good old days." [See Example 3.] While all narratives take place in an earlier time than their narration, the main intent of these songs (and others like them) is to take the listener back to a specific earlier time or, at the very least, to compare an earlier time to the narrator's present time. Even more recently, a few songs have taken the listener back in time through a "metaphorical past." The past is represented by a dirt road in Brantley Gilbert's "Dirt Road Anthem Revisited" and a back road in Rodney Atkins, "Take A Back Road." The specific application of narrative time in the nostalgic songs of the past decade is my focus in this paper.

Paul Ricoeur in the second volume of *Time and Narrative* addresses three "times" to be considered in the study of narratives—the time of narrating, the time that is narrated, and the time of life.⁶ While Ricoeur ultimately modifies this ternary division in his analysis of narrative time in novels, these three categories are useful in distinguishing recent trends in country music narratives. The time of narrating in written narratives is measured in lines or pages; in sung narratives this time can be measured similarly in either in lines or verses *or* in the actual time that the song takes to sing. In both written and sung narratives, the time that is narrated is counted in days, months, or years and may be dated in the narrative itself. The time of life is what has been "compressed" in the time that is narrated.

In country music narratives, as observed earlier, the narrative time in the verses is regularly interrupted by the choruses. The chorus reflects on the action, but lengthens the time of

narrating—the story takes longer to tell because of these interruptions. In a time-shift narrative, there is an additional interruption in the action—the chorus interrupts the narrative *and* each verse introduces a new narrated time. Since large time-spans in the lives of the characters have been omitted, the narrated time is measured in three or more distinct time spans. Even though a greater amount of time occurs in a shorter time of narrating, time-shift narratives tell their stories in the same manner as simple narratives. In both, the listener is aware of the “compressed” time of life that takes place. The more recent songs that involve a play with time are different than either of those. These songs take place in the narrator’s present and involve the narrator reflecting on the past. Since they essentially involve a narrative within a narrative, the listener is unaware of the “compressed” time of life in one, or even both, of the two narratives.

Before examining one of these songs in detail, I would like to briefly mention themes in country western music. As Jocelyn Neal observes, “Country music has long employed a consistent catalog of themes, topics, and references, both textual and musical, to help identify it as distinct from other popular musical genres. The textual themes have been explored by scholars and parodied by critics, as well as used by songwriters as source material for self-referential and ironic compositions.”⁷ [See Example 4.] Take for example the 1974 song “You Never Even Call Me by Name,”⁸ recorded by David Allan Coe. Before the final verse of the song, Coe speaks the following text:

Well a friend of mine named Steve Goodman wrote that song, and he told me it was the perfect country and western song. I wrote him back a letter and told him it was not the perfect country and western song because he hadn’t said anything at all about mama or trains or trucks or prison or getting’ drunk. Well he sat down and wrote another verse to the song and he sent it to me and after reading it I realized that my friend had written the perfect country and western song. And I felt obliged to include it on this album. The last verse goes like this here.

Other than the mention of the rain, the final verse of the song has nothing in common with the narrative of the earlier verses or the chorus; it simply references all of the omitted themes that Coe mentions:

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 a pickup truck
She got run'd over by a damned old train

The themes of country music have been explored more seriously by scholars in a number of recent studies. In *American Music: A Panorama*, Lorenzo Candelara and Daniel Kingman state that “The subjects of country songs are diverse, but tend to revolve around certain recurring themes: love, death, religion, nostalgia, traveling, patriotism, and current events.”⁹ All of the “looking back” songs involving a play with time that I have mentioned would clearly fall into the category of nostalgia. The significant number of songs like these, however, makes me wonder if they might form a new emerging category within nostalgic songs in country western music.

While most of the songs in Example 3 can be classified as “nostalgic” and look back to a better time, Brad Paisley’s “Welcome to the Future”¹⁰ does not fit that description—this song from his 2009 *American Saturday Night* CD is distinctly different. Nearly all the songs of this type make a reference to one particular time and maintain a single narrative throughout all of the verses with the narrator extolling the virtues of the earlier time over the narrator’s present time. In “Welcome to the Future,” each verse begins with a different earlier time in the narrator’s life (or before the narrator was born) and ends in the narrator’s present. In each verse, the narrator finds the situation in the present to be significantly better than the situation in the earlier time described at the beginning of the verse. A closer examination of each verse will demonstrate these relationships.

The first verse begins with a reference to the narrator's youth when he was ten years old. [See Example 5.] The focus of the verse is technology and how the narrator's childhood would have been better with the technology of the narrator's present time—the ability to watch movies in a car during long drives and to play video games at home. In fact, the narrator's present has exceeded the dreams of his youth. As a ten-year old the narrator dreamed of playing PacMan at home, but the adult narrator can play the video game anywhere on his phone.

The second verse begins with a reference to a time before the narrator's birth and a situation involving his grandparents. [See Example 6.] The focus of the verse seems to remain on technology—written letters that took a significant time to travel from the Philippines to the United States during the early 1940s have been replaced by instantaneous and visual communication in the narrator's present. This verse differs from the previous one because not all of the details from the beginning of the verse appear directly related to the single technological advance that appears at the end of the verse. Does the text “the world they say has changed” relate to the possibility of a video chat or the possibility of communicating with someone in Japan?

The third and final verse begins with a reference to a time in the narrator's youth, probably six to eight years after the time in the first verse. [See Example 7.] The technology focus of the previous verses is completely abandoned and the focus is clearly on racial prejudice in the United States. The first half of the verse is a description of an event in the narrator's youth—his black friend experiencing a cross-burning, a practice usually associated with the Ku Klux Klan meant to intimidate blacks, to keep him from attempting to date a white girl. The last half of the verse takes place in the narrator's present with him thinking about all those individuals like his friend who have experienced racial prejudice—especially Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her bus seat for a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, and Martin Luther King, who gave his “I Have a Dream” speech about racial equality in Washington, D.C., in 1963. Based on the format of the previous two

verses, the narrator is clearly implying that racial relationships are better in his present than they were in his past.

The narrative progression in this song, then, is not chronological but based on a shift in focus from advancements in technology to advancements in racial relationships. [See Example 8.] Each of the choruses begins with a slightly different text, allowing their texts to participate in the song's narrative progression. As is typical in country western music, the last line of each chorus is the title of the song—here implying from the very beginning the narrator's idea that his present time, the future of his narrative past, is a better time. [See Example 9.] The first chorus begins with a textual quote from the chorus of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, a patriotic anthem dating from the American Civil War. The line initially seems out of place since the first verse is about technological advancements; it could imply, however, that the narrative progression may be moving in an unexpected direction. The first line of the second chorus could apply to either of the preceding verse's interpretations—the revolution could be in technology or in inter-cultural relationships. A bridge follows the second chorus, emphasizing the narrator's view that his present is a better time than his past. The final chorus, twice the length of the previous choruses, confirms the song's narrative progression—the Martin Luther is a reference to Martin Luther King, the man “with a dream” in the previous verse. The second half of the final chorus repeats the first chorus clarifying the reference to the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

The meaning of each of the three verses was confirmed by Brad Paisley when he spoke about the song before he performed it at the White House for President Obama on July 21, 2009. In his comments, he bases the inspiration for the song on Obama's election, saying: “Very few things have moved me the way that I was moved on November 4 [the date of President Obama's elections]. . . . It was unbelievable to see from my vantage point as I stood there and watched the world turn on a dime in the way that it seemed to. And it got me thinking as I was preparing this new album and wanted to sing about some of those emotions that I had felt.”¹¹ This song has been characterized by critic Stephen Thomas Erlewine as “the first country anthem of the Obama era.”¹²

The harmonic language of “Welcome to the Future” is simple even by country music standards. In the three verses, the only chords used are I, IV, and V (G, C, and D); and in the choruses and the bridge, the only chords used are I, IV, V and vi (G, C, D, and e). I am reminded of both Harlan Howard’s definition of a great country song—“three chords and the truth”¹³—and the montage of forty-seven song beginnings that are based on the four-chord harmonic progression I, vi, IV, V by Axis of Awesome on YouTube.¹⁴ Since much of the song’s narrative takes place in the 1960s or earlier, it is possible that the simpler harmony in this song (especially the three-chord harmonization of the verses) is a reference to the emphasis on those three chords in popular and country music of the early 1960s.

The vocal range of the melody in this song is limited in both register and timbre. Brad Paisley is the only singer during the verses of the song, and only limited back-up vocals are used during the choruses. While much of Paisley’s range is used throughout the song (G2 up to E4), each section of the melody focuses on a much smaller pitch range. Most of the melody in the three verses is limited to the pitches between G3 and C4—the range of a perfect fourth. At the end of the fourth and eighth lines of the verses, the melody goes lower—moving from E3 to D3 and ending with a leap down to G2, the lowest sung pitch. The chorus, however, focuses on a slightly higher register—G3 up to E4. After hearing the solo voice end on the G2, the leap up to E4 to begin the chorus emphasizes the arrival of the chorus by juxtaposing the lowest and highest sung pitches (separated by only one measure of instrumental interlude). The back-up vocals enter on the first word of the chorus (“hey”), providing an additional emphasis on this arrival. The harmony also seems to emphasize the arrival of the chorus; the first appearance of the vi chord occurs at the beginning of the chorus. During the verses the listener hears only I, IV, and V chords—all major triads. The abrupt entrance of the E minor triad accompanying the highest sung pitch provides the “bam” that the earlier Holly Tashian quote mentions.

Because of the limited harmonic vocabulary and the melodic gestures that focus on small vocal ranges, much of the song’s sense of forward motion in is created by instrumentation

and dynamics. [See Example 10.] As you can see from the slide, the arrival at each chorus is not only emphasized vocally and harmonically, but with the whole band playing at a louder dynamic level. You can also see a gradual growth in waves from the beginning of the song until the musical and dynamic climax at the bridge. The sudden return to the instrumentation and dynamic level of verse 1 at the beginning of verse 3 allows the listener to focus on the text and reveals the ultimate meaning of the progress in the narrative—that of better inter-cultural and race relationships that have improved at the same time as technology—an improvement that Martin Luther King’s generation could only have dreamed about.

As I stated in the beginning of my paper, my interest focuses on country songs that attempt to take the listener back in time. While this song does that to some extent, it does not do so in order to transport the listener back to a better time but to emphasize how our lives today are better than we could have dreamed of in that earlier time. The fact that Brad Paisley can write a song such as “Welcome to the Future,” a song that parodies the new country music theme that I have attempted to define actually provides additional support for my belief that this is a new country music theme.

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elton A. McClaurin and Richard A. Peterson, eds., *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music*, Cultural Perspectives on the American South, Vol. 6, (Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1992), 2.

²Cecelia Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press), 7.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jocelyn Neal, "Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music," *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring 2007): 46.

⁵ George Strait, "Love Without End, Amen," *For the Last Time*, CD, MCA Nashville. 2003.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 2, trans. By Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 81. Originally published as *Temps et Récit*, vol. 2 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984).

⁷ Neal, "Narrative Paradigms, Musical Signifiers, and Form as Function in Country Music," 41.

⁸ David Allan Coe, "You Never Even Call Me By Name," *Once Upon a Rhyme*, Album, Columbia, 1975.

⁹ Lorenzo Candelara and Daniel Kingman, *American Music: A Panorama*, 4th ed, (New York: Schirmer, 2011), 83.

¹⁰ Brad Paisley, "Welcome to the Future," *American Saturday Night*, CD, Arista Nashville, 2009.

¹¹ Brad Paisley at the White House [Video], (2009), retrieved April 2, 2012, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sI36TTG0HIM>.

¹² Steven Thomas Erlewine, Review of Brad Paisley's *American Saturday Night* on Allmusic, retrieved April 2, 2012, from <http://www.allmusic.com/album/american-saturday-night-mw0000820075>.

¹³ David Fillingim, *Redneck Liberation: Country Music as Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003): 21.

¹⁴ The Axis of Awesome: 4 Chords (2011) Official Music Video [Video], retrieved April 2, 2012, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOIdewpCfZQ>.